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**Review of *The Catholic Enlightenment: The Forgotten History of a Global Movement* by Ulrich L. Lehner**

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**Ulrich L. Lehner**

*The Catholic Enlightenment: The Forgotten History of a Global Movement.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. 219. Hb, \$29.95.

Professor Ulrich Lehner has provided the first popular and synthetic history of the Catholic Church's engagement with the much mythologized, much praised, and much demonized "Age of Reason" to appear in the English language. In Lehner's view, "Catholic Enlighteners" as he cleverly dubs them, aimed "to use the newest achievements of philosophy and science to defend the essential dogmas of Catholic Christianity by explaining them in a new language," and "to reconcile Catholicism with modern culture," specifically in response to increasingly widespread anti-clerical Enlightenment criticisms (7). The impetus for Lehner's book is twofold. First, is Lehner's growing recognition that the Enlightenment comprised numerous "religious Enlighteners" (Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Orthodox) who adopted newly found innovations in science, philosophy, and critical scholarship characteristic of the 1600s–1700s to inflect, expound, and revivify their faith. Second, is the advent of the reign of Pope Francis whose "reforms and style," Lehner argues, are, in fact, deeply rooted in a Catholic Enlightenment anchored ultimately in the Council of Trent (1). This Catholic Enlightenment, Lehner contends, was scattered and largely abandoned when conservative ultramontanes of the nineteenth century blamed the Enlightenment (and with it, the Catholic Enlightenment) for the anticlerical bloodshed of the revolutionary era.

The first chapter discusses a sampling of the various concerns Lehner considers to have been most characteristic of the Catholic Enlightenment when viewed globally. Although admirably comprehensive in its scope, this first chapter sometimes privileges breadth of coverage to the detriment of depth and precise descriptions of complex historical processes. Nevertheless, the first substantive chapter accomplishes Lehner's main purpose: a general overview of the eclecticism and diversity at the heart of what he provocatively considers to be a coherent Catholic Enlightenment movement. Subsequent chapters then develop discrete aspects of this movement in depth: Catholic Enlightenment and toleration (chapter 2); the role of women and women's issues in the Catholic Enlightenment (chapter 3); the importance of the Catholic Enlightenment in the Americas, and among the missionaries of India and China (chapter 4); the efforts of Catholic Enlightenment scholars to reform the liturgy and rationally reform the church's understanding of witchcraft, miracles, and sainthood (chapters 5–6); and Catholic Enlightenment engagement with slavery and antislavery (chapter 7).

Professor Lehner's most important contributions in this book are to be found in the third and fourth chapters. In chapter 3, he underscores the importance of women to the Catholic Enlightenment, in addition to the often overlooked ways in which Catholic Enlightenment writers advocated women's equality, women's education, companionate marriage, and the importance of women as the primary source of moral leaders of their families. At the beginning of chapter 3, Lehner emphasizes the importance of two Spanish clerics, Benito Feijoo and Joseph Amar, in defending equality between the sexes and promoting equal access to education; he then discusses the life and career of Laura Bassi and Maria Agnesi. Bassi was a confidant of Prospero Lambertini, the future Pope Benedict XIV, and was "only the second woman to receive a university degree at a European university" (78). For her research on Newtonian gravity, she eventually became the first woman to be granted a chair of experimental physics. Maria Agnesi, on the other hand, was both a mathematician and philosopher whose work considered the processes of mathematical reasoning to be conducive to the moral surrender of the will and intellect characteristic of mystical contemplation. Chapter 3 contains many surprising vignettes, one of the most insightful of which concerns the evolution of Catholic teaching about the origin of human life at conception. As Lehner describes it, after Pope Clement XI's insertion of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception of Mary into the liturgical year in 1708, theologians found it necessary to determine that, for Mary to have been without sin from conception, she must necessarily have been a completely formed human soul from the moment of conception. This determination implied that all human life must begin at conception. By the 1740s, physicians such as Giovanni Bianchi believed they had found in their studies on human embryology scientific confirmation for this theological view. The works of Bianchi were, in turn, popularized by theologians such as the Jesuit Francesco Cangiamila, in *Sacred Embryology* [*Embryologia sacra...* (Palermo: typis Francisci Valenza, 1758)], and they implicitly also informed eighteenth-century writers beyond the Catholic Enlightenment (85). For these reasons, Chapter 3 appears to argue that the present day assumption (so dear to anti-abortion crusaders) that life begins at conception actually originated with the eighteenth-century Catholic Enlightenment. Chapter 3 is an important first step toward correcting a significant gap in the scholarship on Catholic Enlightenment, namely its relative inattention to the history of female participation in the movement, and issues of gender overall.

The focus of chapter 4 is on the impact of Enlightenment notions among Catholics in the Americas, China, and India. In as much as Jesuit missionary

scientists and scholars figure prominently in these endeavors, chapter 4 will be most beneficial to researchers focused on the Jesuits. In particular, Lehner emphasizes the vital role of Jesuit missionary scientists in translating the riches of non-European cultures into an idiom that broadened the horizon of eighteenth-century scholars and ironically led to the provincializing understandings of European Christianity and European history. The Jesuit Javier Clavigero, for example, famously defended the laws, customs, and traditions of the Aztecs against the criticisms proffered by Cornelius de Pauw, Abbé Raynal, and Buffon; whereas, the need to create a native priesthood in India and the Americas had led the papacy to mandate specifically that skin color should never disqualify someone for ordination as a priest. In chapter 4, Lehner fruitfully admonishes future scholars of the Catholic Enlightenment to “challenge the prevailing Eurocentrist Enlightenment narrative” as other histories of the eighteenth-century have already done, by focusing on ways in which the colonies “creatively and dynamically engaged with Catholic Enlightenment ideas emanating from Europe” (123).

*Catholic Enlightenment* is an important achievement and an undoubted landmark in the field. Given how many of Ulrich Lehner’s examples of Catholic Enlighteners were Jesuits, this book will be of great interests to those interested in Jesuit studies. Like all synthetic works, though, it begs certain questions and opens avenues for future inquiry. First, the historical breadth of Lehner’s claims that the Catholic Enlightenment was a self-conscious movement will require additional research to flesh out. Many of the book’s chapters are hewn from an ensemble of interwoven biographies. As such, whether the examples Lehner has selected should be best treated as isolated exceptions, or as emblematic illustrations of broad tendencies, is a question that should spark future research. Second, although the thematic approach is one of the book’s strengths with respect to its rhetorical lucidity, this organization, when coupled with a capacious definition of “the Catholic Enlightenment” that unfolds gradually over the course of the introduction and the first chapter, tends to present a rather static and impressionistic portrayal of the Catholic Enlightenment movement. Moreover, the author’s thought-provoking contention that the Catholic Enlightenment foreshadows the present pontificate occasionally verges on becoming an overly whiggish approach to the topic, where aspects of Enlightenment Catholicism are selected less for their eighteenth-century valence than for their role as harbingers of present debates within the Catholic Church. Certainly the relationship between principles animating Pope Francis and Vatican II should not be ignored, and Lehner is prescient in underscoring these possible connections, but one must guard against the tendency to overly reify the Catholic Enlightenment with a view toward

subsequent centuries. How the focus of Catholic Enlighteners evolved, how the nature of their various factions and disagreements changed throughout the time between Trent and the immediate aftermath of the French Revolution, and how different reformers inflected such differences across diverse states and empires tends, are all important avenues deserving of investigation. A growing number of scholars have begun to approach the study of eighteenth-century Catholicism with such questions in mind.

Finally, by defining and successfully building his case for the Catholic Enlightenment as “a reform movement that had its roots in the late medieval reform movement and the Tridentine Reform” (46), Lehner nevertheless leaves readers wondering (particularly after reading chapters 5–7) how his conception of the Catholic Enlightenment really differs from the Catholic Reformation which preceded it. Given the important and well-studied role of the Society of Jesus in the reconstruction of what John O’Malley has referred to as “early modern Catholicism” [*Trent and All That: Renaming Catholicism in the Early Modern Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2002)], further research on the nexus of Catholic Reformation and Catholic Enlightenment will be of heightened interest to scholars interested in the Jesuits. This question, which Lehner admittedly leaves hanging as though to prompt further investigation, points his work in the same direction as much scholarship on the Enlightenment in recent years. In works ranging from my own *Rise and Fall of Theological Enlightenment* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010) to David Sorkin’s *Religious Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), to Dale Van Kley’s *Religious Origins of the French Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), to Ann Thomson’s *Bodies of Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), to Anton Matytsin’s recent *Specter of Skepticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), to the insightful collection of essays recently edited by William Bulman and Robert Ingram, entitled *God in the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), historians have begun to situate the origins of Enlightenment science and secularization within much deeper patterns of religious controversy and cultural change. This historiographical trend is forcing scholars to investigate more closely the relationship between the emergence of the Enlightenment (or enlightenments) and the era of humanism and confessional reformations that preceded it.

Lehner’s spirited and engaging prose in the pages of his thematic *tour de force* through eighteenth century styles of Enlightenment Catholicism has accomplished something that is long overdue, very important, and admirable in its intent. Readers should not expect to find in this book a definitive scholarly synthesis of Enlightenment Catholicism, nor should they expect to find a

work brimming with archival research, and overflowing with comprehensive citations to the increasingly vast extant literature on the intersection of eighteenth-century Enlightenment and Catholicism. But to expect such things would be to expect more from the book than the author's stated intention in writing it. Instead, what Lehner has accomplished is a commendable and timely popular synthesis of important debates and issues surrounding the Catholic Enlightenment for scholars and interested laypersons. Lehner's insights and very readable approach to the topic promises to engender spirited debate and fascinating scholarship about a topic that has been until quite recently, if not precisely "forgotten," then certainly under-appreciated and woefully under-examined by students of the eighteenth century.

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