



Divided Houses: Religion and Gender in Modern France

By Caroline Ford

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In *Divided Houses*, Caroline Ford examines how the so-called feminization of religion in France from the French Revolution to the First World War contributed to the formation of a distinctive secular (laïc) republican political culture in France. She also reveals the effect of women's close association with religion on their civil and social status, which gave rise in France to heated debates about the limits of female agency, women's property rights, and women's role in the family and in society. She argues that religious women were often far more than the passive instruments of a male ecclesiastical hierarchy. In showing that these women could dispose of their bodies, souls, and properties in ways that were unimaginable to their secular counterparts, Ford's book obliges one to rethink the categories of tradition and modernity that have structured most thinking about this subject. Ford's book is centered on a set of microhistories and causes célèbres whose narratives are fascinating in and of themselves. They include conflicts within religious orders, the cults of some latter-day female saints, and riveting legal disputes involving women who converted to Catholicism. Perhaps most intriguingly, Ford brings current debates concerning pluralism and cultural difference in France into sharp historical focus. The fact that women have been portrayed as the quintessential carriers of religion ever since France embraced laïcité sheds light on problems faced by the secular French state today as it attempts to regulate religious expression?including emblems of Islam?in the public sphere.

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Editorial Review

Review

"A hysterical father of a determined convert, discontented nuns, and a fictional saint widely venerated are the subjects of four evocative and superbly written microhistories by Caroline Ford, together informing the study of the conflict between religion and secularization in nineteenth-century France. Ford has produced a masterly work sharpening ongoing debates on the role of gender in differential responses to state-imposed modernity. *Divided Houses* has some relevance to our own times."² Professor Dame Olwen Hufton, Merton College Oxford

"Through the exploration of four fascinating 'microhistories,' Caroline Ford deftly analyzes the feminization of religion in nineteenth-century France. She aims less to discover why women flocked to the Church in unprecedented numbers, and more to understand the meaning of female religiosity in a growing republican society. In particular, she focuses on the gendered conflicts between female religious vocation and the republican state's increasing insistence on laïcité or secularism. *Divided Houses* tells us the story of a central facet of women's lives in the nineteenth century, one that has too long been ignored in the French case. Among Ford's many provocative findings is the argument that religion, far from being an 'archaic throwback,' endowed women with exceptional freedom and agency in an otherwise restrictive society. This book will be of great interest to historians of women, gender, and religion as well as of modern France."³ Mary Louise Roberts, University of Wisconsin–Madison

"Caroline Ford's sparkling book on gender relations in France is formidably well-informed and gracefully written. This is provocative and judicious reflection, historical writing of the highest order."⁴ Peter McPhee, Professor and Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic), University of Melbourne

About the Author

Caroline Ford is Professor of History at the University of California, Los Angeles. She is the author of *Creating the Nation in Provincial France: Religion and Political Identity in Brittany*.

Users Review

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