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Adrian Velicu, *Civic Catechism and Reason in the French Revolution*. Ashgate, 2010. 155 pp. Bibliography and Index. \$114.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 075466998X.

Review by Jeremy L. Caradonna, University of Alberta.

One of the most compelling insights that Alexis de Tocqueville had about the French Revolution was that it possessed the form and character of a religious revolution. Beneath the fiery rhetoric that denounced Christianity, priests, and the cult of saints lay a set of assumptions, structures, and practices (proselytizing, doctrinaire attitudes, cults, and so on) that arose from the very religious traditions against which revolutionaries defined themselves. Without mentioning it, Tocqueville might have been thinking of the Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster, a short-lived “revolution” (1534-1535) in which radical Anabaptists destroyed Catholic Churches, redistributed property, drew up plans to re-educate children in isolation from their parents, and systematically renamed streets that bore the names of Catholic saints. Sound familiar? Indeed, Tocqueville established a whole strand of historiography evident in the works of Carl Becker, Mona Ozouf, Michael Burleigh, and David A. Bell among others, that continues to investigate the hidden and often counter-intuitive links between religion and sacrality on the one hand, and the secular, atheistic, and radical movements of the eighteenth century on the other.[1]

Adrian Velicu’s compact and modest *Civic Catechism and Reason in the French Revolution* is a contribution to this long-standing historiography. Velicu, an historian who teaches in Sweden, situates his own work squarely within the politico-cultural interpretation of the Revolution furnished by François Furet, although he does take issue with Furet’s apparent lack of “textual evidence” (p. 11).[2] Yet Velicu is more interested in investigating the history of reason, morality, and the “paradox” of “revolutionary values” than he is in engaging with historians of political culture (p. 1). The main paradox presented in the book is the awkward pairing of critical reason with an educational program that, in theory (since it barely got off the ground), stressed an uncritical, faith-like acceptance of revolutionary principles. Did elected representatives actually want to create critical citizens, or did they merely pay lip service to reason while simultaneously promoting blind faith?

Velicu’s main focus, as the title of the book suggests, is on catechisms and the pedagogical strategies of indoctrination that they tended to promote. The breadth and depth of this book is what separates Velicu’s study from other works on the same subject by such historians as Paul Beurdeley, Jean-François Chassaing, Bruno Durruty, and Emmett Kennedy.[3] In his effort to historicize the “civic” and “revolutionary” catechisms of 1789-1799, Velicu first offers a thorough and illuminating history of the catechism. He argues that the genre of catechism—a summary of doctrine, often delivered orally and memorized by pupils—dates to antiquity, but that the practice declined in the Middle Ages before witnessing a resurgence in the Reformation, when religious instruction became more contested and valorized. The Catholic catechism, which usually included the Apostle’s Creed, the Sacraments, the Decalogue, and the Lord’s Prayer, now had to compete with a dizzying array of Lutheran and Calvinist catechisms that stressed different aspects of Christian doctrine. By the eighteenth century, however, the word catechism had already begun to lose its strict association with Christianity, and Velicu

cites secular catechisms by Voltaire, d'Holbach, and G.-J. Saige to establish the point. In fact, the latter's *Catéchisme du citoyen* appears to have had a direct impact on the catechisms that appeared in the late 1780s and 1790s.

Velicu argues that there was nothing self-evident about the use of the catechism during the revolutionary decade. He is perhaps correct to note that the "civic catechisms were the only texts that belonged to an established genre with a long and complex tradition" (p. 5). In contrast to the petition, for example, the catechism was a recognizable mode of discourse, but one with an obvious and problematic link to Christian doctrine. What we see in the Revolution, however, is not only a continued secularization but also a radicalization of the catechism. Velicu dedicates the most space to detailing the explosion of civic and revolutionary catechisms that appeared in print after 1789, and shows that deputies sought to use them as introductions to revolutionary principles for students in elementary schools. He analyzes a series of catechisms from the early years of the Revolution, including the *Catéchisme de la paix* and the *Catéchisme d'un peuple libre*, before moving on to discuss the radicalization of the genre during the Terror. He argues that catechisms became paradoxically modeled on Christian doctrine after the creation of the French Republic in 1792. For example, Collignon Dumont's catechism translates the seven Catholic sacraments into seven "national sacraments," and includes references to "capital sins," republican creeds, and republican prayers (p.99). Texts such as this one offer strong evidence that the revolutionaries fused religious forms with revolutionary content.

On the whole, this book provides an excellent introduction to the history of catechisms both before and during the French Revolution. On balance, however, the author could have done more to strengthen the argument. One noticeable problem is the lack of data about the growth of the genre. It would have been helpful to see how many catechisms were published before and after 1789. The author also could have grouped the catechisms into different categories, giving the reader a clearer understanding of the ratio of royalist to republican catechisms, for instance. Second, the author could have spent more time theorizing the paradoxical nature of revolutionary indoctrination, rather than merely describing and charting its existence. The fact that a revolutionary could both author a revolutionary catechism and become involved in violent dechristianization campaigns strikes me as a paradox in need of further interpretation. This work certainly lacks the sophistication of Mona Ozouf's work on revolutionary festivals. Third, the work would have been more poignant if the author had better identified the central thrust of the argument. At times, the book feels disjointed as the author jumps from the history of reason to catechisms to educational policy. Finally, the conclusion leaves much to be desired. The author actually undercuts the power of his own argument by downplaying the impact that catechisms had in the Revolution and arguing instead that their mere "presence" justifies an interest in the subject.

#### NOTES

[1] Carl Becker, *The Heavenly City of Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), originally published in 1932; Mona Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution*, trans. A. Sheridan (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991); Michael Burleigh, *Earthly Powers: Religion and Politics in Europe from the Enlightenment to the Great War* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005); David A. Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680-1800* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).

[2] François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. E. Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

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[3] Paul Beurdeley, *Les catéchismes révolutionnaires: Etude historique et pédagogique sur la morale civique* (Paris: Fischbacher, 1893); Jean Morange and Jean-François Chassaing, *Le mouvement de réforme de l'enseignement en France, 1760-1798* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1974); Bruno Durruty, 'Les auteurs de catéchismes révolutionnaires (1789-1799),' *Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française*, 63 (1991): 1-18; Emmett Kennedy, "The French revolutionary catechisms: ruptures and continuities with classical, Christian, and Enlightenment moralities,' *SVEC*, 199 (1981): 353-62.

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H-France Review Vol. 11 (July 2011), No. 154 Adrian Velicu, *Civic Catechism and Reason in the French Revolution*. Ashgate, 2010. 155 pp. In fact, the latter's *Catéchisme du citoyen* appears to have had a direct impact on the catechisms that appeared in the late 1780s and 1790s. Velicu argues that there was nothing self-evident about the use of the catechism during the revolutionary decade. He is perhaps correct to note that the "civic catechisms were the only texts that belonged to an established genre with a long and complex tradition" (p. 5). In contrast to the petition, for example, the catechism was a recognizable mode of discourse, but one with an obvious and problematic link to Christian doctrine. The French Revolution was a period of far-reaching social and political upheaval in France and its colonies beginning in 1789 and ending in 1799. The Revolution overthrew the monarchy; established a republic; catalyzed violent periods of political turmoil; and finally culminated in a dictatorship under Napoleon, who brought many of the revolution's principles to areas he conquered in Western Europe and beyond. Inspired by liberal and radical ideas such as equality before the law, the Revolution made a Read reviews from world's largest community for readers. At the heart of the French Revolution... Let us know what's wrong with this preview of *Civic Catechisms And Reason In The French Revolution* by Adrian Velicu. Problem: It's the wrong book It's the wrong edition Other. To ask other readers questions about *Civic Catechisms And Reason In The French Revolution*, please sign up. Be the first to ask a question about *Civic Catechisms And Reason In The French Revolution*. Lists with This Book. This book is not yet featured on Listopia.