

Bossuet. By Gérard Ferreyrolles, Béatrice Guion and Jean-Louis Quantin (with Emmanuel Bury). Pp. 268. Paris: PUPS, 2008. €24 (paper). 978 2 84050 581 5
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The avowed aim of this book is to promote the rediscovery of Bossuet for those whose knowledge of religious perspective in seventeenth-century France is cursory. This is certainly achieved in the sense that the different sections on Bossuet's career, his religion, his vision of history and politics and, finally, his preaching, are extremely lucid and soundly analytical. Against this, some unevenness in historical contextualisation, with Bossuet's history and preaching much more explicitly framed, means that at times we must take Bossuet on and in his own terms. However, this book will stand as an excellent general introduction to a prelate whose complex and committed approach to the questions of his time transcends any temptation to describe him simply as the 'gendarme du catholicisme'. Certainly, Bossuet contributed forcefully to controversies concerning quietism, Jansenism, Protestantism and to biblical scholarship, all of which are elucidated here. On the other hand, it is important to understand the overarching vision which informed Bossuet's positions on these matters. This emerges strongly from analyses of his refusal to contemplate any departure from the orthodoxy of Tradition which binds together the community of believers, for whom subjectivism is therefore the ultimate enemy. In this way, the moral and social behaviour of ordinary human beings or kings is related directly to the existence and fortunes of the Church in history from the beginnings of time. Moreover, Bossuet's own activity as a theologian, historian and preacher emphasised the aspect of service to the Church rather than intellectual or literary self-indulgence. Indeed, according to the authors' perspective, theological concerns and the principle of authority are at the root of all his writing, where no space is permitted to scholarship as independent pursuit or to the study of politics in and for itself. Bossuet's conception of preaching is accorded an entirely pedagogic end, despite the posterity of the *Oraisons funèbres* in French literary history. Other important emphases emerge from the authors' discussions, not least Bossuet's profound Augustinianism, the latter term too often associated with Jansenism alone in a reductive history of Gallican spirituality. On the other hand, Jean-Louis Quantin brings out the complexity of Bossuet's moral rigorism in relation to the followers of Port-Royal. Underlying controversies appear discreetly: it is claimed that Bossuet did not belong to the tradition of 'la pastorale de la peur', preferring to promote 'la douceur de Dieu' (although Jean Delumeau is not referred to, even in the bibliography). Gérard Feyreyrolles argues forcefully that Bossuet's conception of monarchy is applied equally to other forms of political system (nowhere in Bossuet's writings does the term 'droit divin des rois' appear). Along the way, useful corrections are offered to what are regarded as the distortions of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Bossuet scholarship. In this sense, Bossuet's status in modern Catholicism seems difficult to define, except perhaps as the exemplar of a particular historical vision of