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## Lourdes. Body and Spirit in the Secular Age

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Nicholas Aitkin

At the heart of this majestic and complex book is a simple story, engagingly recounted by the author. On 11 February 1855, Bernadette Soubirous, a young Pyrenean shepherdess, together with her sister Toinette and a friend Jeanne Abadie, was instructed by her impoverished mother to go out and search for tinder for the stove (p.3). Anxious to avoid allegations of theft, the three girls walked beyond the boundaries of their home town of Lourdes and made for the Grotto of Massabielle, a sandy cave on the banks of the river Gau, a place where children often went to play, even though local farmers used the environs to graze their pigs and even though it was rumoured the cave housed 'devilish' spirits. It was there that Bernadette, asthmatic and unable to keep up with the two other children, spied a 'soft light' inside the Grotto and 'a beautiful, smiling child in white who seemed to beckon to her' (p.3). This was the first of sixteen apparitions witnessed by Bernadette. On learning of the first sighting, Bernadette's mother smacked her daughter and forbade her from revisiting the Grotto. Undeterred, Bernadette kept returning, each time accompanied by a growing crowd of onlookers, whose presence gave concern both to the local priest and the *gendarmerie*. To begin with, the apparition was silent, yet in subsequent sightings instructed Bernadette 'to tell the priests to come here on procession and to build a chapel'(p.7) and, on 25 March, the day of the Annunciation, announced 'I am the Immaculate Conception'(p.8), a curious expression that was soon interpreted to mean that the vision was the Virgin

Mary. On 16 July, Bernadette saw the apparition for the final occasion, unable to get close to the Grotto itself thanks to the barriers erected by the authorities, ever anxious to maintain authority. As Ruth Harris relates, Bernadette's distance from the Grotto 'prefigured her increasing marginalisation' as Lourdes was transformed by 'more orthodox hands' into 'one of the greatest shrines in Christendom'(pp.8- 9). When in 1878 Bernadette died, a peripheral figure, in a Nevers nunnery, thousands were already making the annual pilgrimage to Lourdes to bathe in the curative waters that the future saint had unearthed at the time of the ninth apparition.

Books about Bernadette and Lourdes have since become almost as plentiful as the pilgrims themselves. An initial concern was the telling of the tale itself, an indication of how 'historical narrative mattered to the living practice at Lourdes' (p.178). In 1869, as the Grotto was steadily being transformed into a pilgrimage site, the Catholic journalist Henri Lasserre, published his *Notre-Dame de Lourdes* which claimed to be the definitive version of events, and set out 'to repress all competitors' (p.177). Competitors there were, despite the fact that Lasserre's history had sold one million copies by 1900. In the late 1870s, the Jesuit father Léonard Cros undertook a rival study, although Lasserre's dogged opposition ensured that Cros' findings would only appear in 1927, by which time the hapless Jesuit had been dead for some fourteen years! As Harris observes (p.20), it was not until the centenary of the apparitions, that a 'truly "scientific" history' appeared in the shape of René Laurentin's *Lourdes: Histoire authentique des apparitions* (6 vols,1961-64). Back in the 1890s, Bernadette inevitably became enmeshed in the bitter polemical battle between clericals and anticlericals. In 1893, Emile Zola published his novel *Lourdes* which irritated Catholics not only because it deliberately distorted events, but also because it cast doubts over the authenticity of the 'supernatural' cures that overcame pilgrims (pp.304-5). Medical science has also been intrigued by the veracity of these cures. Since its founding in 1883, a time when French medicine enjoyed a formidable reputation (p.327), the Medical Bureau at Lourdes has maintained voluminous records of all the cures claimed by pilgrims. Curiously, however, as Harris observes, few historians, other than Catholic ones, have tackled the Lourdes phenomenon. It is her opinion that 'mainstream' authors have been reluctant to be sidetracked by the persistence of a medieval world in which popular devotion and peasant folklore still prevailed, and have focused instead on the development of a secular France,(pp.12-13) a France which, as Eugen Weber so eloquently argued, transformed 'peasants into Frenchmen'.

Harris explains that she first became intrigued by Lourdes 'over fifteen years ago, when writing another work on French medicine towards the end of the nineteenth century' (p.xiii). How could such a phenomenon exist at a time when Parisian doctors claimed that science would unravel the mysteries of mankind and do away with the irrationalities of religious belief? Personal factors also entered into her choice of Lourdes as subject of enquiry. As the author reveals in her *Preface*, for a long while she suffered from a strange illness (now cured) that modern medicine could not alleviate (p.xiii). As she looked further into the subject, the author unwittingly began her own kind of intellectual journey, moving away from seeing Lourdes in the conventional terms of a 'political counter-culture' (p.xiv), to undertake research into the 'Pyrenean traditions of storytelling', and even venturing on a pilgrimage herself. As Harris writes, the experience did not disturb 'her Jewish secularism' (p.xv), yet the faith of those around her hardened the growing conviction that there was more to Lourdes than the rampant commercialism that had overwhelmed the town. Sensitive to such spirituality, Harris set out to write a book 'that is neither Catholic apology nor an anticlerical tirade', but instead an attempt 'to provide an historical context for believers and give non-believers a sense of where the appeal of Lourdes lays'(p.xv). She remains remarkably loyal to this brief and, in so doing, sensibly steers clear of trying to prove whether the cures are 'real miracles' or not (p.xvi); in any case, not being a medical doctor, she was denied permission from examining the records conserved by the Medical Bureau. The French Catholic Church's refusal to allow the author access to the archives for the Vichy period, an unfortunate ban that perpetuates the misleading notion that all Catholics were ardent Pétainists, also delineated the contours of her study, ensuring that the book ends in 1914. Nonetheless, through her exhaustive use of existing archives and impressive command of secondary materials, she has put together a fascinating story that says as much about the Catholic world of nineteenth-century France as it does about Lourdes itself.

Handsomely illustrated throughout and superbly organised, the book is divided into two halves. The first section, 'The Lourdes of the Apparitions' provides the historical context in which the sightings took place. Here, Harris writes about the Pyrenean setting, the spiritual world of provincial France, the Soubirous family, perceptions of the Virgin Mary, and Bernadette herself. The second half of the volume is more thematic in nature and tackles 'The Lourdes of Pilgrimage', 'a town of hotels, restaurants and railway lines rather than the poor market town of the first half of the century' (p.175). After describing the commercial development of the Grotto and the erection of the imposing basilica, Harris goes on to explore the historical debates over Lourdes, the so-called 'Battle of the Books'; the role of the Assumptionist fathers in the founding of the national pilgrimages; the reasons why Lourdes became a journey for the sick; the assistance provided by the indefatigable Petites-Soeurs de l'Assomption to the ailing pilgrims; the rituals of the pilgrimage themselves; the supposed cures; and the role of religion and science in the Third Republic.

The mystery that Harris unravels is exactly why Lourdes should have developed into an international phenomenon. 'There was nothing inevitable' about this, she writes (p.9). Bernadette, poorly educated and unable to speak French, was not the only seer in France, and was not especially devout; Lourdes itself was an impoverished and isolated town far removed from Paris and Bordeaux; the local authorities were highly suspicious of Bernadette and her family, who were thought to be 'disreputable' and dishonest; and the Church hierarchy, concludes Harris, was traditionally wary of expressions of popular devotion which it could not control. Yet the shrine flourished. 'The initial antagonism of the local authorities', writes Harris, 'rather than deterring believers, goaded them into stubborn resistance' (p.9). The Lourdais, accustomed to riling authority and immensely satisfied that the Virgin Mary should have decided to appear in their town, quickly established 'new spiritual and class alliances to defend their shrine'(p.83), organising processions and altars, and eventually erecting a chapel. Drawing on her research into Pyrenean traditions, Harris also illustrates how the shrine genuinely caught the imagination of the Lourdais. The poor of the region had long been mesmerised by the 'interior', associating grottoes with magical powers (pp.85-5); in this respect, it helped that, shortly after Bernadette's visions, others too, notably children, claimed to have seen the Virgin in the Grotto. Drawing on her knowledge of popular piety, the author further demonstrates how Lourdes was part of the burgeoning cult of Marianism, a cult that had particular appeal to women and one which combined both 'clerical and popular religion'. As Harris explains, 'Mary was protectress of village fields, cross-roads and regions; she was hope, consolation, grace, pity, aid and comfort, her generous intercession solicited in the smallest mountain chapel and the most majestic Gothic cathedrals'(p.15).

Yet whether Lourdes would have achieved prominence without outside assistance remains debatable. Imperial favour was especially important. In 1858, Louis Veuillot, the renowned ultramontane and the guiding force behind *L'Univers*, Amélie Bruat, the governess to the son of Empress Eugénie, and Achille Fould, minister of state, all made their way to the shrine and were genuinely affected by what they saw, reporting back to the emperor himself. As Harris writes, 'There was no obvious reason for Louis Napoleon to support the shrine', but disturbing political developments, for instance recent republican electoral victories and the unification of Italy, ensured that his regime 'needed the support of the Church' (p.134). In a fascinating insight into the political world of the Second Empire, often thought to be rigidly authoritarian in its chain of command, Harris illustrates how the Imperial Court was thus prepared to override the wishes of the local prefect, Oscar Massy, who was opposed to the shrine, and tilt 'the local balance of power' in favour of the conservative notability and the bishop, Mgr Laurence, who were keen to see Lourdes flourish.(p.110, p.134) A deeply pragmatic man, sensitive to the rhythms of Pyrenean life, Laurence immediately sensed how the Grotto could help the Church reinforce its grip over the local population and reverse the anti-religious trends initiated by the 1789 Revolution.

For many Catholics these sentiments had already achieved too strong a hold. In clerical circles, defeat at the hands of Prussia, the Paris Commune and the subsequent civil war (1870-71), were all signs of God's displeasure with France. Lourdes thus received a further boost as national pilgrimages were organised in the 1870s to pray for national redemption, the restoration of the monarchy, and the rehabilitation of papal authority, severely dented by the unification of Italy. In this respect, it is tempting to see the growth of Lourdes in traditional terms - as a political counter-culture, a rejection of the secular ideology of the Third

Republic. The fact that the anti-Semitic and hopelessly reactionary Assumptionist fathers were behind the development of the national pilgrimages lends credence to this argument. So too, it is argued, does the fact that many pilgrims were women and young girls, often viewed by anticlericals as both gullible and malleable when they came under priestly influence. Drawing again on her knowledge of Marianism, Harris rightly takes issue with this disparaging and patronising standpoint. Lourdes, she writes, offered a possibility for women to escape clerical influence: 'to encounter Mary and Jesus sometimes without mediation, to use the imaginative resources that their religious universe afforded without recourse to the hierarchy' (p.356). In this way, pilgrimages to Lourdes provided 'a realm for spiritual reflection and practical activism that the secular republic was rarely able to match' (p.18).

The other group of people who came to dominate the pilgrimages were, of course, the sick and dying. As the monarchist cause ran out of steam in the late 1870s, it was these unfortunates that took 'centre stage'. While the secular republicans, wedded to a faith in progress and positivism, were quick to pour scorn on the miracles claimed by pilgrims, Harris demonstrates remarkable empathy for the suffering and spiritual sensitivities of those who sought out a cure. 'Touching', she writes, was especially important in the ritual of pilgrimage, bringing together young and old, rich and poor, the fit and the unhealthy. 'Faith was expressed through the body', continues Harris (p.287). It was manifested in the ways in which the helpers carried the inert bodies of the sick, 'those whom science had failed' (p.249), to the waters. Yet the paradox remains that, without the assistance of modern science, notably the development of the steam train, the shrine would never have become a centre of pilgrimage. Before the opening of the first railway line to Lourdes in 1867, it had taken 'some thirty-two hours by coach' to travel from Bordeaux to nearby Bagnères-de-Bigorre (p.24). The other scientific development of the modern age, so crucial to modern pilgrimages - the mass manufacturing of kitsch artefacts - was one which, many agree, Lourdes could have done without, although medieval pilgrimages had not been without their fair share of *bric à brac*.

Overall, this formidable and extensively researched book demolishes the notion that Lourdes was nothing more than a relic, 'a lingering cultural manifestation of a remote, impoverished and illiterate world' (p.357). To accept such a view, argues Harris, is to ignore the genuine appeal of pilgrimage and the 'psychological dimensions of nineteenth-century Marianism' (p.357). At the same time, the author's conclusions enhance the reputation of Anglophobe contributions to French religious history, reinforcing the belief, articulated by Caroline Ford, Ralph Gibson and Maurice Larkin among others, that nineteenth-century French Catholicism was far from being 'a monolithic bloc', in the words of Harris herself, 'a reactionary and fossilized institution on the defensive, unable to adapt and destined to lose adherents and influence in a changing world' (p.327). It was instead a living and oscillating faith that adapted well to changing circumstance, and had a particular appeal to women. While Harris freely admits that the Church sought to 'subordinate' women, she also demonstrates how it provided them with opportunities and spiritual comforts often unobtainable in the secular world. This, perhaps as much the search for a cure itself, is what drove thousands to visit Lourdes at the close of the last century. Yet, as Harris concludes, it was the simple image of Bernadette herself, 'the young, poverty-stricken and sickly girl kneeling in ecstasy in a muddy grotto' (p.366) that captivated the imagination of millions, regardless of their faith, and which accounts for Lourdes' enduring appeal today.

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