

Catholic Particularity in Seventeenth-Century French Writing: 'Christianity is Strange' By Richard Parish. New York: Oxford University, 20 . Pp. 229. Price: £67 (hbk). ISBN 978-0- 9-959666-9.

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Richard Parish is Professor of French at Oxford University and is well known for his research on 17th-century French theatre and 17th-century Catholic writing in France. The book under review here started life as the Bampton Lectures delivered in the University Church of St Mary the Virgin in Oxford in 2009.

Professor Parish examines the particularity of Christian Catholicism as it is manifested in a fertile corpus of a wide variety of genres: apologetics, sermons, devotional manuals, catechisms, polemic, and spiritual autobiography. By 'particularity' Parish means 'that which is distinctive and other' and he adds that he tries to bring into focus some of what defines Catholic Christianity in the 17th-century writers whom he considers. The statement 'Christianity is strange' in the title is a translation of Pascal's statement, 'Le christianisme est étrange.' As Parish points out, Christianity for Pascal is strange because it presents us with a paradox in that it orders man to acknowledge that he is vile and even abominable and also orders him to want to be like God. Parish uses the word 'strange' in the sense of 'against the common order' and 'against the common usage' as well as 'foreign' and 'external.' He explores various ways in which Catholic Christianity in 17th-century France can be seen to have been strange. The book is divided into eight chapters: Particularity and Apologetics, Particularity and Physicality, Particularity and Language (two chapters), Particularity and Discernment, Particularity and Polemic (two chapters, one devoted to Jansenism and the other to Quietism), Particularity and Salvation.

The first chapter 'Particularity and Apologetics' is devoted to Pascal's *Pensées* which Parish describes as 'a catechism for the indifferent.' He concentrates on Pascal's approach to apologetics, his starting point from an assured position of neutrality, his initial presentation of humanity's greatness and weakness without any reference to a transcendental dimension, his ability to turn objections into arguments for credibility, and his efforts to convince his interlocutor that the strangeness of Christianity expresses the strangeness of the human condition. Parish underlines the dramatic power of Pascal's approach in that

he presents his reader with an existential dilemma when faced with the question of salvation. He sees Pascal as stating his case in terms of problem, solution, and commitment.

In the chapter entitled 'Particularity and Physicality,' Parish illustrates the strangeness of Christian Catholicism by way of the carnal dimension of some of its devotional vocabulary. He explores the manner in which the wealth of imagery used by François de Sales, Bossuet, and Fénelon is accorded more intimacy and at times literalness, in certain of François's disciples. In his analysis of the autobiography of St Margaret Mary Alacoque, Parish draws attention to the intense physicality that seems to define her love for Christ. He also focuses on the highly charged erotic and bodily based mysticism in some of the writing of the period. Here he deals with extreme interpretations of the doctrine of the Incarnation and devotion to the body of Christ and the various efforts to establish some kind of harmony between the personally incarnate and the sacramentally enduring. In this context Parish sees the growth of reverence for relics as exemplified in Corneille's *Polyeucte martyr* (1642) and in Bossuet's preaching as going some way towards establishing this harmony. The relic serves as a form of continuity between the Incarnation, the physicality of its witnesses, the bodily existence of the living believer, and the end of time.

In the chapters on 'Particularity and Language,' Parish explores the ways of talking about God and for God in the writing and preaching of the period. Here there is a rich analysis of the style of various writers and of that of St François de Sales and Bossuet in particular. He studies their use of imagery, paradox, oxymoron, semantic inversion, and neologism. He focuses in particular on Bossuet's ability to hold in tension the immanent and transcendent connotations of a given word. There is an excellent analysis of the structure of 17th-century pulpit oratory: the sermon, funeral oration, and panegyric.

The chapters devoted to Jansenism and Quietism illustrate the strangeness of Christian Catholicism in its tendency to give rise to controversy and to be divisive. These chapters are particularly lucid and the positions adopted by the key figures in the various debates are well delineated. Parish sees Jansenism and Quietism as arising from the very points which constituted the strengths of the Catholic Reformation: a return to the early Fathers and personal devotion. The movements are marked by the tensions between inspiration and obedience, grace and free will, transcendence and meditation. At the heart of Jansenism he detects the appeal to primitive rigour and the desire to want those who practise their faith to be perfect. In the treatment of Quietism with its emphasis on contemplation and, in the case of Madame Guyon, its dismissal of the need for the sacraments, the debate between Bossuet and Fénelon is well analysed: their agreement that Quietism represented the danger of the loss of Incarnational theology and their disagreement in regard to the condemnation of Madame Guyon. In this, as in the other chapters, Parish studies the ways in which the French texts of the 17th century struggle to come to grips with the consequences of the particularity and strangeness of the Christian Incarnation.

This is an extremely well-researched, erudite, and stimulating book which is thankfully free of jargon. The annotated sources are very rich and the lists of primary and secondary sources in the bibliography are comprehensive. The book will be of great value to students of various disciplines such as French literature and thought, Philosophy, Theology, and Ecclesiastical History.