

Blum, Christopher Olaf. *Critics of the Enlightenment: Readings in the French Counter-Revolutionary Tradition*. Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2004. 357 pp. \$30.00 hardcover.

The conservative social critics of the 19th century are often a more satisfying read than those of the 20th. Living, as they do, closer to the times before the Enlightenment project had reached the grass roots, they have a clearer and more detailed sense of the traditional society that preceded the modern society that surrounds us. In "Critics of the Enlightenment," Christopher Blum brings together six 19th-century French essayists who took a firm stand against the ideals of the French Revolution: François-René de Chateaubriand (1768-1848), Louis de Bonald (1754-1840), Joseph de Maistre (1753-1821), Frédéric Le Play (1806-1882), Emile Keller (1828-1909) and René de la Tour du Pin (1834-1824).

Blum's choice of texts is commendable. By way of friendly disagreement, I myself would have preferred selections from Cheateaubriand's "Genius of Christianity" in place of "Buonaparte and the Bourbons." Also, some selections from Louis Veuillot would have been welcome – Veuillot, strangely, appears only in footnotes. Taken all in all, however, the texts are all illuminating.

Blum's work invites us to appreciate the permanent relevance of the critics of the French Revolution, a difficult task even among those who call themselves "conservatives." Since the *ancien régime* has passed away, never to return, the observations of Maistre *et al* seem like sentimental longings. Aside from some inveterate traditionalist Catholics, who wants a king? Even if we all wanted kings, who could credibly claim the throne in California or Wisconsin?

But this is of course to miss what is most profound in their critique of the Revolution and the Enlightenment ideals which inspired it. When we think of the *ancien régime*, we tend to focus on the monarchy, the aristocracy, and the peasants, in a kind of Marxist schematic of "haves" and "have-nots." We forget what was most fundamental to pre-Revolutionary society, namely the Catholic Church. The Revolution was not just a rebellion against the Church insofar as it was allied to the throne. As Emile Keller observes, the conflict between the Church and modern society "begins with the reality and consequences of original sin; from there the debates moves to the necessity of the Redemption, and thence to the divinity and sovereignty of Jesus Christ and his Church" (269).

The French Revolution is, in fact, a continuation of the Protestant Revolution, although at a more radical level. Maistre remarks

"there is no faction, no enemy of religion or laws who has not praised Protestantism. There is no fomenter of that execrable Revolution who did not praise the Protestantism of the sixteenth century" (151). From the perspective of the revolutionaries, Protestantism accomplished the important first step of separating men from the hierarchy and teaching of the Church.

Consequently, "[s]ince the first moments of the Revolution the enemies of the throne have shown a filial tenderness for Protestantism. Men of all lands and all cults, observers of all systems, note well and do not forget it: The Gospel taught by the Protestant Church never brought fear to Robespierre" (148-149). Protestantism cannot provide a coherent intellectual response to the Revolution, since it elevates "private reason" to the detriment of authority and community.

The modern world, the *nouveau regime*, under which we live, is one born from Protestantism and Enlightenment liberalism. At the same time, it lives parasitically on the moral and spiritual capital that Catholic belief and practice provided over its long reign before the Revolution; moral and spiritual capital, by the way, which it can only spend and no longer accrue.

To take only one example out of many possible, Maistre argues that the papacy was the only force in society powerful enough to keep the monarchs from destroying the institution of marriage. Long before Henry VIII, European monarchs sought to distort the traditional Christian belief on marriage with divorce, even polygamy. The local bishops often lacked the strength to correct the monarch; only the Pope could rebuke the erring monarchs.

Where is marriage now? The indissolubility of marriage, once challenged by the monarchs, was rejected by the Protestants. With the Revolution, marriage becomes a civil union, governed by the State. The inability of contemporary society to protect and promote marriage, indeed, to restrict it to unions of different sexes, is a perfectly logical consequence of the Protestant/Revolutionary position.

The most important institution, then, of the *ancien régime* is the Church, not the throne. As Emile Keller observes in his defense of the *Syllabus of Errors*, "Strong in her faith and her eighteen centuries of existence, the Church proclaims that men and nations – tending toward evil from the day of their birth – need her help and authority in order to sustain themselves and to progress in the temporal order as well as the spiritual" (268). The temporal realm is doomed without the teaching of the Church and the grace of her sacraments.

Such pronouncements are, of course, unwelcome to many, even those who describe themselves as "conservative Catholics." It

seems too stark a statement to say that Western society is doomed without turning to the Church. Even conservatives look for signs of hope everywhere, in election results, in "changing attitudes" shown by polling data, in any scrap of remaining Christianity in the culture. And yet, suppose your physician told you that your body was riddled with cancer, that this cancer was untreatable, and that your case is terminal. Would it be fair for you to respond, "How negative you are! What about the parts of me that are in health? Why don't you talk about those?"

For some reason, the principle that allows us to "face the facts" about health does not appear to apply to social ills. When the "patient" is our decadent liberal society, a terminal diagnosis is never acceptable. Such pronouncements are "pessimistic," "overstated," "gloomy," and "reactionary." But, as one looks at the trajectory of Western society with the insight of the "critics of the Enlightenment," one wonders if a terminal diagnosis is wrong.

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