Book Review

Karen E. Carter. *Creating Catholics: Catechism and Primary Education in Early Modern France*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011. 328 pp. Paper $40.00.

Creating Catholics provides a vivid portrait of French catechetical reform during the Catholic Reformation. Carter argues poignantly that this reform was first and foremost educational, resulting in the emergence of universal education prior to state-sponsored schooling. Her investigation of seventeenth and eighteenth century reform at the regional level focuses on how, and how well, catechism was taught by both the church and the *petites écoles* (rural primary schools) in the dioceses of Auxerre, Chalons-sur-Marne, and Reims. Carter's primary argument is that religious and secular education were not imposed by either the church or the state as has been commonly maintained, but that education in early modern France was "built from the ground up by parents, schoolmasters, village councils, and parish priests" (p. 232). Historians examining the role of religion in early modern France have traditionally focused on the conversion of urban French Catholics to Protestantism. This neglects, Carter maintains, the critical masses of French peasants in rural France who not only remained Catholic but became active agents in promoting children's education. Contrary to dominant interpretations of the Catholic Reformation, which suggest a top-down process of institutional reform, Carter argues that the advancement of children's religious education through catechism and rural primary schools *petites écoles* was the result of interaction and compromise between the clergy and laity.

Carter draws on a variety of primary source materials to provide a detailed account of not only the process of educational reform but also the pedagogical methods and classroom culture of village schools and catechism classes. First and foremost, she draws on an analysis of catechisms. Catechisms were a critical component of the church's reform. Carter also investigated the visitation records of bishops from the dioceses of Auxerre, Chalons-sur-Marne, and Reims who made yearly inspections. While each of these dioceses left detailed records, they were chosen because they differed in size, prestige, and prosperity. Both Reims, which was one of the largest dioceses in France, and Chalon, an average-sized diocese, are in the Champagne region in northeastern France. Auxerre, a small diocese in Burgundy, was not as wealthy, nor did it have as high a literacy rate as the other two dioceses. Carter analyzed the visitation records from 1650 through the revolutionary period, as well as seven hundred thirteen-page questionnaires sent out

to every parish by the Archbishop of Reims in January 1774, which provided detailed information about parish life, including the quality and availability of primary education. The visitation records and questionnaires, in combination with letters, journals, diaries, employment contracts, and literacy rates, provide a rich portrait of the emergence of universal education in the early modern period.

Carter's analysis of these representative dioceses reveals that by the time of the Revolution, at least 89 percent of the parishes had established their own schools. Traditionally, French educational history has focused overwhelmingly on the emergence of state-sponsored "public" schools in the nineteenth century. Carter suggests that "Instead of examining the importance and impact of the *petites écoles* from the perspective of the initial founders and supporters of the schools—seventeenth and eighteenth-century clergy, parents and village notables—most historians have instead preferred to analyze the types of education that would become more important in the modern world, reading and writing" (p. 12). Consequently, a primary contribution of this book is to retrieve this period of early school formation as a neglected and important site of historical research in education.

Creating Catholics adds to current research in three significant areas. First, Carter provides a fuller understanding of reform, particularly the need to attend to a long-term view of reform. In other words, change does not happen overnight. Carter maintains that historians have neglected the eighteenth century as a significant site of Catholic Reformation studies since it marked the advent of secularization and the dechristianization of France. Second, she questions dominant historical interpretations that suggest that the state was central to the standardization of religious beliefs and the opening of *petites écoles*. Lastly, she highlights that reform was not imposed by either the church or the state but was the result of a process of compromises between both the clergy and laity. This provides a critical challenge to poststructural readings of history in which the emergence of state institutions, like schools, prisons, and hospitals, is seen as critical to the regulation and internalization of social behavior.

The book is organized into two parts, in which detailed analysis of archival materials provides a rich, thick description of the role of children's education in Tridentine Catholicism. In Part One, Carter maintains that the Catechism was the critical component of the "science of salvation" (pp. 23–24). Interestingly, the knowledge of the Christian truths was understood as a science. Understanding these scientific truths required a method. Carter describes in depth the origins, historical context, content, and specific pedagogical methods and religious rituals for teaching the catechism. While catechism pedagogy has often been criticized as mere rote memorization, Carter suggests that we not judge

early modern educational thought by today's standards. Early modern bishops believed (like many Enlightenment educational theorists) that memorization was a prerequisite to higher levels of thinking, imagination, and reason. Ultimately, though, Carter suggests that the teaching of the catechism was not meant to convey difficult theological doctrine. In fact, as the catechism evolved, it became even more simple and direct (a question and answer format). Learning catholic doctrine was not the goal of the catechism. Instead, it was a tool to "create Catholics who had thoroughly internalized religious and civic values and who could police their own behavior as adults" (p. 96). This was the true goal of the Catholic Reformation and in this sense the catechism became the "ultimate instrument of social discipline" (p. 96).

While Part One of the book focuses on the catechism and catechetical method, Part Two examines how these reforms were applied to the individual dioceses and parishes. Four chapters detail the actual implementation of reform from various perspectives, including the relationship between the *curés* and their parishioners, the role of schoolmasters in providing primary education, community agency and, lastly, actual literacy rates. These richly detailed chapters maintain that the educational reform of the Reformation was the consequence of ongoing compromise between the church, state, and the laity. For example, chapter four highlights this through a discussion of the role, function, and employment of the village headmasters. While Louis XIV's 1698 edict required every parish in the kingdom to establish primary schools where all French boys and girls could learn to read, write, and recite their catechism, neither the state nor the church provided any funding for these schools. It was, in fact, the local communities, middle, and working-class folk who contributed what little money they had to ensure the education of their children. Because funds were limited, the separate education of boys and girls, as mandated by the church, was not enforced. Chapter five details how the bishops were forced to compromise on this issue given that parents wanted both their sons and daughters to have an education but could not afford to pay both a schoolmistress and schoolmaster. Lack of funds, in part, also prohibited local communities from hiring a writing teacher. The last chapter highlights the dangers of equating literacy with signature rates since learning to write at a primary school was a rare occurrence. In fact, parent's primary reason for sending their children to school was not to learn to read or write but to conform to Catholic practices that would create and strengthen community.

In conclusion, this book is clearly an important contribution to the research in educational and religious history, as well as the early modern period of French history in that it provides a nuanced description of the evolution of primary education prior to state-mandated education.

It contests dominant portrayals of the emergence of universal education as top-down and state controlled. Consequently, it is nothing short of radical in calling for a reassessment of what constitutes the origins of universal education in France. While clearly lodged in European history, this book also has relevance to contemporary educational historians, theorists, and policy makers in the United States. Ultimately, this is a story of reform. Given that the United States is in the midst of one of its largest educational reform movements, this book provides an opportunity to take a big picture look at the complex ways in which reform functions. It is a powerful reminder that reform always takes place in historical contexts that are shaped by social, cultural, political, and economic factors. Second, despite common understandings of reform as top-down, Carter reminds us that it is what happens at the local level that counts. The agency of community, parents, and students must always be taken into account when understanding how reform works. Lastly, Carter's narrative is a powerful reminder that education reform always works in complex ways, not only to control and indoctrinate, but also as a potential form of agency and liberation.

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