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Published on *Reviews in History* (http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews)

The Jesuits and the Monarchy: Catholic Reform and Political Authority in France (1590?1615)

Review Number:
593
Publish date:
Tuesday, 1 May, 2007
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ISBN:
9780754638889
Date of Publication:
2005
Price:
£55.00
Pages:
290pp.
Publisher:
Ashgate
Publisher url:
https://www.ashgate.com/default.aspx?page=637&calcTitle=1&title_id=5236&edition_id=7506
Place of Publication:
Aldershot
Reviewer:
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As popular television and film insists on reminding us, Jesuits were infamous in the early-modern period for plotting the deaths of monarchs. Shekhar Kapur?s portrayal of Edmund Campion in *Elizabeth* (1998), cloaked and dagger in hand, is a case in point. Eric Nelson?s book *The Jesuits and the Monarchy* will do much to dispel this misconception, and much more. Nowhere, outside the British Isles, were the Jesuits more reviled than in France: they were an integral part of the Catholic black legend until at least the separation of Church and State just over a century ago. This tradition was invented during the French Wars of Religion, not by Protestants, as we might have expected, but by the Gallican clergy and magistracy who were otherwise staunchly orthodox in their beliefs. In spite (or because) of this opposition from the French-Catholic establishment, the fortunes of the French Jesuits were thrown in with those of the first Bourbon monarch, Henri IV, however unlikely this may seem.

Eric Nelson admirably demonstrates that, with the inventiveness and adaptability that characterized his reign, Henri IV sided with the Jesuits when they were at their most controversial and won their trust. The Jesuits in return proved to be bulwarks of royal authority throughout the seventeenth century and contributed

to the emergence of absolutism. This is a historiographical tour de force as, until recently, discussions of the French Jesuits focused almost exclusively on the issues of papal authority in France and the controversy surrounding their expulsion and subsequent reinstatement with little understanding of the Gallican context. In this sense *The Jesuits and the Monarchy* is in good company with a number of other groundbreaking works that have sought in the past ten years to refine our understanding of French Catholicism. I must acknowledge here the contribution that was made by Alain Tallon, *La France et le Concile de Trente* (Paris, 1997) and Thierry Wanegffelen, *Ni Rome Ni Genève* (Paris, 1997), in works that, sadly, remain untranslated, and, more recently and in English, Jotham Parsons, *The Church in the Republic* (Washington, 2004). These works have done justice, in different ways, to the ambiguity and complexity of the French Catholic Church?s involvement in the Reformations and Wars of Religion.

As in so many other respects, the idiosyncratic French response to the Reformations, both Catholic and Protestant, conditioned the establishment, expulsion, and reinstatement of the Jesuits in France in ways that have largely been ignored until now. With painstaking analysis of archival and printed sources, Nelson has reconstructed the Jesuits? legal battles with the parlement of Paris, fought in the last decade of the sixteenth and the first two decades of the seventeenth centuries. There were a number of reasons why the presence of the Society of Jesus in France was problematic, too numerous to be gone into here, but they largely congregate around the contested issue of papal supremacy in France. Indeed, the liberties of the Gallican Church, as this nebulous body of medieval legal precedents was called, denied some of the pope?s privileges that had been uncontested in other parts of pre-Reformation Europe. Thanks to Francis I?s victories in Italy against the Emperor at the beginning of the sixteenth century, some of these liberties were reclaimed by the king as part of a settlement with the pope known as the Concordat of Bologna (1516). The Church in France, imprecisely referred to as the Gallican Church, was thus already in much turmoil before the advent of the Reformation, torn as it was between the rival (but sometimes joined-up) claims of royal and papal supremacy. It is in the context of Gallican law that the controversy surrounding the Jesuits? oath of allegiance to the pope must be understood, and it was on this ground that the Paris parlement fought to keep them out of the kingdom.

Eric Nelson?s book opens at the end of the French Wars of Religion, at a time when a great many of these legal battles, although already fought and won by the Jesuits, were becoming controversial once more as the prospects of religious peace loomed ever larger. It could be argued that the presence of the Jesuits had been tolerated by the Gallican authorities as the two formed a marriage of convenience for the purpose of fighting heresy. After the Catholic League had overtaken the Protestant heresy as a ?clear and present danger? to political and religious stability in France, however, Gallican clergy and magistracy returned to their pet hate and blamed the Jesuits for all the excesses of the League. By blaming the Jesuits as an external influence for the demise of concord in France, the Gallican lawyers played the royal card of reconciliation between Protestant and Catholic former enemies as bon français. Indeed, as Nelson has shown in his contribution to *Religion and Superstition in Reformation Europe*, ed. Naphy and Parish (Manchester, 2003), the Jesuits came to be portrayed as foreign agents of papal and Spanish interests which made them a convenient ?other? against whom Protestant and Catholic Frenchmen could make common cause.

This solved a particularly difficult conundrum for the politiques: how to gain the trust of the king?s Catholic subjects without antagonizing former allies? Henri?s conversion and reconciliation with the pope was crucial if he was to pacify former Leaguers who had made it clear that they would not disband unless Henri converted. But although they agreed that Henri should convert, the politiques did not want him to become a puppet of the pope. The Gallican magistracy therefore singled out the Jesuits as champions of ultramontanism, the expulsion of whom would mollify the moderates. This placed Henri IV in a very awkward position vis-à-vis the pope at a time when he was still trying to have an excommunication lifted. Eric Nelson sheds light on this problematic issue in the context of an attempt on the king?s life in 1594. Until that point, Henri IV had succeeded in preventing the expulsion of the Jesuits, but this time the Gallican lawyers were able to point the finger at them using circumstantial evidence: namely that the assassination of Henri III in 1589 could be blamed on their advocacy of regicide. For the first time the Jesuits? reputation as dispatchers of crowned heads was brought to bear to effect their expulsion from the kingdom.

The second chapter of *The Jesuits and the Monarchy* deals with the recall of the Jesuits at the king?s own request in 1603, and contains, in my view, the monograph?s most original contribution to scholarship. As Nelson articulates very lucidly, the king?s involvement in this particular episode of the Jesuits? fortunes in France had repercussions for the entire seventeenth century and the style of government that his successors would adopt with the support of the Jesuits as newfound allies. As Henri IV had occasion to discover, the Gallican lawyers, although staunch defenders of royal supremacy, could be just as troublesome as his Leaguer enemies or former Huguenot allies. Nelson demonstrates admirably how Henri IV used the Jesuits as pawns to placate the pope, along with his most vocal Catholic subjects, while chastising his critics within the parlement of Paris. It is ironic that this effectively turns on its head the Protestant myth of Jesuit generals using Catholic monarchs as puppets.

Because of their oath of allegiance to the pope the Jesuits were free from entanglement in Gallican politics, and this made them ideal candidates to help in the pursuit of an idiosyncratic royal campaign of Catholic reform. Henri IV articulated the justification of his recall of the Jesuits using the same principle that had allowed him to reconcile himself with Leaguer enemies and former Huguenot allies: clemency. Recourse to this concept created a precedent on which successive Bourbon monarchs could fall back when legal or theological justifications failed them. The royal goodwill was inscrutable, unjustifiable, and yet at the heart of Henri?s style of government. Here I have to point out the success with which the first Bourbon king propagandized his self-image as the ?good king Henri IV?, which was still echoing in French classrooms in this reviewer?s lifetime. But this strategy was far cleverer than posterity has let on, as it made the Jesuits indebted to the king and made them dependent on his protection which could be mitigated by no text of law or recourse to theological argument.

In return, French Jesuits moved further away from their counterparts outside France in accommodating their rule to the specific demands of Gallican law. For instance, Jesuits emphasized their credentials as ?good Frenchmen? to distance themselves from the accusations of colluding with Spain or Rome that had flourished during the League. This might infringe on the principle of strict obedience to the pope, sometimes without the knowledge of their Father General, provoking the anger and outrage of the papal nuncio. In this respect, Nelson shows us, the Jesuits were no different from other religious orders that had accommodated their rule to the specific demands of Gallicanism in the course of the medieval and early-modern periods. The example of the Franciscan order can be evoked here, as shown in a recent monograph by Megan Armstrong: *The Politics of Piety: Franciscan Preachers during the Wars of Religion, 1560?1600* (Rochester, 2004). Here is another particular strongpoint of Nelson?s monograph: in no way were the Jesuits unique with respect to their response to Gallicanism. Aside from their black legend, gleefully replicated in later centuries by polemicists and historians alike, Jesuits were like any other order that had accommodated its rule to the strictures imposed by Gallicanism. What is different here is what the king, Henri IV, made of these difficulties and how he used them to his advantage.

It is no coincidence that Jesuits became the favourite confessors of the Bourbons and that Henri IV endowed the order with land and money for the building of a flagship Jesuit College at La Flèche in 1603. The subject

of the third chapter is the expansion of the Society of Jesus under the auspices of the new alliance struck between Henri and the Jesuits. The terms of this alliance were couched in a legal document known as the Edict of Rouen (1603), drafted for the purpose of placating the objections of the Gallican lawyers in the parlement of Paris. This document required a measure of compliance with Gallican principles which directly contradicted the Jesuits? first rule of direct obedience to the pope. Moreover, it was reminiscent of the strictures that had been placed on foreign regular clergy by Philip the Fair with the Pragmatic Sanction of Bourges in 1438 at the inception of the ?liberties of the Gallican Church?. It also limited the foundation of further Jesuit colleges, seen as unfair competition by the Gallican clergy, except at the direct behest of the king himself, exemplified by the spectacular foundation of the Collège de La Flèche. This strengthened the king?s hold on the Society, as it placed it beyond the reach of both the Gallican magistracy and clergy, but firmly at the mercy of the king?s pleasure or displeasure. Not unlike the Edict of Nantes, the Edict of Rouen was a carefully worded piece of legal finessing that at once placated Gallican criticism within the parlement and the Sorbonne while clearly placing the Jesuits in the king?s debt.

The Jesuits were instrumental in a deliberate royal policy of Catholic reform and education of the French nobility?s sons which bore its fruits during the reigns of both Louis XIII and XIV. This is Nelson?s most provocative and valuable contention: the crown?s alliance with the Jesuits in the face of Gallicanism coincided with the Bourbons? move towards absolutism. Gallicanism, with its reliance on medieval precedents and theoretical independence from Rome, no longer squared with the political needs of post-civil-war France and had become a thorn in the side of the crown. Thanks to the caveat that the king had skilfully inserted in the Edict of Rouen, Jesuit foundations flourished under the direct patronage of Henri IV. In the meantime, the suspicion of regicide and collusion with foreign powers that had characterized anti-Jesuit polemics leading up to their expulsion had declined. Although the Edict of Rouen limited membership of the Society of Jesus to Frenchmen, foreign Jesuits were reinstated in 1608 to remedy the shortage of vocations in the kingdom. When Henri IV was stabbed to death in 1610, the fortunes of the French Jesuits fell into the hands of the Gallicans who, under the regency of Marie de Médicis, were able to apply the letter rather than the spirit of the Edict of Rouen.

The fourth and penultimate chapter of *The Jesuits and the Monarchy* is devoted to the renewal of the Jesuits?s troubles after the regicide of Henri IV that the judges were keen to pin on them. The Gallican lawyers were no more successful in linking Ravaillac to the Jesuits than they had been with Chastel who had been the author of the previous attempt in 1594. The context, however, was different from that of 1594 when the parlement had nonetheless obtained the order?s expulsion: by 1610 the Jesuits had estranged themselves enough from contentious arguments to thwart Gallican efforts to expel them again. This did not deter Gallican jurists from renewing their polemical war against the Society, using against it the defences of papal supremacy and treatises advocating regicide that had been penned by foreign Jesuits. It led to further tinkering with the Jesuit rule to accommodate Gallican principles expressed in the Edict of Rouen. Interestingly, in this case the most vocal protestations did not emanate from the Jesuit Father General or the papal nuncio, but from members of the Gallican clergy itself. The bishop of Paris, for instance, protested at the parlement?s infringement on his jurisdiction over theological works published in Paris, albeit by foreign Jesuits. This highlights the relevance of much deeper divisions within the Gallican establishment that took precedence, Nelson argues, over the wider issue of the Jesuits? presence in France.

It is necessary here to question Nelson?s insistence on using Jotham Parsons?s terminology, ?erudite Gallicanism?, to describe objections that lawyers of the parlement of Paris made to the Jesuits? presence in the kingdom. Gallicanism is a complex concept, and there are perhaps as many interpretations of the so-called ?liberties of the Gallican Church? as they were Gallican lawyers and theologians. The term ?erudite Gallicanism? is used by Jotham Parsons in chapter three of *The Church in the Republic* to describe a form of humanist (by opposition to medieval) Gallicanism that emerged during the French Wars of Religion. I have suggested above a distinction, borrowed from Alain Tallon, *Conscience nationale et sentiment religieux en France au XVIe siècle* (Paris, 2002), between ecclesiastical and judicial Gallicanism which nuances a monolithic understanding of this phenomenon; although it too fails to summarize with any precision the variety of views that Gallicanism encompassed during this period. *The Jesuits and the Monarchy*

demonstrates a keen understanding of these ambiguities that is incompatible, in my view, with the use of the term ?erudite Gallicanism? which is neither descriptive nor useful in the context of a much shorter chronological span than Parsons?s *The Church in the Republic*.

In the end, the French Jesuits agreed to swear an oath in 1612, carefully worded to allow enough room for interpretation, disavowing the writing of non-French Jesuits on royal supremacy and even sanctioning the Sorbonne?s Gallican theology. By then, Jesuits had found unlikely allies in the shape of a syndic of the University of Paris and even a president of the parlement who had become sensitive to the role that Jesuits could play in a new Catholic establishment. One of the many shades of Gallicanism included one that was not averse to defending papal supremacy in the face of a strict judicial understanding of the Gallican liberties, especially with respect to the Council of Trent. Nelson only mentions in passing the Gallican arguments that conflated the Jesuits with Spain and the pope in denouncing the Council of Trent as forming part of an elaborate foreign conspiracy hatched in Rome. It seems to me that the eventual registering of the canons of the Council of Trent by the parlement, and the normalization of the Jesuits?s presence in France, have a parallel history. That Nelson chose not to address the wider context of the Gallican response to the Council of Trent, if only to summarize Tallon?s conclusions, is regrettable as in the minds of many Gallicans the two topics were indistinguishable.

Nelson?s fifth and final chapter describes the final stages of the neutering of the Jesuits?s specificity and removal of the last obstacle to their full incorporation in the French Church. On the eve of the majority of Louis XIII, advocates of papal supremacy were more likely to be found within the ranks of the Gallican clergy than amongst the Jesuits who, by then, had become bulwarks of royal supremacy against the writings of their foreign counterparts. Eric Nelson successfully argues in *The Jesuits and the Monarchy* that the Jesuit order was turned, in spite of itself, into a political weapon that was wielded by Henri IV against those who challenged his authority as rightful king of France. Counter-intuitively this book argues that rather than being the Catholic firebrands and advocates of ultramontanism that they were made out to be, the French Jesuits had carefully weaved their way through the intricacies of Gallican politics to the point where their presence was no longer challenged. Although credit for this lies squarely at the feet of Henri IV, their accommodation with the constraints of French law eventually earned them a key role in the Catholic Reformation and rise of absolutism that marked the seventeenth century. Nelson?s book raises some important research questions and is, in this respect, in good company with works that have transformed our understanding of French Catholicism in the past ten years.

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