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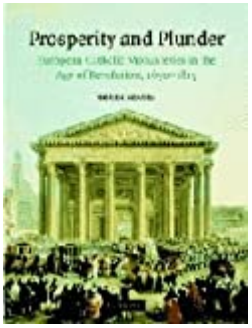

Derek Beales. *Prosperity and Plunder: European Catholic Monasteries in the Age of Revolution, 1650-1815.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. xviii + 395 pp. $50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-59090-7.

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Contemplating Eighteenth-Century Monasticism

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The most common contemporary view of eighteenth-century monasticism, if there could be said to be such a thing, is probably similar to that presented in Denis Diderot's posthumously published novel, *La Religieuse*, in which the novel's heroine, Suzanne Simonin, born of an adulterous relationship and forced into a convent against her will, endures a series of physical, emotional, and sexual abuses. Otherwise, there is the image of the Carthusian monk, Dom Gerle, prominently depicted in the foreground of Jacques-Louis David's *The Tennis Court Oath*, memorializing the fateful moment when the delegates of the Estates-General stood on the verge of reconstituting themselves as the National Assembly, and thus, beginning the French Revolution. Indeed, David took a great deal of artistic license; Gerle was not even present at the event depicted in *The Tennis Court Oath.* However, Gerle's presence in the painting symbolized the triumph of national unity and Gerle became the archetype of the patriotic cleric for whom even faith should be subservient to the ideals of the Revolution. Obviously, neither image is particularly kind to Catholic monasticism. The former represents the scorn heaped upon the monasteries by the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment as places where a life of prayer and contemplation was equated with superstition, as opposed to the usefulness of talent and industry. The latter suggests the destruction of the monasteries in the revolutionary upheavals at the end of the century, being restored in the nineteenth century only as anachronisms. The French Revolution's period of "dechristianization," in which Gerle played no small part, only further promotes the opinion that religion and the Age of Enlightenment and Revolution were totally incompatible.

Should historians view eighteenth-century monasticism other than through the lens of Enlightenment or Revolution, however, they would, in fact, discover an institution that was far from being in decline, but one that prospered. The problem, according to Derek Beales, Professor Emeritus of Modern History at Cambridge University, historians are generally satisfied with a teleological view of monasticism that looks at it from the perspective of the end of the eighteenth century, when monasticism seemed to be only a vestige, at best,of Europe's Old Regime. In fact, writes Beales, "[f]or most histori-

ans of modern Europe, my subject might as well not exist" (p. 1). Nor does Beales believe that the historiography of eighteenth-century monasticism improves within Catholic countries, largely due to the "bitter antagonism between the Church and the secular state going back well before the revolutionary period" (p.11).

It is precisely this sort of neglect, benign or otherwise, for which this current volume can be a useful corrective. First offered in the Birkbeck Lectures in Ecclesiastical History at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1993, Beales's book describes a period of "prosperity," followed by "reform," and then the "plunder" of the French Revolution, both in France and abroad. Readers searching for a cohesive thesis regarding eighteenth-century monasticism will be disappointed; the chapters, especially those on monastic prosperity, read very much like the lectures they once were, each presented as a sort of historical vignette. This is not to say, however, that the book is without merit–this is far from the case. Indeed, Beales' study will be a valuable starting point of inquiry for historians working on eighteenth-century religious history, as well as proving to be enlightening for historians of the period in general.

To be sure, the religious history of eighteenth-century Europe has certainly enjoyed increased popularity in contemporary scholarship. A panel at the 2005 American Historical Association Annual Meeting, for example, entitled "Enlightenment and the Ends of Religion," promises not only to find certain "ends" of religion within the Enlightenment, but also the beginnings of the Enlightenment within religion. It appears that, some seven decades later, Carl Becker's claim in *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers*, that the French Enlightenment had far more similarities to Christianity than it had differences, has finally entered into the historiographic mainstream. Dale Van Kley's and John McManners'work on eighteenth-century France, J.C.D. Clark's on eighteenth-century England, Harry Stout's studies of colonial America and the early Republic, and T.C.W. Blanning's on the German states, just to name a few, have all made significant contributions regarding the continuing role of religious movements in shaping modern Western political, social, intellectual and cultural modes. Indeed, the term "Catholic Enlightenment" is now a widely accepted term to describe forms of the Enlightenment in countries outside of France where the irreligion of the French "philosophes" appears an exception, rather than the norm.[1]

Beales is cognizant of this scholarship, and he rightly gives credit to many of these authors for putting religion back into the eighteenth century, as something other than, paraphrasing Voltaire, an infamous thing that needed to be eradicated. Yet, Beales is also correct in asserting that, for the most part, even those scholars purposefully seeking a positive role for faith in the Age of Enlightenment and Revolution have simply bypassed monasticism in any sort of systematic inquiry (with the very notable exception of John McManners' two-volume magnum opus, *Church and Society in Eighteenth-Century France*). Yet, the monastic orders and houses of the Catholic Church were undeniably important institutions: as land owners and as charitable institutions, as houses of educators and scholars, and as religious communities with strong gendered identities. If Beales's goal is to simply help to reestablish the importance of eighteenth-century monasticism, then he has been successful. Although, considering that the book is based almost exclusively on secondary literature, it also seems to be the case that Beales's charges regarding the historical neglect of eighteenth-century monasticism are a bit exaggerated.

The first part of Beales's study, titled "At the Brim of Prosperity," briefly presents Catholic monasticism within the context of the Catholic Reformation, followed by a survey and discussion of monastic institutions in the German states, France, the Iberian Peninsula, and Italy. Here, Beales establishes the context for the next two parts of the book: part 2, "Patterns of Monastic Reform;" and part 3, "The Time of Revolution." The best chapters in the opening part are those on German and French institutions, the former reflecting Beales's previous scholarship on eighteenth-century Austria, and the latter due to the relative strength of available secondary sources. Indeed, the chapter on Spain and Portugal especially seems a bit thin compared to the others. Still, in all of these national case-studies, including Spain and Portugal, Beales admirably reviews the relevant scholarship on the topic, and succeeds in establishing the importance of Catholic monasticism within the artistic, intellectual, social, and political history of each state. The sum becomes a sort of map of the monastic contributions towards the "Catholic Enlightenment." Finally, each chapter is nicely supplemented with illustrations and the book includes nine color plates which alone seem to testify to the importance and grandeur of Catholic monasticism.

Parts 2 and 3 of *Prosperity and Plunder* describe the "plunder" of European monasticism. Part 2 describes various monastic reforms: the suppression of the Jesuits (chapter 6), the creation of a royal commission *des reguliers* in France in 1766 to centralize royal supervision of

the houses (chapter 7), and, finally, the Josephist reforms in Austria that curtailed papal influence over the Church in the Empire, and closed a great number of monastic institutions (chapter 8). Part 3 focuses on the French Revolution (chapter 9) that first suppressed contemplative monasteries, subsequently nationalized the Church in France (turning the clergy into elected officials and civil servants), and finally, entered into a period of radical "dechristianization." The final chapter describes the impact of the French Revolution on European monasticism outside of France.

Here, in these latter parts, are where the considerable value of Beales's study is most evident. That is, while the example of the French Revolution–the notorious requirement that clerics say an oath of allegiance to the Nation which was to supersede their allegiance to Rome, and, of course, "dechristianization"–stands out as the most radical of the monastic reforms. By placing France within the context of European developments, such as the Josephist reforms, Beales demonstrates that the French Revolution's religious solutions are less uniquely French and more European after all. Moreover, Beales presents a powerful counterexample to the notion that Catholicism and national revolutions were incompatible in his presentation of the oft-ignored case of the Austrian Netherlands in which "Belgian" democrats and traditionalist Catholics combined forces in 1789 to resist Joseph II's violation of what they perceived as their constitutional liberties.

There are, to be sure, some minor concerns with *Prosperity and Plunder*. In the introduction, Beales does an admirable job of explicating the differences between the various orders, but between the contemplative and mendicant orders, and between monks, friars, and so forth, he does not as cleanly follow his own distinctions in the text. For example, the history, mission, and pastoral work of the Jesuit society was really quite different from that of those institutions traditionally considered monastic, yet Beales devotes a considerable amount of space to the Jesuits. Indeed, this is a minor point, and one that is largely a function of the book's title which promises to study "monasteries." Beales's study is really a broader study of the regular clergy.

Another, perhaps more serious objection, is the complete omission of the case of Ireland, where it appears the model of "prosperity" followed by "plunder" was perhaps reversed. Catholicism, to be sure, was part of "hidden Ireland" during the eighteenth century; yet one account numbers a total of forty active Dominican communities in 1734. There were certainly active communities from other orders, and this number surely increased over the course of the century.In fact, while the Age of Revolutions might have contributed to the "plunder" of the Church on the continent, the general spirit of Enlightenment and toleration created relative prosperity in Ireland, to the point that a Catholic university, St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, was granted a charter by the Irish Parliament in 1795, perhaps demonstrating a level of prosperity.[2] Again, these are relatively minor objections; overall, this book should provide an essential roadmap for scholars of eighteenth-century church history.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, the various articles in James E. Bradley and Dale K. Van Kley, eds. *Religion and Politics in Enlightenment Europe* (NotreDame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001).

[2]. R. F. Forster, *Modern Ireland, 1600-1972* (London: Penguin, 1989), pp. 208-211.

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