

Timothy Tackett — *Religion, Revolution and Regional Culture in Eighteenth-Century France: The Ecclesiastical Oath of 1791*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986. Pp. xxi, 425.

“On any of several chilly Sunday mornings in the winter of 1791, parish clergymen throughout France were asked to stand in their churches before their congregations and swear a solemn oath of allegiance to the nation, the king, and the new Revolutionary constitution.” Thus opens a description and discussion of an extraordinary happening in the history of modern France: the oath crisis of 1791, in which some 50,000 parish priests and curates were suddenly confronted with a choice “for” or “against” the new order; a choice, moreover, which had to be made in public, and on record. By their response to this decree they were forced to define, not only for themselves but for their parishioners and the nation, the complex issue of their double loyalty to State and Church. The division was dangerously close. Between 52 and 55 percent threw their lot in with the Revolution, while the remainder, by refusing to take the oath, started out on a long road towards open schism. After an interval of toleration, positions on both sides would harden; non-jurors would become counter-revolutionaries, and the long battle between the Roman Catholic Church and the Revolution would be declared in earnest. “The oath would come to reinforce and solidify the Manichean universe of revolutionary politics and give visible substance to the underlying paranoia which had gripped the National Assembly and much of the population since the inception of the Revolution” (p. 6).

Timothy Tackett argues that the oath crisis of 1791 was a pivotal — a “seminal” — historical event. By this he means that it actually created new politico-religious structures in France. The idea is not original. Other historians have remarked on the striking correspondence between the patterns of oath-taking in 1791 and subsequent national patterns of clericalism and anticlericalism. What he has done has been to supply an exhaustive statistical foundation for what had previously been merely a strong impression. But in so doing, he has provided insight into a second problem: the question of the historical roots of the oath. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the politico-religious geography of France has conformed to the lines created by the oath crisis. One might expect a similar continuity backwards, into the Old Regime. But Tackett’s entire study serves to show that no such obvious correlation exists between the oath and previous religious practice. “No single map of the Old Regime yet encountered matches the geography of the oath — neither the map of Jansenism, nor of popular peasant uprisings, nor of obvious patterns of economic and social structures” (p. 299). In other words, he concludes, it was the oath itself, and the decisions of these 50,000 individuals, which created later cleavages in French society. The ecclesiastical oath of 1791 was a “véritable événement structurant” for provincial France.

The oath crisis can also be seen as an extraordinary historiographical event. The importance of the parish clergy as leaders of local opinion made their reaction a matter of immediate concern to the government; therefore the departments were ordered to submit lists of juring and nonjuring priests. These lists, either the completed versions or the rough drafts, still exist for the majority of departments. Administrative files, parish registers and emigration rolls help to fill in the details. This contemporary evidence is bolstered by the extensive research of nineteenth-century local historians, mostly priests, fascinated by their predecessors’ reactions to what they perceived as the “test” of the Great Revolution. According to Tackett, almost no region of France was without its devoted antiquarian. If we accept the integrity of their findings — as Tackett does, perhaps a little too easily — the result is an unusually complete data base, ready to be subjected to modern statistical analysis. “With patience one can determine the positions of the overwhelming majority of vicaires and curés in the spring and summer of 1791” (p. 33). And this he has done, district by district, department by department, scoring each source in turn for its reliability (See Appendix II).

The question then becomes one of explaining and understanding those positions. What factors led the parish clergy to take the oath or to refuse it, to become “patriots” or “refractories”? If we believe in structures, then we must believe that somehow, somewhere, the decision of 1791 was in the making, years in advance. Early historiography portrayed the choice in simplistic terms: the non-jurors were persuaded by their consciences, the jurors by the “logic of the cooking-pot”. More recent inquiry has been of a sociological nature, focusing on the age, social background, and personal wealth

of the individuals, and whether they were urban or rural, native sons or strangers; the density of clergy in the area and the proximity of institutions of control such as the seminary and the diocese; the curés' subordination to their bishops (who were almost all nonjurors) and the degree of their politicization. There is also the question of *mentalité*. Historians — Tackett among them — have recognized that within the clergy of the late eighteenth century there were two conflicting mindsets: the first, Tridentine and traditional, conditioned by hierarchy and dedicated to the salvation of souls, the second, more modern, accustomed to an enlightenment vocabulary of citizenship, utility, and the well-being of peoples. The latter was conducive to the oath, the former tended to oppose it.

Other historical inquiries have taken a new direction, focusing less on the individual priests and more on the interaction between priests and their parishes, so complex that it is difficult to see "who ultimately was the leader, and who was the led" (p. 159). For every priest who defied his congregation, to take — or refuse — the oath, there were more whose options conformed to the will of their parishioners, whose actions were taken within a circle of approval and applause. In Tackett's words, "ecclesiastical reactions essentially mirrored the local attitudes and mindset of the population" (p. 184). Seen in this light, the oath ceases to be an affair merely of the clergy and becomes a sort of national referendum, a sampling of provincial society's attitudes towards the structures of civil government and of Church. "Throughout most of *rural* France, clerical options were related less to individual career experiences than to the broader cultural assumptions and opinions of fellow citizens and fellow clergymen across whole *pays* or provinces" (p. 288).

If one accepts this model of clerical-lay interaction, a new set of questions appears. The striking regional differences in oath-taking must be explained, at least in part, by differences in lay society. Tackett has investigated all of these: differences in language, in the degree of urban-rural interpenetration, in the dispersal or concentration of the population, in the strength and density of "clericalism", in fear of Protestants or resentment against the activities of the local elites, or dislike of centralization. The whole problem of causation becomes "vastly more complicated and problematic", as he admits (p. 182) — and yet, in the final analysis, much more significant, since the whole culture is now at issue. Most of the single-cause arguments are laid to rest, but "clusters" of causes appear. It is Tackett's thesis that the particular mix of these causes resulted in different reactions in different parts of the country. "Substantially different regional reactions and trains of logic had come together in forming the oath geography" (p. 299).

In contrast to his data, which is presented with an air of finality, Tackett's conclusions are cautious and tentative. At the end of it all, the reality of the oath crisis, and of those 50,000 individual choices, eludes a tidy definition, and he offers only the outlines of understanding. The deepening of uncertainty — that is the final reward for so much patient scholarship. But his description of the complicated human context in which the event took place is enlightening and thought-provoking. This work is an enormous advance on anything that has gone before.

Elizabeth Rapley  
University of Ottawa

\* \* \*

Reginald E. Zelnik, (trans. and ed.) — *A Radical Worker in Tsarist Russia: The Autobiography of Semen Ivanovich Kanatchkov*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986. Pp. xxx, 472.

1879 was a momentous year for Russian history. Joseph Stalin was born then, and so was Semen Ivanovich Kanatchkov. In the annals of history, they are not of equal significance. Stalin looms large in Russian history, throwing such a shadow that Kanatchkov is difficult to find. But these men came from very similar backgrounds and both ended up in the Bolshevik movement.

Stalin's journey from peasant to radical revolutionary has been recorded, but the record has been altered and is largely unreliable. Kanatchkov's sojourn from peasant-worker to Bolshevik