




1999

Religion and Identity in Modern France: The Modernization of the Protestant Community in Languedoc, 1815-1848

John B. Roney

Sacred Heart University, roneyj@sacredheart.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/his_fac

 Part of the [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), and the [European Languages and Societies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Roney, John B., "Religion and Identity in Modern France: The Modernization of the Protestant Community in Languedoc, 1815-1848" (1999). *History Faculty Publications*. Paper 50.
http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/his_fac/50

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History Department at DigitalCommons@SHU. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@SHU. For more information, please contact ferribyp@sacredheart.edu.

Russian, the *Khristovshchina*), from whom they emerged. Just as the divine descended to the earth and repeatedly took human form—the Skoptsy believed in Jesus Christ and in other Christs who periodically appeared in their midst—so humans could take on features of the higher order by castration, that is, by renouncing the physical possibility of sinful sexual relations. The sources for these insights are documents from the Skoptsy themselves, many of which the author discovered in the archives collected by Vladimir Bonch-Bruевич, an Old Bolshevik who devoted his career to the search for revolutionary allies among the disaffected sectarians of late Imperial Russia. In her analysis of these documents, Engelstein employs tools from literary theory to uncover the layers of meaning within the texts. She gives the reader an understanding of the intentions, audiences and subtexts of the each document's author. She also includes a wide variety of nonliterary texts (photographs, drawings and poetry) that add to the richness of the book.

The greatest strength of this monograph is the author's ability to empathize with a group of socially marginalized people and present their story using internal as well as external sources. This empathic presentation is bolstered by her use of literary theory, archival sources, and brief descriptions of the broader historical context. The book is well written, at times reading like a Russian folktale, particularly in the chapter on "Myths and Mysteries." Overall, this study makes an important contribution to our knowledge of Russian religious history. It also is a fine example of the application of cutting-edge historical methods on society, literature, and culture to religious history.

While not detracting from the book's considerable strengths, I still have questions about the fate of the Skoptsy under Soviet rule. In describing the period from 1917 to 1939, Engelstein draws heavily upon material collected by Bonch-Bruевич and concludes they disappeared because contacts with him ended. Do documents held in other major Soviet archival collections on religion support the claim that the Skoptsy vanished? Were these sectarians never discussed by the Anti-Religious Commission (in the 1920s), the Commission for Cultic Matters (1930s), or the Council for Cultic Affairs (1940s–1960s)? One wonders whether the final episodes of the Skoptsy folktale have yet to be told.

Edward E. Roslof
United Theological Seminary
Dayton, Ohio

Religion and Identity in Modern France: The Modernization of the Protestant Community in Languedoc, 1815–1848. By James C. Deming. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1999. xxii + 237 pp. \$43.00 cloth.

The study of national identity has become a popular focus in recent publications, and James Deming adds to this growing literature by looking at the little-known French Protestant church in the nineteenth century. The realization that religion plays a significant role in European national identity has been reintroduced into a study of French history since Nathalie Zemon Davis began her study of earlier sixteenth-century France (*Society and Culture in Early Modern France: Eight Essays* [Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1975]), followed by the fine works of Barbara Diefendorf (*Paris City Councillors in the Sixteenth Century: The Politics of Patrimony* [Princeton, N.J.:

Princeton University Press, 1983] and *Beneath the Cross: Catholics and Huguenots in Sixteenth-Century Paris* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1991]) and, in subsequent eras, Dale Van Kley's study of the role of religion leading up to the French Revolution (*The Religious Origins of the French Revolution: From Calvin to Civil Constitution, 1560-1791* [New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996]). While Catholicism was dominant in France, the small yet significant French Protestant church is little known. The French Revolution was good for the Protestants because it freed them from official tyranny, and their attitude to the Revolution was often opposite their European counterparts, who only had disdain for its irreligious foundations. At the same time the French Protestant church reawakened to its own spiritual roots with a new revival, or *Réveil*, which began just after Napoleon's defeat. Not all Protestants fully accepted this movement, and in the struggle to reassert their unity and identity, internal strife divided the community into two distinctive groups. Deming's work is a very important contribution to our understanding of French Protestantism, important not only because he writes with great balance and fairness to both sides, but because his study is based on an encyclopedic collection of archival materials. This book will stand as a great resource for many other studies, and thus he has significantly advanced the field in the English-speaking world.

Deming has chosen to focus on the Protestant church in Languedoc between 1815-1848 because it is here that the greatest number of Protestants lived and had a significant impact on the economy and politics. From its inception in the sixteenth century, the majority of French Protestants belong to the Reformed [Calvinist] church and are known as Huguenots. They thrived in the south, and following the rivers and mountain ranges there is a crescent-like concentration of population, similar to the Middle East. It is here where opposition to royal power and northern culture and language found its greatest concentration. Huguenots were involved in the silk and textile industries, which were also tied to local finance and trade, especially in Nîmes [13,000 members (73)], while others worked the fertile soils of Garrigues and the foothills of the Cévennes.

The process of modernization plays an important role in Deming's study, and this becomes a very important organizing principle and leads to the best questions. Despite the fact that historical study greatly increased in the nineteenth century and Romanticism encouraged a sympathetic return to the past, almost all social institutions struggled to redefine themselves as modern social bodies. French identity had always been rooted in Catholic culture, and once it lost some of its power Protestants had a new chance to identify themselves as completely French, despite their Protestant religious affiliation. But, since Napoleon, the French government wanted to control all recognized religion through the Organic Articles, and therefore the French Reformed church struggled to understand its own unity, beliefs, and practices.

The two communities that emerged were on the one side the established church, represented by the Liberals and embodied in the persons of Samuel Vincent, Ferdinand Fontanès, and Gustave de Clausonne. They strived to retain some semblance of national unity for the Reformed church, which they understood as a community of all Protestants (involuntary). Since the Enlightenment they followed the principle of free inquiry because they believed that all doctrinal confessions were dated and the Bible was a "complex document and difficult to interpret . . . [and] conclusions were far from certain" (90). Yet

standards of behavior and moral values were important. Deming shows that they were correct in fearing that a loss of unity might bring political and economic consequences because this had been the case until their time. But, despite these real fears, they tenaciously hung onto Consistorial power and denied any real growth of individual religious experience. On the other side were those influenced by the Réveil, and they were known as Evangelicals—connected to the European-wide movement—and as the Orthodox, due to their insistence on doctrinal standards. Agenor de Gasparin, Emilien Frossard, Abraham Borrel, and Frédéric and Adolphe Monod were some of their greatest exponents. At the heart of the matter was their insistence on an “awakened” and voluntary church, where an experience of conversion authenticated one’s spiritual life. By 1848 many Evangelicals decided to seek their own unity through the “Union of Evangelical Churches”; a lively international movement that had connected many other bodies together already. Deming shows that the Réveil allowed some Protestants (*parvenus*) to break into the established political structure of the church: “it also gave them a sense of purpose and an outlet for public action and respect to which they otherwise did not have access” (120). This outlet was especially important for the role of women and the lower classes, which gave them access to leadership and activity.

At the same time, both groups attempted to become more modern, and this brought them together in several ways. First, beyond the doctrinal question, they both believed in a “personal relationship between individual and God” (90). Even the liberals renewed their own faith as a result of contact with the Evangelicals. The Evangelicals parted with strict Calvinism, and they developed newer forms of worship, evangelism, and community. Second, they both wanted to be considered completely French and Reformed at the same time, yet questioned the other’s membership. Third, each responded to the great social needs of the time with several agencies, sometimes even working together; the *Maison de Santé* and the *Société des Intérêts généraux du protestantisme* were notable achievements.

Deming has offered a very good and focused study of the role of religion and identity in France. A longer study, however, might make more connections to the contemporary international Reformed churches and to the international Evangelical movement, especially the Réveil in Geneva, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and the German lands. For example, the social care agencies in France find a parallel in Geneva through their founding of similar societies, with the Red Cross representing their crowning achievement. Still, Deming’s work will remain the main reference work in English for nineteenth-century French Protestantism.

John B. Roney
Sacred Heart University

Word Crimes: Blasphemy, Culture, and Literature in Nineteenth-Century England. By Joss Marsh. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998. xii + 436 pages. \$55.00 cloth, \$22.50 paper.

One staple of postmodern cultural studies involves the resurrection of a curious anecdote or event from the past that when explicated in detail illuminates an entire historical period. For Joss Marsh, the three trials for blasphemy of G. W. Foote in 1883 prove just such an episode. A member of the