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Serge Maury, *Une secte janséniste convulsionnaire sous la Révolution française: Les Fareinistes (1783-1805)*. Paris: Éditions L'Harmattan, 2019. 482pp. €42.00 (pb). ISBN 978-2343143248.

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The abbé François Bonjour, village *curé* of Fareins-en-Dombes (Ain) in the Lyonnais, his older brother, and his assistant, mutated from standard diocesan priests into sectarian cult leaders and abettors, who operated between the Lyonnais and Paris. Serge Maury, author of this study, remarkable in its theological, anthropological, and psychological richness, calls the sect an *incarnation tardive* of the Jansenist convulsionary movements that began after the death of François de Pâris, deacon of the parish of St.-Médard, in 1727. His tomb in the parish cemetery immediately became a place of pilgrimage, ecstatic prayer, and miracle experiences. When local authorities closed down the cemetery four and a half years later, loyalists gathered in secret in many locations, looking to a millennium of holiness and the reign of Christ, prefigured in the old and new testaments: hence the label *figuriste* for such a belief.[1] Beginning with the constitutional bishop Henri Grégoire, building on the research of Jean-Pierre Chantin across the regional Jansenisms of the epoch, and engaging in a periodic dialogue with the publications of Catherine Maire, Maury offers us a study that is set into a broader history of enthusiasm and millennialism of the Fareinistes in all their diversity and perversity.[2]

Henri Grégoire, in chapter fifteen of volume two of his *Histoire de sectes religieuses*, entitled “Sectes des fareinistes, des blancs, des bleus ou béguins, etc.,” presents the priests as charlatans and their followers as fanatics, caught up in their enthusiasm for self-torture and sexual cavorting.[3] Flagellations, piercings, quasi-crucifixions, nudity, and promiscuity were integral parts of their worship celebrations. Though much of this was true, it was not the whole story, as subsequent research has demonstrated, and Serge Maury has committed himself to narrating the whole story. The convulsionary movement itself had three elements: first, a Lyonnais nucleus made up of religious order priests and their penitents, royalist and later anti-Concordat in sentiment; second, a rural Jansenism that developed in some (other) parishes in the Forez; and third, the Fareinistes gathered around François Bonjour who saw the Revolution as the violent and appropriate overthrowing of a decadent government and church. Highlighting the third element, Maury does not ignore the other two.

Contemporary reports of François Bonjour’s miracle ministry focused on the presumed crucifixions of Marguerite Bernard and Étiennette Thomasson, condemned by local civil and religious authorities. But Serge Maury, taking all the reports together, proposes a broad interpretation of a troubled community as an explanation of troubled individuals. The parish at

Fareins was characterized by generational conflict and conflict between the sexes in an isolated setting that stifled the freedom of the young and women, and so especially young women--hardly a unique situation for that era or any era. François Bonjour made the difference, stirring up the young and not so young with his theology and behavior. Maury, then, wants to present the Fareiniste movement above and beyond the historical context of the post-St.-Médard convulsions and their aftermath, considering, rather, contiguous to the illuminist or mystical phenomena studied by Clark Garrett in his *Respectable Folly*.^[4] Marguerite Bernard and Étiennette Thomasson were not the only convulsionary prophetesses of the era and area, but because François Bonjour submitted them to a series of painful procedures evocative of the crucifixion, they and Bonjour himself achieved local notoriety.

Two other women, Suzette Labrousse and Catherine Théot, along with the constitutional bishop and member of the National Assembly, Pierre Pontard, attracted more attention here. All awaited a second coming of Christ, a new millennium or spiritual age where a structured church would be superfluous. Maury appreciates Catherine Maire's change of emphasis in her studies of the Jansenisms, because she moved from downplaying to highlighting the millennialist current that swept away the Fareinistes.^[5] Already, by 1790-1791, the brothers Bonjour had broken off relations with the official church and the official constitutional monarchist government, engaging themselves and their adherents in the Jacobin extremes of the Revolution.

These theological refinements were almost eclipsed by the wonderful scenario of François Bonjour taking up with a woman in his entourage, Claudine Dauphan. From this union would come a new Elijah, a species of messiah, a Paraclete in fact, who would usher in the new age. This carrying-on, along with the exchange of letter between the two lovers (with another mistress in the wings), Serge Maury labels "le vaudeville 'mystico-amoureux'" (p. 136). In the background, the Bonjour brothers were moving their religious activities away from the parish to private houses, while trying to retrain jurisdictional rights in the parish itself. Their efforts were not helped by the reorganization of the dioceses into departments, forcing them to deal with new authorities in the Department of the Ain. So, while waiting for the future arrival of a one who would be the incarnation of the prophet Elijah and at his majority the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, Bonjour took the oath to Nation, Law, and King that included acceptance of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. He installed himself in Paris, departing Fareins definitively and leaving the Fareinistes and their neighbors in other villages of the Forez to their own devices. Whether this resulted in such a fracturing of common purpose into Richerism, figurism, millennialism, and convulsionary phenomena, that one should no longer speak of a Jansenism *forezien* is still a matter of debate.

With Fareinism installed in Paris, the central figure in Serge Maury's study becomes the prophetess Soeur Élisée--an Elisha to the Bonjour child's Elijah! There are 18,000 pages--yes 18,000 pages--of her witnessing and prophesying, which were preserved in the Bibliothèque Municipale de Lyon and finally studied only in the 1980s. Maury's work on Soeur Élisée is really the centerpiece of his book, 244 pages out of a total of 444 pages of text! He writes:

"Mais l'intérêt de ces discours de soeur Élisée est de se rapporter entièrement à une communauté précise et délimitée, et permet de suivre, presque jour après jour (jusqu'à plusieurs fois par jour), les harangues que cette prophétesse adressait aux membres du groupe. Se dessine ainsi, à travers ces imprécations, ces visions, ces discours métaphoriques, ces rituels à la forte charge tout à la fois ésotérique et provocatrice, une image profondément renouvelée et vue

de
l'intérieur de ce groupe de croyants pour le moins original" (p. 193).

Soeur Élisée was born Julie Simone Olivier and was abandoned by her parents, leading thereafter a "wandering" life, about which nothing is known. Nor is anything known about a spiritual father named "Hilarion," who may simply have been an imagined personality or a conflation of several Jacobins. When she broke off relations with François Bonjour and, to a lesser extent, with the child messiah, she worked up her own combination of mysticism and prophetism that Serge Maury calls "mysticisme sauvage," in contrast to the "mysticisme domestique et apprivoisé" (p. 218) of the saints of the church, such as Theresa of Avila and St. Marguerite-Marie Alocque. The break with the church was really a break with the other traditions of millenarianism and figurism, quasi-Jansenist or whatever. Élisée—with her followers—was totally on her own, to create an apocalyptic and millenarian religion that would reject the totally corrupt church, use a partially corrupted bible text only with great care and numerous emendations, and ignore the fathers and doctors of the church. They were "pentecôtistes" [pentecostals] (see pp. 264-269), who worked out their own varieties of "philojudéisme" (see pp. 289-297). Looking at the arguments that developed within the group, Maury speculates on which came first: varied interpretations because of internal jousting or internal jousting as a result of varied interpretations. In any event, they had remarkable familiarity with details of the biblical texts, and their story should be factored into the history of literacy and bible reading in Catholic France of the eighteenth century.

If the Apocalypse was the privileged text, the privileged moment in Élisée's religious experience was "la mystique nuptiale entre l'Époux' et l'Épouse" (p. 297). The convoluted discourse of Élisée, fabricated from the books of the Apocalypse and the Canticle of Canticles seems to invite several possible identifications of the two spouses, the Epouse being presented alternatively as Elie Bonjour and as the new Church, and the Epoux as the divinity (pp. 297-305). Small wonder that images and meanings rubbed off on one another, and that spouses marrying within the group could receive biblical names. Maury, for all his sympathy with his subjects, heads the following section, "Derrière l'allégorie, des débordements sexuels et polygamiques tout à fait réels" (p. 321). Élie Bonjour, the young son of François Bonjour and Claudine Dauphan, was the central character for the adherents of Soeur Elisee and the other Parisian Convulsionaries. He certainly had his life-script written up for him! And this script was richly developed: a Christic identity, though scandalously surrounded by crime and vice, in relationship a mysterious "Lili" (who seems to be a symbol of Divine Wisdom), an inspiration for all who spiritually identified themselves as infants.[6]

To make sense of all of this, Serge Maury brings into a delicate balance the use of religious-historical, psychological, and anthropological tools. He highlights the scriptural texts and the theological themes that they lived by—this cast of characters in their convulsionary universe—the book of Revelation and the Canticle of Canticles. He explores the popular theological themes of millennialism and figurism, and the traditional church rituals that could be reworked to favor the texts and interpretations. For visions and trances, a repertoire of psychological explanations—states of consciousness and personality structure—could be activated. These would include classic studies of hysteria offered by Jean-Martin Charcot, Sigmund Freud, and Pierre Janet, which Maury wants to partially replace with explanations derived from anthropologists who highlight social interaction and belief systems. Maury is willing to consider much of the so-called convulsionary religion as normal, or at least understandable,

culturally and normal, or at least understandable, theologically. He has provided us with the “imaginaire visionnaire” (p. 397) of Soeur Elisée and the others rather than a psychiatric diagnosis, without denying the obviously unhealthy and destructive behaviors of his cast of characters. Some readers may suffer a bit of cognitive dissonance when they realize that Soeur Elisée is the Fareiniste exhibit A here, and not François Bonjour and other villagers of the Forez. And some readers, who are accustomed to dissertation texts that have been trimmed down by 25-50% for book publication, may wish for briefer quotations and less extended exposition. But in my view, this is a valuable contribution to the religious history of early modern and modern France.

NOTES

[1] The complications are great and the literature is vast on millennialism (millenarianism) and figurism. Even if we keep our search within the context of the Jansenisms, the problem remains. A useful introduction to millennialism is Jean Delumeau, “Une traversée du millénarisme en Occident,” *Socio-anthropologie* 28 (2013), available online : <http://journals.openedition.org/socio-anthropologie/1610>. On figurism, see Catherine Maire, *De la cause de Dieu à la cause de la Nation : Le jansénisme au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998): 163-166, 241-249, 585-600.

[2] See Jean-Pierre Chantin, *Les Amis de l'œuvre de la Vérité: Jansénisme, miracles et fin du monde au XIXe siècle* (Lyon : Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1998), and in particular “Les Espaces révolutionnaire des jansénistes convulsionnaires à Fareins,” *Actes de la section d'Histoire moderne et contemporaine du 114e congrès national des sociétés savantes* (1989): 117-124.

[3] Henri Grégoire, *Histoire des sectes religieuses*, 5 vols. (Paris: Baudoin Frères, 1828), v.2, 168-183.8.

[4] Clarke Garrett, *Respectable Folly: Millenarians and the French Revolution in France and England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975).

[5] Downplaying the millennialist impulse in *Les Convulsionnaires de Saint-Médard* (Paris : Gallimard, 1985) and emphasizing it in “Les Jansénistes et le millénarisme, du refus à la conversion,” *Annales, Histoire, Sciences sociales* 63, no.1 (2008): 7-36.

[6] The happiest part of this history is that the boy, then the young man, went on to live a normal bourgeois life!

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