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The Voyage into Unbelief: Leaving the Catholic Church in France 1870-1940

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of the requirements for the degree of

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in

HISTORY

by

Nickolas G. Conrad

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Abstract

The Voyage into Unbelief: Leaving the Catholic Church in France 1870-1940

By Nickolas Garth Conrad

Today France is effectively a post-Christian nation. The majority of French no longer identify themselves as Christian. Prior to the modern period, belief in God was largely taken for granted in French society; the majority of French men and women participated in some form of Christian worship. But these practices have drastically changed over the last two centuries. How might we understand the processes through which unbelief took root in modern France even as traditional forms of worship slowly eroded? In order to understand French religious decline, this dissertation contextualizes the crisis at the end of the nineteenth century by making a comparative study of former Catholics who became unbelievers during the Third Republic (1870-1940). The work focuses on intellectuals not known outside of specialists in Third Republic France who left testimonies, such as Hyacinthe Loyson, Albert Houtin, Alfred Loisy, André Lorulot, and Clemence Royer. This microhistorical approach studies how unbelief become a part of French intellectual and political culture through the testimonies of reforming Catholics and militant atheists. The decline of religion is related largely to moral and social shifts that caused the people's loyalty to Catholicism to evaporate. The decline of religion in France was contingent and not a determined process of modernity. Science was important but mostly as a justification after the fact.

Acknowledgments

It is my pleasure to thank the people who helped make this work possible.

This dissertation was a project that encompassed several years and succeeded largely due to the help and guidance of others along the way. The idea of studying atheism was first inspired by the prodding of professor Steven Kale who had the insight to encourage me to find a subject that not only suited me, but also a subject that I would be passionate about for years to come. This is truly important in a dissertation project because one is often sustained by one's intellectual curiosity and interest in the subject during the long, quiet, and solitary hours of research and reading.

After professor, Kale, my advisor Professor Jonathan Beecher deserves the credit of both pushing me to constantly improve my French, my writing, and the depth of my project. He did not hesitate to let me know when I was overstepping my abilities and encouraged me to keep working after setbacks and challenges. His kind touch and critical analysis proved invaluable. His ability to see things where I could not taught me to see deeper into my subject area. Further, Professor Beecher had the characteristic of being an immense pleasure to work with. The many conversations and discussions in his office over the years will always remain a warm memory and a pleasant time in my life. He is both a scholar and an entirely agreeable person. This can be said also of my whole committee. Professor Traugott was exacting and a very careful reader. He was also instrumental in introducing me to Durkheim and Weber.

It was through Traugott that I would later workout my theoretical framework. Professor Harding was also a lifesaver, having come onto my committee late in the process. She provided goodwill and validation throughout the process and helped introduce me to the deeper questions of secularism and religion as subjects of inquiry.

Much credit must go to Philippe Portier the director of the studies at the *École pratique des hautes études*, who helped me write a MA thesis in French that would later become a chapter in my dissertation. More than that, he helped develop the later structure of my dissertation due to his hands-on approach in guiding his students. Attending his seminars proved a very beneficial time due to his mastery of the subject of sociology, history, and issues of secularism in nineteenth and twentieth century-France. Further, the research position that I took at the *École normale supérieure* truly paid off because of the help by Philippe Portier and for allowing me access to the top scholars in France such as Jacqueline Lalouette.

Overcoming the difficulty of reading large quantities of literature in French was a challenge that took many hours and years of study. Having started this project later than average, it meant I did not choose the road of least resistance. My French teachers through the years at the various universities and especially at Middlebury college deserve a lot of credit in getting my French up to the level to analyze the French sources for my dissertation.

There were many others of course whose names I never caught yet who played important roles. The small hints and suggestions by librarians always proved

invaluable. Without their help, one is often struggling in the dark. The librarians at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, the Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand, and the National Archives helped made what felt like an unscalable mountain into a hillside. As a foreigner, navigating the bureaucracy in order to unlock the archives and source material stored across the many institutions of France was an intimidating process. Similarly, the help I received from the Fédération nationale de la libre pensée in Paris put me in contact with professors and specialists. They knew at once some of the most important figures of the time that are featured now in my dissertation.

A word of thanks is due also to my good friend Dan Hoffman who took the time to proofread my writing, a painstaking task. Finally, I would like to thank my partner, Bleuenn Simon, who endured all the lonely hours before major deadlines when I was locked away in the office. Like all major undertakings, the cost of a dissertation goes beyond just a single person and cost the time, efforts, and patience of many people. I am proud to tell my father, my son, and my partner that I am finally done with my dissertation.

Finally, any weaknesses and mistakes still inherent in the project are my own. Within the time frame allotted, I could only strive to the standards my committee pushed me towards.

Introduction

Today France is effectively a post-Christian nation. The majority of French no longer identify themselves as Christian. Prior to the modern period, belief in God was largely taken for granted in French society; the majority of French men and women participated in some form of Christian worship. But these practices have drastically changed over the last two centuries. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, 43-54% of French people did not believe in God, and 19% were self-identified atheists according to statistics taken from various surveys conducted between 1999 and 2004.¹ Another study found that, while Catholicism is the dominant religion in France, only 8% of the population was composed of practicing Catholics who attended church regularly.² How might we understand the processes through which unbelief took root in modern France even as traditional forms of worship slowly eroded? This work will look at several groups to better understand the decline of Catholicism in France: first, liberal progressives who abandoned Catholicism for Protestantism or *freebelief*; second, a discontented group of clergy called the modernists who wanted to reform the Church from within; and third,

¹ See Phil Zuckerman "Atheism: Contemporary Numbers and Patterns," in Michael Martin, editor, *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); also European Commission, "Social Values, Science, and Technology," *Special Eurobarometer*, June 2005.

² Blandine Pont, "French Catholics, Secularization, and Politics," Alec Hargreaves, John Kelsay, and Sumner Twiss, editors, *Politics and Religion in France and the United States* (New York: Lexington Books, 2007); Michael Martin, ed., *Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (Cambridge Uni. Press, 2006), 4.

freethinkers and atheists who were born Catholics. These three examples coincided with the height of anticlericalism and the activity of freethought groups that had their highest numbers of membership in France between the years 1870-1940. This has sometimes been called the golden years of freethought, especially the 1880s.

This dissertation will explore the intellectual and cultural factors that caused former Catholics to lose their faith during Third Republic France (1870-1940). For the most part, the people studied—André Bourrier, Charles Loyson, Marcel Hébert, Alfred Loisy, Joseph Turmel, Albert Houtin, Prosper Alfaric, J. B. Lefèvre, Clemence Royer, and André Lorulot—did not lose their faith because they suddenly realized they had made an error in calculation, as if they learned the answer to a math problem. French men and women left Catholicism because they were embedded in a social milieu that challenged or rejected their attempts at reform and compromise. When the Catholic Church refused to change, people stopped considering it important. Further, the French Revolution, the ethics of scientific inquiry, and changing moral values created conditions for people to replace one set of values for another. The key conclusion of this study is that when people have a shift in their moral values, it causes a shift in their social and intellectual loyalties that may cause them to no longer value old belief systems. The simplest answer to why people abandoned Christianity is that a new social orientation emerged with liberalism and it caused people to find arguments for unbelief more compelling. A more complex understanding requires a nuanced discussion about the emergence of an autonomous liberal self that sought political reform and revolution, the changing methods of

knowledge production (namely the sciences), and the birth and propagation of irreligion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The subjects of this study encountered deep-seated problems in the historical and social institution of Christianity that looked not divine, but all too human, so they rejected it for alternatives better suited to their needs and interests.

In the French Revolution, republicans created a new and different set of moral values and traditions that went against an unyielding, conservative Church. When democratic, egalitarian values began to challenge the Old Regime, people's beliefs began to change. Thus, although there were many intellectual arguments critiquing and ridiculing Christianity, they did not have the power to persuade the larger population until they encountered a conflict between their new values and the old. Once the Church and monarch lost their legitimacy, other ideas could fill the moral and political vacuum. Further, belief is a social product and rationality is subject to the influence of the social group; therefore "truth" is partly a social construction and so belief changed once the social foundations holding it together grew old and stale in the face of new modern, liberal, scientific values.

The theory of the social construction of reality, posited by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, is the notion that knowledge is created, validated, and maintained through social interaction. People make and are products of their social and cultural worlds. Religion is ultimately social and survives only by its social transmission in each new generation. The rupture with Christianity was above all about the changing moral and political values that defined modern social life. Arguments such as

evolution were immensely significant, but many people had to be confronted with conflicting social and moral dilemmas before it was used to justify their unbelief. The theories of Durkheim and Berger-Luckmann provide a theoretical and descriptive model to understand the movement of French men and women away from Christianity.

Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's hugely influential work the *Social Construction of Reality* (1966) and the less influential work *The Sacred Canopy* (1967) provide theoretical insight into the changes that began before the French Revolution and into the twenty-first century. The social construction of reality relativizes all claims of reality and rejects absolute truth claims, rendering all religions effectively subjective creations that have been institutionalized through habituation and internalization. The social is not given to us in life, we construct and transmit it. Outside of what we can learn from our senses, intuition, and reason we learn from what others tell us, which accounts for 95% of what we learn. In the process of culture creation, Berger and Luckmann said we create a culture and social reality through 'externalization' by imposing order over our environments. We externalize, i.e., create our social world, by imposing them on environments, of which there two: the physical environment and the social environment.

The physical environment is nature. It is not constructed but it is given to us, and the link we have with it is our only bridge to reality as it actually is. Of course, this is what science claims to reveal to us. Science claims objectivity by its

correspondence to the physical environment, which it verifies by prediction.

However, Thomas Khun and other historians of science have argued that science is often significantly impacted by culture.

The cultural environment is divided between material culture and non-material culture. Material culture is how we impose culture on nature, such as roads, borders, tools, and technologies. Nonmaterial culture is our abstract ideas, beliefs, values, and norms that we make ourselves. We impose culture on the environment and create webs of more complex order. For example, 'marriage' is a cultural structure imposed on human relationships and 'race' is construct imposed on human groups and has facilitated racism.

These constructions are the products and contingencies of history and are not necessary. However, 'externalization,' the imposition of culture, is presented to us as objective reality and unchanging, which Berger and Luckmann call objectification. We are coerced and acted upon by this externalization. Objectification is a process "whereby individuals apprehend everyday life as an ordered prearranged reality that imposes itself upon human beings but is seemingly independent of human beings."³ Even though it is an invention, it is treated as real. Objectification happens when culture is imposed through several processes: institutionalization, historicity, and legitimation. Institutionalization imposes culture by routine and habituation of

³ Dr. Dennis Hiebert, "What does 'The Social Construction of Reality Mean,'" Providence University College, ProfVFTalks: Ideas worth pondering. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SqFhd-lgs6w> August 3, 2018.

meaningful behavior, although there are alternative ways for creating meaningful behavior. Historicity occurs when culture ‘hardens’ or ‘thickens’ through the passing of generations and time so that it is accepted as the way things are done, although at a previous time things were done differently. Legitimation occurs when “meaning is given a cognitive and moral basis that will explain and justify it.”⁴ Of this last form, religion is the most powerful expression because it appeals to what “God said.” Religion asserts that meaning is beyond the human realm as an eternal truth of existence and is not an optional belief. It sets the line of what is good and evil, defines deviance, and threatens people with temporal punishment and eternal damnation. Plus, religion grants an ultimate sense of righteousness that helps remove our doubts and the questions about the correctness of our actions. Lastly, religion integrates all of existence into a web of meaning that offers explanation and guidance.⁵

The socialization process (objectification) causes people to internalize constructed cultural products. This is the legitimation of the institutional order; we carry culture in our minds, and it defines what and who we are. Society makes it a practice to reify the cultural products to produce order and stability and makes it seem that cultural products are something other than human products. Berger takes this theory and applies to religion in his work *The Sacred Canopy* (1967). He argues here that religion is a system of knowing, what Berger calls ‘nomos,’ the totality of all the patterns in the objectification process. The nomos makes up a worldview (its

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

knowledge) and its ethos (its values and norms of living). People are made to believe that the nomos is rooted in the cosmic order and is eternal.

The nomos is maintained through cultural institutions that are socially constructed. The legitimacy of the institutions depends on the people who represent them appearing good and right. Those who maintain the body of knowledge and its institutions create a 'plausibility structure.' The nomos will appear healthy and compelling if it is supported by a strong plausibility structure. If the defenders and propagators of the nomos lose moral standing, the nomos also loses standing. Knowledge and belief are tied to the social structure, and as long as people act and behave harmoniously within the social structure, beliefs are reinforced.

The plausibility structure of religion is challenged by the moral standing of its defenders and also the personal benefits people gain from the social institutions. In this work, I have called the worth and incentive of social actions **social capital**.⁶ Social capital is used to describe people's incentive to accept social institutions, as Berger and Luckmann describe them, based on the social cost or benefit. Our choices and beliefs have social costs and benefits, and this influences our willingness or ability to accept them. In the makeup of human psychology, people have a desire to make something of themselves, to attain social status, to be accepted and appreciated by their peers, to know that their lives have meaning and impact, that their labors were not done in vain. Social capital considers the social transaction cost, a utilitarian

⁶ This is not a concept that Berger and Luckmann use.

calculation, placed on a belief or action. This can be opportunistic, but it can also describe the social pressures for conformity. The desire to acquire social capital can cause people to act opportunistically when the benefits of non-conformity outweigh the social benefits of conformity. It is also a cynical conception about human convictions that people are prone to believe what benefits them. This partly explains my description of spiritual drift in Chapter 5. When Alfred Loisy and Charles Loyson failed to receive a satisfactory social reward for their ideas to reform Catholicism, they lost their convictions. Alfred Loisy stayed Catholic as long as his ideas were appreciated, and his social status improved. Loisy found greater reward among academic society outside of Catholicism and ceased to benefit from maintaining orthodoxy. Conversely, the loss of social capital can reinforce conformity. For example, my believing in the Mormon religion benefits me if all of my social connections are Mormon. I will find it difficult to leave Mormonism (and my belief) until I can gain recognition, friends, and appreciation outside of the Mormon circle.

In the modern period, science and modern knowledge production created a competing social hierarchy outside of local control. Scholars could communicate and transmit ideas, gaining status and recognition, within the new academic communities. Through universities and scientific debate, a new social institution was created that provided social capital outside of the religious communities. These new institutions of learning challenged the plausibility structure of religion by providing an alternative social consensus that religious orthodoxy was not good or right.

To summarize, the nomos of western civilization through the liberal and scientific revolution underwent a shock that delegitimized the Old Regime and Christianity's place within it, so people began to create new social institutions, systems of knowledge, and new nomos. The social construction of reality by religion was challenged by competing social constructions of habituation and practices that provided new rewards (social capital). Society currently lives in a plurality of sacred canopies, each trying to reify and institutionalize their systems of knowing the world. This thesis claims that the liberal, democratic, egalitarian revolution and new methods of knowledge production provided the force to destabilize the nomos and fracture modern life.

This work also relies heavily on the functional theory given by Emile Durkheim who provided a theory of religion. Religion according to Durkheim provided social cohesion. Durkheim's functional theory of religion has particular relevance as freethinkers sought to replace the void left by a delegitimized Christianity and sought new collective identities through materialism, republicanism, and positivism. The social aspect of belief is a key factor in why more and more people left Catholicism and why people became unbelievers. It is one of the principal reasons why certain countries are more deeply religious than others (think of the importance of Catholicism to Irish identity in resisting Protestant England for example). Emile Durkheim in his two most important works in *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893) and *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912) provided a classic theory on the secularization of society through the slow accretions of social

change. In the *Elementary Forms*, Durkheim saw religious-like ritual and organizations in non-religious ways. Central to his thesis is that society must universalize and reinforce the social bond. He defined religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden - beliefs and practices which unite into a single moral community called a Church, and all those who adhere to them."⁷ Durkheim argued that religion acted as a source of social cohesion (solidarity he called it) and the identification of individuals within society. Religion organized the life of people by providing a meaning for life, authority figures, reasons to gather and communicate, and it reinforced collective morals and social norms. Religion was a real "social fact" of human life that provided a critical part of the social system. Durkheim's most significant contribution was to show that belief was social and that the moral was social. Thus, the new ideologies of liberalism and socialism provided new sacred alternatives to religion by redefining the moral order. This idea is the lynchpin behind the argument provided in this thesis.

The Division of Labor in Society (1893) is particularly important for pointing to what holds society together in the modern period. The thesis advanced in this dissertation is that moral consensus provides a foundation for religious belief and social organization. Religion answers the question, "what am I and how am I to behave?" Durkheim explores the idea of social cohesion in the *Division of Labor*. He starts by examining law as a point of departure into the phenomena of the collective,

⁷ Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc. 2008).

which is a convenient indicator of the “collective consciousness.” This collective consciousness works as a force and limitation on human behavior, providing boundaries and horizons, as each person is integrated into the social body. He points to the fact that traditional society was slowly displaced and its power to enforce conformity had significantly diminished. The force behind creating this traditional solidarity was often religion. In place of the older form, and existing side by side, was the development of society united by its mutual dependence on people completing complex tasks. The complexity of the tasks created greater isolation and accelerated individuality. This new form of solidarity, which he called “Organic Solidarity,” is based on the ever-increasing division of labor and the integrated, interdependent, functioning of its variegated parts. In Organic Solidarity the person is under the obligation to productively develop their individuality in order to contribute to the greater good of society. Durkheim states that “what is moral is everything that is a source of solidarity,” so developing the individual self becomes a moral and societal goal.⁸ However, there is an inherent contradiction within human nature: people seek to express their individuality while desiring to subsume their identity in causes greater than their selves. This desire for autonomy and meaning within the collective became a critical issue of the nineteenth century in a way that it had not before. As the causes became greater than the individuals, the secular ideologies of the nineteenth century became real religions according to Durkheimian analysis.

⁸ Émile Durkheim and Wilfred D Halls, *The Division of Labor in Society* (New York: Free Press, 2008), 331.

Durkheim's idea about the purpose of the self coincides with the emergence of the modern *liberal self* postulated in this dissertation. The complete person in modern life is someone who strives to grow, learn, cultivate, and improve them self—being denied this is a moral wrong. Catholicism attempted to deny people personal growth and intellectual development by limiting their horizons. The liberal self that emerged with the liberal republican, democratic revolutions in England, the United States, France and elsewhere promoted the space of the individual and protected their property, their liberties, and their personhood. Alongside this political revolution was the liberty of thought and conscience that reaffirmed itself by its independence from authority and the pursuit of free inquiry that would release the floodgates of irreligion in the nineteenth century. Free from the censure and armed with the methods of a new and developing empirical science, “facts” and empirical discoveries overwhelmed prior methods of knowledge production. Further, socialism and liberalism provided a moral framework for addressing the problems of material life that competed with the moral framework of Christianity which was not always reconcilable. Interestingly, this set forth the other great moral struggle of the twentieth century between the sanctity of property and merit and the social obligation to society and social justice. The selfishness and narcissism that accompanies liberal individualism were contrasted by the movement of socialism that sought collective identity over that of the individual and equality over meritocracy. New moral struggles that were much more immediate pushed aside the old worries of Christianity and an unverifiable afterlife. Both political ideologies wanted the emancipation of the person through

material gains in the here-and-now. Both political ideologies also held unfettered scientific inquiry as foundational to the modern economy.

Taking Berger-Luckmann, Durkheim, and the notion of a new liberal self, the development of a new moral self would destabilize the “nomos” and the socially constructed institutions of human society. This is also subtly supported by Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age*. One of his main insights is that moral and political ideas began to change after the Wars of Religion with the rise of the Commonwealth in England and Holland that supported toleration (permitting the triumph of the Protestant Reformation), limited democratic representation, and commercial society as the basis of the state. The liberal ideas formed there would impact all of Europe. At the same time, state building required a disciplined and orderly population that could be relied upon to act effectively to challenges and furnish an army. Charles Taylor claimed these new social practices began to create the modern conditions of the new secular age. Taylor says polite society was cultivated within commercial society, developing a public sphere without religion. Thinkers such as Grotius, Locke, and Smith helped create a secular moral world that coincided with the “civilizing” of the elites. The new social order sought its foundations in sociability, rights, and individuality. Following Max Weber, Taylor says “many people are happy living for goals which are purely immanent; they live in a way that takes no account of the transcendent.”⁹

⁹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge (Mass.): Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 143.

In Taylor's description, the new moral values were preceded by science, which provided a bulwark that weakened religious sensibility. Science did not refute religion or God but provided a disenchanted world where events and actions were explainable from a mechanistic, mindless cause. With science reducing supernatural explanation for both creation and consciousness, it also provided a new modality of experiencing nature through a materialist filter where all things are explained by naturalism. This reduces the sense of mystery and the unknown. For Taylor, unbelief is not a mere subtraction of religion from people's lives but rather a mode of life with its own positive beliefs. Taylor calls it the "buffered self" to suggest that this new condition is closed to religious experience and spiritual possibility by the nature of its assumptions. Mystery and the unknown are lost before "the ambition of disengaging from whatever is beyond the boundary, and of giving its own autonomous order to its life."¹⁰ A new secular moral framework provided the preliminary steps to creating large-scale unbelief.

These arguments provide the underlying interpretative structure of this dissertation and the analytical framework for understanding and interpreting the testimonies of those who lost their faith around the end of the nineteenth century in Third Republic France. These theories are supported by the documents and testimonies of those who lived through the time period and much credit is due to Durkheim and Berger-Luckmann for their power of explanation and insight.

¹⁰ Ibid., 38.

While this work focuses on the loss of belief in late nineteenth-century France, this is not a study of atheism, per se. Few people took the name of "atheist." In the period, it seems few people wished to be associated with atheism and took instead the labels pertaining to the cultural milieu in France, positivist, deist, and freethinker were more common identifications. If I looked only for those who called themselves 'atheists', the study would indubitably leave out a vast number of people who were close to atheism but never fully went as far in their conclusions. The study of atheism and the process of the loss of faith must look at those who rejected the established religion and entered into the territory of irreligion. Atheism as a cultural phenomenon lives and breathes in the activity of irreligion, being that which challenges, refutes, doubts religion and the religious. This study is focused on the process of the loss of faith in Third Republic France. It is a look at unbelief and the culture of irreligion and the various forms that unbelief took.

The word atheist will be used only with care. Instead, this study will use the term *unbelief* as conceived by Gordon Stein and Tom Flynn found in the editions of *The Encyclopedia of Unbelief* (1985) and *The New Encyclopedia of Unbelief* (2007). In these works, unbelief is defined in a more open and inclusive way as the position of "not holding orthodox beliefs or traditional opinions –on religious matters" (Stein 1985). In this light, *unbelief* is heterodox in relation to traditional or dominant forms of religious expression and is understood to be a term inside a historical context. It is the whole or partial break with traditional religion that includes blasphemy, heresy, the rejection of belief, atheism, agnosticism, humanism, and rationalism (Stein1985).

Unbelief has its merits particularly as a historical term that helps make the connections to the critique, decline, or attenuation of belief in supernatural agents or religious ideas and practices. Unbelief thus conceived can include various forms of spirituality and heresies that represent the incremental steps that took people further and further from normative belief in religion and the existence of God. The openness and inclusion of *unbelief* is its virtue.

Thematically, the work is divided up into clear and distinct sections. Chapter One discusses the first real political emergence of unbelief during the dechristianization phase of the French Revolution. The chapter speculates about the very surprising event in 1793 when people began to abandon Christianity openly, or at least Catholicism during the French Revolution. Thus, it considers the general factors that led to dechristianization in order to understand globally how unbelief and atheism grew in importance. The French Revolution suggests that the grip of Christianity was never complete and total, and there was always underneath the decorum and conformity to ritual and tradition, doubt and criticism. Further, the chapter connects dechristianization to the Third Republic and the continued anticlerical campaign, which is the contextual background for the proceeding chapters.

The next three chapters are organized around the examination of *deconversion* narratives from liberal Protestants, then liberal Catholics, and finally freethinkers and atheists respectively. *Deconversion* is seen as a disengagement from

religious traditions. Recent multi-disciplinary studies have divided the factors of deconversion into four causes: intellectual doubt, moral criticism, emotional suffering, and disaffiliation from the community. Further, deconversion studies show that unbelief is not simply a loss but rather a process of spiritual growth and transformation. The concept of deconversion is borrowed from other similar but larger interdisciplinary studies among scholars who have studied contemporary people who abandoned their religious beliefs or traditions. The researchers H. Streib . Streib, R.W. Hood, B. Keller, R-M Csöff, C.F. Silver defined the term "deconversion" in a quantitative and qualitative study, as an experience that " generally appears as a disengagement from a religious tradition which, in retrospect, is considered absolutist and authoritarian. It is an exploration of spiritual or secular alternatives and is a change that is likely to be associated with transformation in terms of faith development."¹¹ Using the concept of deconversion instead of the term "disengagement" is useful because it implies a rejection and a rupture versus that of a possible indifferent detachment, although this too is an important step. The point of this study is to look at those who experienced a transformation into unbelief. Therefore, the word deconversion will be used from the particular angle of those who abandoned their Catholic and/or Christian faith, a belief that died during their

¹¹ Heinz Streib et al., *Deconversion: Qualitative and Quantitative Results from Cross-Cultural Research in Germany and the United States of America* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 218. See also Heinz Streib and Barbara Keller, "The Variety of Deconversion Experiences: Contours of a Concept in Respect to Empirical Research," *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 26, no. 1 (2004): 181–200.

spiritual voyage, i.e., the Christian faith was no longer real and living in their being. They stopped nourishing, practicing, and defending Christianity.

In Chapter Two, the first deconversion narrative examined is that of Protestant or liberal Catholics, André Bourrier and Charles Jean Marie Loyson. They both were stymied and isolated in their efforts to reform Catholic ritual and doctrine. Liberal Catholicism tended towards Protestantism because the desire to escape authority inevitably overlapped and appealed to them. Bourrier represented a Catholic Priest wishing to find independence and the freedom of conscience. Loyson spent his life looking to find common ground between Catholicism and progressive values and for this he would be pushed out of the Church. Chapter Three explores the narratives given by the former Catholic priests Houtin, Hébert, Loisy, Turmel, and Prosper who attempted to reform the Church. They used modern historical research methods and modern philosophy to reevaluate and assess Catholic doctrine that led ultimately to a power struggle and their rupture with Catholicism. From their memoirs, the different factors of rural educations, female-dominated households, unbearable authoritarian censorship, a lack of validating religious experience, and intellectual sincerity pushed them into unbelief. Chapter Four examines atheists and freethinkers who experienced a loss of faith. They were often militant and passionate unbelievers who believed they defended the side of Reason. The final chapter examines the story of what happened to the subjects of the study after they lost their faith and suggests that there were definite patterns that describe the process after deconversion: inversion, absorption, or spiritual drift.

A major source for this research has been the personal testimonies of former priests who became known as the modernists, a group of reform-minded Catholic priests who sought to use contemporary standards of science and research methods to explore and understand their faith. The modernist crisis is a subject fairly well studied. Chapter three about the modernists will add to the works by Alec Vidler, *The Modernist Movement* (1936), Emile Poulat *Histoire, Dogme et critique dans la crise moderniste* (1996), and of Pierre Coline *L'audace et soupçon* (1997). The works by C.J.T. Talar are of particular importance, especially his work *Personal Faith and Institutional Commitments* (2002). Talar's schema of *identity formation*, the *reconstruction of identity*, and *transformation* is adapted and re-theorized in a modified form here within Chapter 3 and 5 (formation, deconversion, and exile). Lester Kurtz wrote a useful analysis in his work *Politics of Heresy* (1986) that uses the sociological category of ambivalence to explain their conflicts of identity and professional values leading to their ruptures. Kurtz gives a broader analysis than Talar by considering together the rupture of the former priests Loisy, Turmel, and Houtin.

Lastly, in looking at unbelief and deconversion, this work addresses an absence in historical accounts of French freethought and atheism. Much has been written about the Enlightenment thinkers such as Denis Diderot, Baron d'Holbach, and Jean le Rond D'Alembert. However, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, atheism changed from being centered on clandestine, established, aristocratic atheists to the burgeoning lower and middle classes, who disseminated and preached

anticlerical unbelief openly. While Jacqueline Lalouette presents a thorough account of the freethought groups in *La libre pensée en France 1848-1940* (1997), her work gives only light mention of the process of the loss of faith. And while Jennifer Hecht's book *The End of the Soul* (2003) offers a compelling account on the confluence of science, atheism, and freethought, I will examine the very precise factors that atheists and unbelievers gave for their deconversions. Lester Kurt's *The Politics of Heresy* (1986) and Hill and Sardella's book *By Those Who Knew Them* (2008) provide essential analysis of the loss of faith of several modernists clergy members; however, I will look at a larger group of clergy members and freethinkers for a broader analysis. My dissertation will contribute to the literature through a focused analysis of the process by which a number of public intellectuals and activists underwent a loss of faith within their historical context. My main sources will be their memoirs, letters, and writings. This microhistorical approach will provide a window on the larger phenomenon of growing disbelief that will demonstrate the patterns and causes for various people's voyage into unbelief and suggest reasons for the growing dissolution of religious practice in France from 1870 to 1940.

Chapter 1. Unbelief, the French Revolution, and the challenge to universal religion

Starting in 1789, a liberal, democratic political revolution shook France, then the major power of the European continent, to its foundations. Then, in a shockingly anomalous event in 1793, the French Revolutionaries banned Christianity, set about destroying the symbols of Catholicism, and celebrated new cults dedicated to reason. Accused of attacking the foundations of Western civilization, dechristianization shocked the Christian monarchs and people of Europe. And yet only a year later religious toleration was restored, and the dechristianizers were relegated to a footnote in history, overshadowed by the seismic events of the Revolution that spread across Europe. Historians have been uncertain ever since what to make of this radical, dechristianization phase of the Revolution. Was it simply an ephemeral disturbance? Or were there countless atheists hidden underneath layers of Catholic ritual?

This chapter will examine dechristianization and unbelief before the Revolution, during the Revolution, and then in the later part of the nineteenth century. I will argue that dechristianization was not an ephemeral, entirely contingent event, but one representative of the undercurrents of discontent that had risen from the depths of Western culture—it was a rationalist philosophy, bubbling up between the cracks of clerical authority and finally exploding onto the political stage. Unbelief finally found social support through the liberal, republican French Revolution. Reaching its pinnacle during the violence of this revolution, unbelief ironically ended

up manifesting a level of intolerance towards religion equal to that of the Church's towards freethought. Unbelief stood for the disestablishment of universal Catholicism and the overturning of theocratic rule—unbelievers wanted freedom from religion. Unbelief grew in the modern period, springing from rationalism, which had detached people from Christian thought. It provided sufficient reason to break with tradition, allowing people to redefine themselves in a new, modern age. The roots of unbelief stretch over several centuries alongside the growth of rationalism and anticlerical thought. By looking at dechristianization during the French Revolution, the rise of unbelief and freethought during the early modern period and then during the Third Republic, we can see perhaps more clearly the social and political characteristics that drew people to unbelief.

[The Civil Constitution of the Clergy in 1790 and the Dechristianization of 1793](#)

To resolve the French budget crisis that was crippling the country, the king of France, Louis XVI, called the different orders (the clergy, the nobility, and the commoners of the French population) to the Estates General meeting in 1789. The Estates General meeting quickly turned into a rallying point for the commoners in the Third Estate to challenge the privileges of the clergy and the nobility. With the help of liberal nobles and lower clergy, they forced the king to accept a constitution and to revoke the privileges of the Church and the nobility, who paid little to no taxes. So

far, there was no expectation that there would be an attack on the foundations of Christianity or Catholicism as an established religion.

While the Catholic Church would remain steadfast against reform in the nineteenth century, this was not necessarily the case in 1789. In the early days of the Estates General meeting, the lower clergy were sympathetic and hopeful about meaningful reform. This was primarily due to the makeup of the First Estate: 208 members of the lower clergy, who hoped to see reform of the Church offices, compared to the 48 bishops, who benefited from the privileges of the nobility. The curés, since they came from the bourgeoisie, were also sympathetic to the ideals and hopes of the Third Estate. The clergy, in fact, had helped win support for the “reunion of orders” by taking their seats with the Third Estate in increasing numbers. Thus, the lower clergy helped force the hand of Louis XVI, and on June 27, 1789, he decreed the union of the three orders. It was the alliance of the Third Estate and the lower clergy that doomed the privileges of the nobility.

The crisis with the Church started in February of 1790 when the revolutionaries addressed the financial burdens of supporting Catholic institutions. With some enthusiasm, members of the First Estate agreed to abolish the tithe. On August 4, 1789, two privileged religious orders made a public renunciation and suggested that tithes should be redeemed by the state. “The clergy, carried away by the enthusiasm of the hour, accepted this, together with the abolition of sundry other financial privileges. The morrow brought regrets, and they tried to wriggle out of

their concession.”¹² The Constituent Assembly, however, went a step further and abolished monasteries and convents that did not do productive or useful work on the grounds that they were unnecessary expenses for the state; monks and nuns were relieved of their vows and offered a pension. Very quickly, the Catholic Church received a shocking blow to its status in French society.

Church wealth would help pay the countries debts. Over the centuries, the Church had acquired considerable wealth and property, owning approximately 10% of the real-estate of the nation. Further, members of the clergy in the higher positions lived in wealth and luxury. The high style and fashion of some of the noble Bishops, abbots, and abbesses belonging to the wealthy convents and monasteries cast a long shadow over the more humble and practical work with the orphanages and hospitals.¹³ All Church property was declared property of the state, which was in part justified by the revolutionaries by the fact that, with this confiscation, the state would take over the Church’s social welfare functions (education, aid to the poor, etc.).

However, it was not the confiscation of property that caused the rift in the Revolution. In fact, that caused little resistance. For example, in Angers, McManners writes that “the clergy [...] itself made no overt gesture or opposition, a reticence which was typical of ecclesiastical France in general.”¹⁴ In other words, it would take

¹² Charles Stanley Phillips, *The Church in France, 1789-1848; a Study in Revival*, (New York: Russell & Russell, 1966), 8.

¹³ Jeremy D Popkin, *A Short History of the French Revolution* (Upper Saddle River, N.J: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2006), 8-9.

¹⁴ John McManners, *French Ecclesiastical Society under Ancient Régime: A Study of Angers in the Eighteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1960), 254.

more than the impoverishment of the established Church to cause civil unrest. What precipitated the conflict between republicans and Catholics was the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, which polarized those within the Assembly as well. The revolutionaries wanted Catholics to confirm their consent to the ecclesiastical reforms and to swear allegiance to the constitutional government. In retrospect, this was the great error of the Revolution, and it reverberated well into the nineteenth century. The clergy were required to swear to “maintain with all their power the Constitution decreed by the National Assembly and accepted by the King.”¹⁵ If they did not comply, they would lose their offices. Despite the mostly good intentions of the Constituent Assembly, Pope Pius VI condemned it, affirming the loyalty of a good Catholic priest first to God, and then the Pope, before the state. Consequently, nearly all the Bishops refused to take the oath, with the exception of Talleyrand, Brienn, and two others. In the lower clergy, only one-third took the oath. From here on, the clergy would be considered either **constitutional** or **refractory priests**, and it was dangerous to be a refractory priest. On May 27, 1792, a decree was passed stating that refractory priests denounced by at least twenty active citizens were liable to deportation without judicial proceedings. Freedom of conscience would not be honored in the tumult of creating the Republic. Then, on August 10, 1792, when the king was removed from power and all his offices, the Assembly called for another oath that put the loyalty of the clergy to the test once again. They were required to

¹⁵ Michael Burleigh, *Earthly Powers: The Clash of Religion and Politics in Europe from the French Revolution to the Great War* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 60.

say: “I swear to be faithful to the Nation, to maintain with all my power liberty, equality, the security of the persons and property, and to die if necessary for the execution of the laws.”¹⁶ Non-jurors were told to leave or be deported to New Guinea. On September 20th, the Assembly legalized divorce.

The Civil Constitution of the Clergy reduced the jurisdiction of the Church. In reordering the structure of the Church, it abolished the fifty sees and rationalized the remaining to fit the current population densities in eighty-three dioceses into ten metropolitanates. Areas with less than six thousand inhabitants would form a single parish, and all cathedral dignitaries were abolished. Four thousand parishes were abolished in one stroke. The new constitution also abolished the title of ‘archbishop.’ To address the inequality of the priesthood, they reorganized the pay scales and downgraded the pomp and grandeur of the bishops. Parish priests’ salaries were raised to six thousand livres in Paris to a low of two thousand four hundred in the provinces, while Bishops made between twelve and twenty thousand livres (before this, some had made over a hundred thousand livres in positions given exclusively to the nobility, who lived like minor princes of the Church). Cathedrals were to become parish churches to be administered by the Bishop as curé and assisted by several vicaires.¹⁷

¹⁶ As cited in Burleigh, *Earthly Powers*, 64.

¹⁷ “The Civil Constitution of the Clergy, 1790,” accessed August 6, 2018, <https://history.hanover.edu/texts/civilcon.html>.

The Oath was not necessarily a concerted attack on the clergy by the Constituent Assembly, but it was an extreme act of Gallicanism that sought to tie the clergy closer to the state. The theory behind Gallicanism was to set the collective voice of the Church against that of an autocratic papacy. The effect, however (a point Lamennais would later make) was that it allowed for the tyranny of the state over the clergy, a condition that Napoleon knew well and promoted with the 1802 Concordat and the Organic Articles. The Constituent Assembly was partial to supporting traditional Gallicanism because of the eighteenth-century struggle over Jansenism and the papacy. The Jansenists were a reforming group of Catholics who wished to abide by the authority of the pope but adopted a theology that combined the theology of Calvinism, which included predestination and justification by faith, with the Augustinian notion of the Fall and human sinfulness. The Jansenists were persecuted and condemned by the Holy See but they persisted in silent resistance and discontent. The Revolution gave Jansenist minded Frenchmen in the Constituent Assembly the upper hand. Civil Jansenism made common cause with those who might be considered the enemies of Rome to take their revenge on the power of an autocratic papacy.¹⁸

In the Assembly, Mirabeau led the way in confiscating church wealth and promoted the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. Mirabeau and his compatriots considered the Church inextricably bound with the Old Regime, and so they sought to

¹⁸ Phillips, *The Church in France, 1789-1848; a Study in Revival*, 10.

sweep away both institutions, going so far as declaring the need to decatholicize France.¹⁹ The Civil Constitution, however, did not remove Catholicism but maintained the Church as part of the state. Instead of having their own income, the clergy would receive it from the government, who could withhold it if priests were intransigent. Nonetheless, it went too far for many loyal Catholics. Very importantly, appointments to ecclesiastic office were to be by popular election, and then they were to take the oath of loyalty to king and state before being consecrated. The Assembly said that it did not directly attack or change Catholic doctrine, but only its loyalties and organization. Nonetheless, the clergy felt that it went too far.

At stake in the Civil Constitution was the definition of what bound people together in their civil life and of who represented the Church. Liberalism sought to define the center of social life through a social contract represented by a constitution that made all men citizens first. To guarantee their freedom, it also required the freedom of conscience; therefore, loyalty to the state is a secular notion that supported religious toleration. The monarchy had already in fact begun to reform itself in this direction. Only several years earlier, in 1787, the king had issued the Edict of Toleration that caused Protestants to rejoice. A Protestant pastor of Sainte-Foy happily explained that “henceforth one can be a Frenchman without being a Catholic.”²⁰ France had been up to this point a confessional state where civil status

¹⁹ Ibid., 12.

²⁰ As cited by Norman Ravitch, *The Catholic Church and the French Nation, 1685-1985* (London [England]; New York: Routledge, 1991), 28.

and rights conformed to the practices of the established Catholic religion. After Louis XIV had revoked the Edict of Nantes in 1685, public office and certain careers required the profession of Catholicism. Thus, after 1685, citizens who wanted their full rights recognized under French law had to convert to Catholicism; Jews and Protestants had only limited toleration. Thus, the French Revolution sought to remedy two problems: the fact that Protestantism still existed in France and the denial of their citizenship and also to continue in the tradition of close ties between church and state that would be supported by a seemingly innocuous oath of loyalty. All French men and women would be first and foremost part of a regenerated citizenry body and second as clerical functionaries. This had the unforeseen revolutionary result however of trying to tie religion to a new social order. Republicanism was to be an alternative to a system of domination by royalists and nobles that worked through patronage and clientage. Nobles had dominated politics because of their wealth, power, and connections. Instead of being connected to privilege, republican citizens were going to be connected to the state, which would exercise power by the mobilized masses and popular will. This was a radically new social orientation of power that had at its base egalitarian values—banded together, the ordinary man could challenge the power and connections of the nobility. Yet to provide religious toleration and challenge the power of the nobility, liberty of conscience had to be guaranteed, and Catholicism had to be reformed. The new center of social life was the liberal constitution. The revolutionaries took the notion of the sovereignty of the people and applied it to the Catholic Church. Bishops and parish priests would be elected by the

people. The act of electing bishops and parish priests democratically encroached on the jurisdiction of Church autonomy.

With the Civil Constitution, this notion of the popular will of the people was taken too far for loyal Catholics. The pope condemned the Oath due to the extreme position of vulnerability in which it placed the French Catholic Church.

Consequently, Oath of the Civil Constitution backfired for the members of the Assembly. The historian Phillips noted that the logic behind the Catholic Church's resistance had valid reasons:

It is the abiding strength of Ultramontanism that with all its faults and errors it stands for the right of the Church to govern itself, to make its own rules of doctrine and discipline. And this right existing, the Church must insist on the line distinction being kept clear between those who are its members and those who are not. By the terms of the Constitution Civile even Protestants and Jews were to take part in the elections of bishops and parochial clergy. Such confusion between 'Catholic' or 'Christian' and 'citizen' is inadmissible.²¹

The Pope's condemnation caused a vast number of the clergy to refuse the Oath and set the stage for an explosion of violence and dislocation that would politically divide France into the next century. The Oath devastated the clergy, who in large numbers began to leave the country. In the winter of 1792-93, one-third of the clergy and three-fourths of the bishops left France for exile; in total, between 25,000 to 30,000 priests (one-quarter of the total 'emigration' that also included thousands of nobles and supporters of the Old Regime). Those clergy who found themselves

²¹ Phillips, *The Church in France, 1789-1848; a Study in Revival*, 14.

unable to leave had to go into hiding. Some regions of France, alternately, resisted the Oath and rallied to the support of their refractory priests. In devout Catholic parts of France, for example, refractory priests would hold services in farm buildings or in the open air. Further, because so many priests left, Catholic services of Mass, marriage, and burial became neglected. Where priests were unavailable, for example, laymen would hold services and parents took charge of the catechetical instruction of the young.

The Civil Constitution was also a great shock to French cultural and social life. Zealous republicans attempted to change in one year what had been put in place over a period of more than seventeen centuries. Catholicism was deeply intertwined with the daily life of the majority of French men and women. Before the French Revolution, McManners argued that Catholicism was “so woven into all the affairs of ordinary life that it could hardly be regarded as an aspect of human thought and action which could be regarded in isolation.”²² In McManners magisterial study of the Catholic town of Angers before the French Revolution, one can see just how deep-seated and embedded Catholicism was. In Angers, Christian ritual and tradition were bound up to such a degree that nearly everyone acquiesced to the sacraments of the Church as a matter of procedure, if not conviction. “It was practically impossible, in the middle of the century at least, for a member of the upper classes to die unreconciled, for rumors of such a scandal would bring the bishop or his vicars-

²²John McManners and Oxford University Press, *Church and Society in Eighteenth-Century France. Vol. 1* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 643.

general in person to an impenitent deathbed.”²³ The town lived by the ringing of the church bells, which organized their lives, and when the bells had stopped ringing after 1790, some of the workers asked them to be wrong so they knew when to get up in the morning.²⁴

Looking at McManners’ study of Angers, one can see the tragedy that befell a way of life for practicing Catholics. In the name of progress, traditional Catholicism would be uprooted and irrevocably weakened, largely because of the loss of real estate, monasteries, and nunneries. The destruction of Church assets, the closing of its congregations, and the removal of its social functions ended a way of life prominent during the Old Regime. The dechristianization that befell it was result of a simmering anticlericalism that exploded during the paranoia of war. It came like a tsunami, wrecking decades if not centuries of work and efforts of the clergy.

Louis XVI was reluctant to accept the constitution and did not approve of the radical legislation against both the Church and against his own power, so he decided to flee with his family during the night of June 20–21, 1791, in hopes of starting a counter-revolution by Marie-Antoinette’s family in Austria. He was identified and apprehended by locals and then placed under arrest. The king’s flight and betrayal of the revolution deeply undermined the legitimacy of the monarchy and sealed Louis XVI fate. Angered by the king’s treason, Robespierre, who had once been against capital punishment, voted for his execution. Along with the majority of the National

²³ McManners, *French Ecclesiastical Society under Ancient Régime*, 19.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 240-254.

Assembly, Louis XVI was sent to the guillotine on January 21, 1793; nine months later the same fate befell his wife, Marie-Antoinette. The French state became a fully democratic nation with universal male suffrage, although never fully implemented. Thus began the First Republic in 1792.

However, following the seizure of Louis XVI, the Prussians and Austrians issued grave warnings of war to the young republic that if it harmed the king. Incensed by the provocation, the revolutionaries declared war on Austria and Prussia. As the war progressed, fear spread among the republicans of Paris and across France began to suspect a counterinsurgency from the disgruntled Catholic Priests and nobles, causing civil war to erupt and provoking a witch hunt for potential traitors that led to the Terror, the political execution of 20 to 30,000 people across France, the worst occurring outside Paris in the provinces. In the chaos of civil war, social order broke down, ties to the past were discarded, and France found itself in an unprecedented situation that is sometimes referred to as the Radical Phase of the Revolution. Leadership became a dictatorship by the Committee of Public Safety led by Robespierre, who sought to salvage and save the republic. In this new atmosphere, the support for the constitutional clergy deteriorated, and the hopes for a Constitutional Church appeared partially doomed in the traditionally devout Catholic regions of France. In some places, there were both constitutional and refractory priests, which promoted bitter division. Those who were faithful to their old parish priests and Bishops did not look kindly upon Constitutional priests. For example, in the provinces, the constitutional priest Bishop Pouderos of Béziers had to use an

armed escort to enter his see and became known as “Bishop of the Bayonets.”

Burleigh skillfully describes the situation:

Life among villagers who detested them was tough on the Constitutionals. Guns were discharged outside their windows late at night; dead cats, excrement or in some cases coffins were left on the rectory doorstep. They discovered that the pool of lay goodwill necessary for the upkeep of their churches had abruptly emptied as bell-ropes or the keys to the door or treasury literally vanished. In some parishes, people would not even sell them life’s necessities or perform routine repairs.²⁵

The prospects for the survival of the French Republic in 1792 worsened with the Austro-Prussian invasion, causing the relationship between the Church and the Republic to spiral further downward. When a Prussian army captured the frontier fortress Longwy and looked to move on to Verdun, fear and paranoia struck the population as these foreign armies marched closer to Paris. Parisian mobs started killing those suspected of being counter-revolutionaries, including large numbers of priests. At the height of the hysteria, a mob infamously attacked prisoners in their cells because they feared the freed prisoners would later lead an uprising against them. Taking matters into their own hands, they burst into where the prisoners were incarcerated and knifed many of them to death; between two and three thousand prisoners were killed, with no quarter given to the imprisoned clergy either—three bishops and 220 priests were summarily executed.²⁶ The act demonstrated the extreme loss of confidence in the clergy’s loyalties among certain segments of French

²⁵ As cited by Burleigh, *Earthly Power*, 65.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

society. Over the next year, conscientious objecting Catholics became victims to a tragic spate of religious intolerance that harked back to the Bartholomew's Day Massacre.

In the spring of 1793, large-scale revolts began to spread throughout western France in the Vendée, Inférieure, Maine et Loire, and Deux-Sèvres. The rebels were inspired by the attack on refractory priests, the calls for conscription for another 300,000 men to continue the fight against the Austrians and Prussians, and in general their discontent with the Revolution. In the Vendée, the people had asked for lowered taxes in their cahiers but failed to get any relief. When they suffered a bad year economically, their patience ran dry and their anger swelled to rebellion.²⁷ Most of the rebels were small and medium farmers and a third were village artisans, shopkeepers, and silk weavers. This was a revolt by the provincial people against a Revolution that they felt falsely claimed to represent them. The war raged over several years and ended with the death of some 250,000 to 300,000 people. In order to save the Republic, the Jacobins argued, they had to purge the non-conforming parts. The result was large-scale massacres, numerous executions, and the destruction of villages all across France. The worst was in Nantes, where one-third of the population was killed on the grounds they were enemies or suspected enemies of the Republic.²⁸

The uprising in the Vendée began on March 12, 1793, after the call for conscripts. By the end of the month bands of rebels joined one another and created

²⁷ McManners, *French Ecclesiastical Society under Ancient Régime*, 82-83.

²⁸ Burleigh, *Earthly Power*, 97-100.

what came to be called the Catholic and Royal Army of Vendée. The rebels carried images of the Virgin Mary as standards of war and sang religious hymns as they marched. They were unpaid and poorly equipped, and inevitably they fell before the revolutionary armies. At the same time, there was a parallel revolt in the major cities outside of Paris by the Federalists in Bordeaux, Lyons, Marseilles, and Toulouse, who all resisted Jacobin domination in Paris. Then, to make the situation even direr, a parallel revolt to the Vendée was being led by the Chouans in Brittany. The Chouans greatly resented revolutionary conscription and rallied around the refractory priests. They operated mostly in small guerilla bands that were rooted out and crushed only by sending General Lazare Hoche along with 140,000 men.²⁹

As the violence mounted, priests became a primary target and were treated as a fifth column, in league with the Emperor. The Revolution, alongside the Terror, took on an ideological, totalitarian character. If the priests did not leave on their own account, and they had not taken the vow, the authorities deported them or shot them on the spot. Aged and infirm priests were excluded, but as they got swept up in the chaos, they too sometimes were summarily executed along with other opponents of the Revolution. All priests became suspect. In September 1793, Fouché wrote in *l'Instruction aux départements du Rhone et de Loire* the following:

The priests are the sole cause of the unhappiness in France [...]. The Republican has no other divinity than his fatherland, no other idol than liberty; the Republican is essentially religious because he is good, just, courageous;

²⁹ Ibid.

the patriot honors virtue, respects his elders, consoles the unhappy, relieves indigence, and punishes treason. What a beautiful homage to divinity!³⁰

Collot d’Herbois and Laplanche told the Convention of Public Safety that the Constitutional priests were as troublesome as the non-jurors and that some had joined the Federalist revolt against Jacobin centralism. And if the priests did not join the revolt, they were accused or suspected of unpatriotic behavior. In the winter of 1793-94, after the Jacobins regained control over the provinces, they told the clergy they were expected to resign their orders of the priesthood and marry. The alternative was imprisonment and sometimes death. The revolutionary leaders thought that Christianity would expire once the clergy were removed. Effectively, they banned Christianity. “Concurrently, churches of all denominations (plus synagogues) were shut and converted into granaries, arms dumps of municipal buildings where they were not demolished outright.”³¹ Some were turned into ‘Temples of Reason’ to hold festivals in honor of the republic. The trappings of what had been the sacred space of religious ritual were replaced with republican, patriotic ritual. They created their own secular saints that were celebrated as part of a republican martyrology: Jean-Michel Lepeletier de Saint-Fargeau, Jean-Paul Marat, and Francois-Joseph Bara were honored in public festivals such as the Festival of the Martyrs of Liberty.³²

³⁰ As cited in Georges Minois, *Histoire de l’athéisme: les incroyants dans le monde occidental des origines à nos jours* (Paris: Fayard, 1998), 413.

³¹ Aston, *Christianity and Revolutionary Europe, 1750-1830*, 213.

³² Ibid.

One of the most fascinating and surprising developments was the attempt to replace Christianity. During the festivals promoted by Jacques Hébert, revolutionaries abandoned the Christian god, and France underwent a period of dechristianization that caused conservative critics ever since to associate the Revolution with godlessness and atheism. McManners argues that dechristianization was not invented by the central government and that it was promoted by “adventurers on the margins of power—exhibitionists who sought to bring themselves to notice or intriguers who wished to divert attention from their own misdemeanors.”³³ Certain acts taken by the radicals became emblematic of this evaluation; for example, on the 10th of October 1793 Joseph Fouche, a military commander, denounced “religious sophistry” and enacted a zealous campaign in Nevers with an ordination that called for the “elimination of all religious signs found on the roads, the squares, and all public places.”³⁴ He removed all the crosses and religious statues from graveyards and posted a message on a signpost before the entrances that read “death is an eternal sleep.” Interestingly, Fouche also created a Festival of Brutus as a civil cult to replace Christianity, which was interchangeable with the Cult of Reason.³⁵

In the winter of 1793, during the most radical days of the French Revolution, Jacques Hébert and Antoine-François Momoro decided to take an unprecedented and revolutionary action. In their efforts to circumvent the problems of Catholicism and

³³ McManners, *French Ecclesiastical Society under Ancient Régime*, 86-87.

³⁴ As cited by A Mellor, *Histoire de l'anticlericalisme français* (Paris: Veyrier, 1979), 182.

³⁵ William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 259.

the civil war, they created an alternative religion – the Cult of Reason, which would replace Christianity. A group of zealous French revolutionaries inaugurated the cult during a large celebration called the Fête de la Raison, which took place in Paris on the 20th Brumaire, Year II of the Revolution (or November 10th, 1793). Where they had control, they closed and retooled Catholic churches for their new cult. Churches across France were transformed and dressed up as Temples of Reason, where great celebrations would be held to inaugurate the new Cult of Reason.

Among these churches was Notre Dame in Paris, which had been taken over by Jacobin radicals who were able to occupy the cathedral after Paris' bishop, Jean-Baptiste-Joseph Gobel, renounced his priesthood. After Gobel resigned, he was followed by four hundred Parisian Priests, leaving Notre Dame and Paris empty of clergy. That same day, revolutionaries optimistically dedicated the Cathedral of Notre Dame not to God, but to "Philosophy," by engraving the word over the cathedral doors. Notre Dame was then prepared to initiate the cult of the state by holding the Fête de la Raison. The Jacobins prepared a whole panoply of pomp and ceremony. The Fête started with the lighting of a flame at the altar to symbolize Truth. To avoid idolatry and statuary, there were no permanent images of deities. Instead, the goddesses were portrayed as living women in costumes. These women entered the Temple in a pagan procession after the lighting of the altar. The star among the procession was Mademoiselle Maillard, a famous opera singer and beauty, who was distinguished by being dressed as the Goddess of Reason and the embodiment of Liberty. Other women accompanied her, draped in the robes with tricolor sashes in

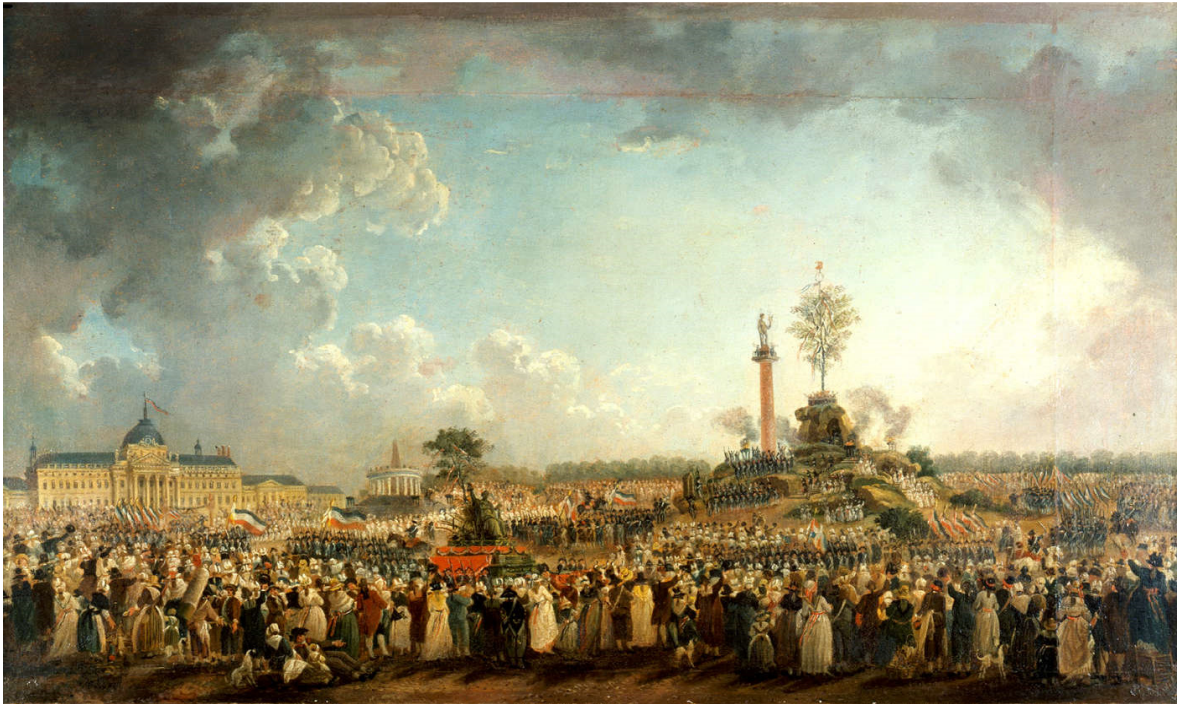
the style of the ancient Romans. One of the organizers of the event, Momoro, had his wife Sophie take part in the procession. After the procession came to a halt, trumpets were sounded, and the members of the ceremony began dancing the Carmagnole. La Carmagnole was a French song invented for the French Revolution, based on a tune and a wild dance of the same name, which may have come to France via the Piedmontese. The song, dance, and procession provided spectacle and grandeur, which elicited scoffing and smirks from those who had not entirely abandoned their Christian beliefs and sensibilities.³⁶ The festival was supposed to mark the turn of a new age of reason, enlightenment, and regeneration.

The Fête de la Raison represented only one of the attempts to replace Christianity with ritual and newly invented traditions. Different festivals were proclaimed across France, such as the Festival of Law or the Festival of Liberty. The inspiration partly came from Jean Jacques Rousseau, who had written about the necessity of a civil religion in order to ensure civic unity. Following Rousseau's advice, the revolutionaries embraced the creation of new rituals with gusto. The great painter Jacques-Louis David, who had become the master of ceremonies by decree of the republican government, managed the most spectacular festival. To fulfill his duty as master of ceremonies, he made grand theatrical gestures. His most memorable event was a celebration for the Cult of the Supreme Being. On the 8th of June, 1794, David planned a festival that would run through key sites and end on the Champs de

³⁶ Emmet Kennedy, *A Cultural History of the French Revolution* (New Haven [Conn., etc.: Yale University Press, 1991).

Mars sixteen hours later. The festival started at sunrise at the Bastille with a procession that walked carrying a banner displaying the all-seeing eye, or revolutionary surveillance. Following the banners came the members of the Convention carrying in a wooden ark the constitution of the First Republic. They marched toward a meeting point in a plaza next to the remnants of the Bastille, where a large colossal statue of Nature stood that represented a fountain of regeneration. In the fountain stood the large monumental woman from whose breasts water flowed into a cup held in her outstretched hands. She was designed to represent nature and rebirth. At the Bastille, the ceremony started with a song by Hérault de Séchelles. The officiates of the ceremony made propitiatory offerings in onyx cups that they passed to a group of 86 senior citizens who symbolized the 86 departments, who then drank from the cup and passed it to the next person while they recited patriotic sentiments. After the ritual was completed, trumpets blared for the spectators, followed by the sound of a cannon blast to signify that the ritual of Paris' renewal was complete. Members of the Convention held bouquets of wheat, banded fruit, or upheld olive branches. Another ritual was made to start at the Invalides where David had erected a statue of Heracles that held a fasces, which represented the united departments, to club the Hydra of Federalism at his feet. A procession then went to the Place de la Revolution where David had erected a statue of Liberty. Finally, in the Place de la Revolution, the president enacted an auto-da-fé by lighting on fire crowns and scepters

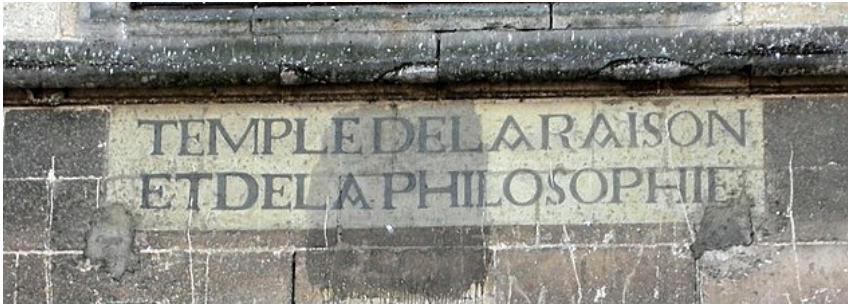
and releasing three thousand birds into the sky, while at the same time a choir chanted hymns to the Sun God.³⁷



The Festival of the Supreme Being, by Pierre-Antoine Demachy.³⁸ The heavens have opened?

³⁷ Dansette, Adrien. *Histoire Religieuse de La France Contemporaine*. Paris: Flammarion, 1965, 130-131.

³⁸ Wikimedia Commons contributors, "File:Fête de l'Être suprême 2.jpg," Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:F%C3%A0te_de_l%27Etre_supr%C3%A0me_2.jpg&oldid=177837963 (accessed July 30, 2018).



Inscription Eglise Ivry-la-Bataille ³⁹



“Disaffection” of a church, Jacques François Joseph Swobach-Desfontaines, 1794.⁴⁰

³⁹ Wikimedia Commons contributors, "File:Inscription Eglise Ivry-la-Bataille.jpg," *Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository*, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Inscription_Eglise_Ivry-la-Bataille.jpg&oldid=112278129 (accessed July 31, 2018).

⁴⁰ Wikimedia Commons contributors, "File:Désaffectation d'une église.jpg," *Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository*, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:D%C3%A9saffection_d%27une_%C3%A9glise.jpg&oldid=177832000 (accessed August 2, 2018).

While the revolutionaries dreamed of a rational religion embraced by the nation, Catholics were persecuted and on the run. Some simply stopped practicing Catholicism between the years of 1794-1799. McManners documents how dechristianization impacted the provincial town of Angers in 1793 and 1794, an instructive example that shows how fear played a large role in the abjuration of priests. When dechristianization came to Angers, the Constitutional Bishop Pelletier abjured his orders out of caution. Twelve other constitutional priests followed his lead. Sisters in Angers who served in the hospitals were rounded up and put into prison. They were told to take the civic oath or be deported; some took it, and those who didn't were sent into exile. Two were shot anyway. On November 20th, revolutionaries held a festival of Reason in the cathedral. On the 30th of December 1793 revolutionaries celebrated a military triumph by marching through the city carrying a statue of the goddess Liberty, just as the Catholics had once held processions of the *Sacre*. The goddess Liberty shouted, "Priests were a 'filthy horde', 'vile flatterers of crowned brigands.'" Church artifacts were thrown in the fire as a ritual cleansing act. The revolutionaries also made a spectacle of the execution of fugitive or infirm clergy still in the town of Angers. Few were spared. "The Abess of Ronceray, who had escaped to the château of her sister-in-law at Beaupréau, was arrested, brought back to face the tribunal and shot." The result of the Oath and the

Terror had destroyed what had been an innocuous ecclesiastical town.⁴¹ McManners concludes that:

Legacies of medieval piety and traditions of generation had been squandered, and the days of chapters and monasteries, bells, candles, processions, social conformity and ecclesiastical domination were over. The old régime in Angers had ended.⁴²

The position of the clergy in France had sunk to all-time lows. In 1793, 20,000 clergy renounced their priesthood, or approximately two-thirds of the entire priesthood at the time. In twenty-one of the departments in the South-East studied by Michelle Vovelle, 4,500 priests abdicated, of which 60% were curés and 16.5% vicaires. McManners concludes that “few could have been spontaneous: the vast majority were made under pressure, in desperate and feverish circumstances.”⁴³ The French atheist Naigeon wondered at the time how many thousands of priests were in the vocation without belief, as was the case with Meslier. However, it must be noted that 10 to 15% of the abjurations, around 2,500 individuals, preceded the dechristianization phase and provided enthusiastic testimonies.⁴⁴ In Paris, 410 priests abdicated out of 1500. Certain regions stood out, such as the district of Provins, where 70% of the priests quit. Their resignations sometimes became public declarations, where abdicating priests lamented on their past support of “prejudice,”

⁴¹ McManners, *French Ecclesiastical Society under Ancient Régime*, 280-289.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 276.

⁴³ John McManners, *The French Revolution and the Church*. (Westview, Conn.: Greenwood Publishers, 1969), 109.

⁴⁴ Minois, *Histoire de l'athéisme*, 414-415.

“superstition,” “errors,” “nonsense,” “masquerades,” and their exploitation of the credulity of the people. Some of the abdicating priests shockingly admitted that they had hidden for a long time their feelings of duplicity, keeping their doubts and conclusions from their flocks.⁴⁵ How much of this was sincere? Sometimes, the priests were given an already formulated testimony to sign; only their names were required. Were these confessions like that of Stalin’s purges in the 1930s, forced to confess ideological purity, or were some priests happy to leave? Their confessions show the complexity of the moment; here is an example of a priest from Gannat, who wrote in *l’Allier*:

Citizens, I have been a priest for six years; by an inconceivable circumstance, I became the minister of lies. I was born with a sensitive soul, made for the truth [...]. Today, to put the stamp on my generation, I swear to you with all of my heart that interior religion is the only one that pleases the Supreme Being and that it is sufficient to be patient, to respect the honesty of tradition, and act with benevolence to be agreeable to His eyes. I hereby renounce the priesthood and desert the fanatical army of the zealous tyrant from Rome, to serve henceforth nothing but the truth, of which I will become its soldier and apostle.⁴⁶

After February 1793, the Convention passed measures to encourage priests to marry, partly by punishing those who tried to stop it. Some 5000-6,000 priests married (often certifying their long-standing partners). However, many of these marriages may have been done as acts of self-preservation to be accepted into normal society. Marriage was considered a sign of real assimilation to revolutionary values.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Minois, *Histoire de l’athéisme*, 414-415.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ McManners, *The French Revolution and the Church*, 115-116.

Many nuns married former priests. Some priests fell into apostasy and instead practiced and defended “natural religion” while abjuring “priest-craft.” Half the Constitutional clergy gave up their profession; some joined the Republican army or taught at secular schools. In 1794, out of 40,000 pre-Revolution parishes, only 150 openly celebrated mass. Catholicism was hemorrhaging in France.⁴⁸

More than just pushing out or liquidating the leaders of the Church throughout France, the Revolution sought to wipe out the traditions of the past and remake the image and culture of Republican France. This meant removing symbols of the Church and the Monarch. Radicals did not call it a “cultural revolution,” as we would say in the 20th century, but “regeneration.” They removed the word “Saint” from roads, city names, and places. Rue Saint-Jaques became Jacque and Bourg-la-Reine became Bourg-Egalité; Mount-Saint Michel became Mont-Libre.⁴⁹ The constitutional priest Abbé Gregoire was responsible for renaming the places of Paris; for example, he designed the street names so that Rue de la Constitution led to Rue du Bonheur. Some people named their children after famous Roman Senators from antiquity, such as Brutus, Gracchus, or Scipio. Citizens were told to use the informal “tu” instead of the formal “vous” and were encouraged to call one another “citoyen.” Churches were despoiled of their wealth and the funds were used for the war effort; revolutionaries violated and desecrated relics and holy places by smashing icons, pillaging precious

⁴⁸ Burleigh, *Earthly Powers*, 66.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 83.

objects, and destroying sacred paintings and statues.⁵⁰ The changes and new practices were not all ephemeral: to the present day, some French continue to give their children Republican baptisms.

Members of the Republican National Assembly carried out the war of Reason against Christianity in more subtle, but no less significant ways. The historian Burleigh writes that “While drunken hobbledehoys mocked the clergy, sober rationalists set about eradicating the ways in which Christianity had imposed itself on peoples’ most unconscious rhythms.”⁵¹ They did this by promoting universal rationalism. Society would be rebuilt upon Reason. For example, they were responsible for the creation of a universal system of weights and measurements that became the metric system now common throughout the world. Before this, different regions had different measures. And just as they changed the common system of measurement, so did they create a new calendar, the Revolutionary Calendar, which reset the time of world history. Year One would begin with the fall of the Bastille on the 14th of July 1789 (but they later changed it to the 22 of September because of the execution of the King). For the names of the months and weeks, the National Assembly first wanted to use names of moral inspiration like the Bastille, Liberty, or Equality; however, the names of the months finally chosen represented the actual seasons. The months were Vendemiaire (vintage), Brumaire (fog), Frimaire (cold), Nivose (snow), Pluviose (rain), Ventose (wind), Germinal (budding), Floreal

⁵⁰ *Historical Dictionary of the French Revolution 1. 1.* (London: Aldwych Press, 1985).

⁵¹ Burleigh, *Earthly Powers*, 84.

(flowers), Prairial (meadows), Messidor (harvest), Thermidor (heat) and Fructidor (fruit). In an attempt to remove the religious meaning of the seven-day week, there would be three weeks of ten days with one day each week set aside for rest (having only three days off a month instead of four killed any enthusiasm for its effective implementation). Plus, the radicals promoted the revolutionary cults as a republican practice during the days of rest.

The anticlerical zeal of the dechristianization phase would be cut short by the paranoia of Robespierre to find any and all traitors. Robespierre was an orthodox deist, who with good reason believed that dechristianization was discrediting the Republic and leading to a significant counter-revolutionary reaction. Robespierre said that “They are the ill who must be prepared for healing by reassuring them; one makes them fanatics by forcing a cure on them.”⁵² Revolutionary paranoia of being surrounded by traitors gripped Robespierre, and he believed that the dechristianizers were hypocritical counter-revolutionaries and criminals. He had Hébert guillotined, and the secular/pagan cults stopped. Robespierre then reinstated the freedom of religion and started a new, less controversial cult, the Cult of Supreme Being, which lasted until Robespierre himself was guillotined. His demise finally ushered in a period of calm after two years of religious upheaval. As for dechristianization, it never took root beyond the small group of fanatical republican patriots. “The pre-1789 Church had found popular religiosity problematic and so, in their turn, did

⁵² David P. Jordan, *The Revolutionary Career of Maximilien Robespierre* (University of Chicago Press, 1989), 193.

revolutionaries who, even using the considerable state resources available to them, were unable to persuade the masses to embrace the new republican creeds.”⁵³

With the fall of Robespierre, the Directory took over the government and religious toleration was reinstated. However, after dechristianization, the state was laicized and the clergy and Church staff were taken off the government payrolls. Once the dechristianization phase lost its zeal, Catholics came out from their hiding and demanded once again that the religion of their fathers and their father’s father be allowed to practice openly within the churches. And as of old, the Clergy took their places at the altars, although it was still legally only the Constitutional clergy. However, Bishop Henri Gregoire had to round up 6,000 unmarried priests who were scattered across France. Some of his priests were on the hit lists of republican death squads. The issue that was at the heart of the Papal condemnation of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, the public election of priests, was abandoned and restricted to only the members of the Constitutional Church. The Constitutional Bishops went back to work with new zeal, and between 1796 and 1801, they carried out many confirmations, baptisms, and confessions. But the Constitutional Church would not survive for two significant reasons: first, it had little representation in the countryside, and second, women boycotted it.⁵⁴

Popular worship had continued underground. In the Vendée, layman took over priestly functions, holding ‘white masses,’ marrying couples, and burying the dead. In

⁵³ Aston, *Christianity and Revolutionary Europe, 1750-1830*, 216.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 236-237.

areas across France, the laity began making petitions that referenced the freedom of religion written in the Rights of Man, a tool of the Revolution, to reopen their churches. In the Limousin, there was a public clamor to have the bells rung in public again and to overturn the ban. In all of this activity, women, who had been brazenly defiant since the officials attempted to eliminate Christianity, played a key role. In France, “[...] women had taken the lead in resisting dechristianization, ready to dig up Trees of Liberty (female images of Liberty were a favorite object of laceration or dismemberment) and replace crucifixes taken away by the authorities.”⁵⁵ In the Yonne, women led the way in demanding the keys to the churches, protected refractory priests from being arrested, and encouraged them in celebrating the Eucharist despite the risks. Sometimes the women rang the bells themselves, calling other women to worship with them. In one instance, at Besle in the Haute-Loire, Year V, women rescued two old and ailing refractory priests and then forced them to hold a Mass for the villagers. Further, while the priests were absent, women kept religion alive in the home, where they catechized their children, read from the Bible, and told them the tales of the Saints.⁵⁶

The experience of the Revolution for women was just as disastrous and emotionally trying as it was for men. When there were food shortages, the woman sacrificed: sometimes suffering a lower immunity from feeding the family before themselves, and in the worst of times, they watched their undernourished children and

⁵⁵ Ibid., 243.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 243-244.

parents die of preventable sicknesses. Working class women watched as their children and husbands marched off to war for a utopian cause that gave them few practical rewards. Instead, the Revolution brought sacrifice, scarcity, death, and then the destruction of the local churches. In practical terms, it was better before the Revolution. “When God was there we had bread.”⁵⁷ Many women had, of course, supported the Revolution and sacrificed their wealth, wedding bands, and donated what they could to help the men fight in the battlefields. Having gained only the high claims of moral abstractions, the women were the first to feel disillusionment with the Revolution and guilt for abandoning or forsaking the Church.

Women perhaps turned to the Church too for another fundamental reason: revolution, war, famine - these are the dissolvents of the family while the Church stood at least for its integrity, its sanctity; the hallowing of birth, marriage, death; the cement of something much more intrinsic than the social system. When the cards were down and the scores chalked up, what really was the cumulative experience of the working woman from 1789-95? How else could she assess the Revolution except by examining her wrecked household; by reference to children aborted or born dead, by her own sterility, by the disappearance of her few sticks of furniture, by the crumbling of years of effort to hold the frail family economy together and what could her conclusion be except that the price paid for putative liberty had been far too high?⁵⁸

Over the span of human history, how many revolutionaries, confronting their noble efforts dashed on the rocks of stubborn resistance, have not asked this question?

⁵⁷ As cited by Olwen Hufton, “Women in Revolution 1789-1796,” *Pastpresent Past & Present*, no. 53 (1971): 90–108, 105.

⁵⁸ Hufton, “Women in Revolution 1789-1796,” 108.

Catholicism remained rooted in French culture and survived the cold winter of 1793. France did not become a secular nation over the period of one year. The results of the Revolution, in regards to religion, ended in a kind of draw, symbolized by Napoleon and the Concordat of 1802. Napoleon conceded that dechristianization had failed and he would have to accept Catholicism. He made conciliatory moves towards the Church by removing any state obstacles to Sunday observance, releasing refractory priests from incarceration on the islands of Ré and Oléron, and burying Pius VI with full pontifical honors in December 1799. Napoleon would cynically resurrect the Church-state alliance and revive Gallicanism. Where unbelief won a small victory was in the recognition of pluralism. The Papacy had to abandon France as a Catholic confessional state and recognize the rights of Protestants and Jews. Still, it won the official acknowledgment that Catholicism was “the religion of the majority of the French.” Public election of the clergy and the bishops was abandoned. Parish priests, as of old, would be nominated by the episcopate. However, bishops and the clergy would be paid from public finances and remain under the thumb of French civil authorities. Napoleon had the last laugh; he added the seventy-seven Organic Articles to the provisions of the Concordat. The Articles limited the power of the pope and strengthened the control of the government over the Church by requiring that all Papal Bulls, the convocation of national councils, and the creation of new parishes be approved by the French government. Further, Napoleon gained a propaganda victory against the enemies of France who presented the war as a

religious crusade against atheist revolutionaries.⁵⁹ The Concordat rehabilitated Catholicism. To further the compromise, anticlerical Republicans were censored and silenced by police authorities from attacking the clergy or religion.

After Napoleon, Louis XVIII, Charles X, Louis-Philippe, and the Second Empire all sought to limit and censor provocative anticlerical or atheist intellectuals and to control philosophical teaching at the universities. Reforms of education in 1821 declared that their guiding principle would be “Religion, Monarchy, and the legitimacy of the Charter.”⁶⁰ However, French Catholicism had lost a large contingent of former republicans. Cousin, Guizot, Jouffroy, Quinet, Michelet, and others had at various points had their courses suspended. These thinkers wanted to provide their own ideas for a new society with an ideological synthesis. Those who were part of the failed Jacobin Revolution—the rationalist, republican tradition—sought to fill a hole in modern consciousness. The historian D.G. Charlton argues that widespread loss of Christian belief in intellectual circles sparked this production. Charlton breaks down his analysis into several typologies. The first group sought to provide a new theology and ethics like those of Saint-Simon and Comte; others a metaphysical religion, such as the natural religion of Cousin, Renan, or Étienne Vacherot, while others used a language of prophetic fervor and a comprehensive explanation of humanity’s

⁵⁹ Aston, *Christianity and Revolutionary Europe, 1750-1830*, 256-257.

⁶⁰ As cited by D. G Charlton, *Secular Religions in France, 1815-1870*. (London; New York: Published for the University of Hull by the Oxford University Press, 1963), 1.

condition and destiny in the cults of science and progress.⁶¹ While religion revived, the current of unbelief continued in a parallel, contrasting direction.

For a time after the Revolution, Christianity regained its intellectual respectability with the rise of the Romantic movement. Chateaubriand's *The genius of Christianity* became a widely read and admired work that inspired a rediscovery of the Middle Ages and Christian civilization. One of the results of the French Revolution and the closing down of churches was that many people in France had not received a religious education. The calculations of Gérard Cholvy and Yves-Marie Hilaire suggests that the ignorance of the ordinary person about the Christian religion reached its peak in 1830. After this point, the Church replaced missing priests in villages and communes. Mass attendance rose and so did Eastern Communion. The Catholic Revival treated French regions as missionary areas where the missionaries often directed their efforts at Christianizing the children. In the towns, they would also hold large, passionate sermons in efforts to create enthusiasm. The sisters did their part to reawaken the faith through schooling, at least until the Third Republic made education a primary ground of the cultural war. Finally, there was a revival in popular forms of practice through the cult of saints, the veneration of shrines,

⁶¹ Charlton, *Secular Religions in France, 1815-1870*.

spreading messages of miracles, and organizing pilgrimages. For example, hundreds of thousands of pilgrims went to Lourdes for cures and to pray to the Virgin Mary.⁶²

The Meaning of Dechristianization

Given the resurgence of Catholicism, what was the legacy of the dechristianization phase? What remains other than the metric system? And what did it mean that Catholic worship regained its place in French society for the next half century? What about the Fête de la Raison, the Cult of Supreme Being, the abolishment of Catholicism and the abjuration of twenty thousand priests--how do we understand the eruption of anticlericalism and dechristianization? Why for a brief time did so many people so readily and quickly abandon Christianity?

Nigel Aston writes that the dechristianization phase was the “most inimical onslaught by any government against organized religion for nearly 1,500 years; it was at the heart of the sudden and very dramatic challenge in the 1790s to religious primacy in European culture.”⁶³ Emmanuel Todd conceived of it as a radical shift of the focus of human energy: “Men instantly replaced the wished for image of the city of God with a new image of the ideal society.”⁶⁴ This was a remarkable and

⁶² James McMillan, “Catholic Christianity in France from the Restoration to the separation of church and state, 1815–1905,” in Gilley, Sheridan, and Brian Stanley, eds. *The Cambridge History of Christianity*. Cambridge University Press, 2014, 215–32., 220.

⁶³ Aston, *Christianity and Revolutionary Europe, 1750-1830*, 211.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 217.

unprecedented breaking away from Christianity and towards temporal political concerns.

Mercier, author of *Tableau de Paris*, argued that it was an explosion that had its origins in the pamphlets and revolutionary theater that ridiculed the Old Regime. The lower orders of society had lashed out at those above them who had not ever been the good Catholics they were purported to be. Mercier reasoned that once the restraints were removed, the people were intoxicated with their new power and used it to debauch and plunder. In this interpretation, clerical authority had overestimated their loyalty to Catholic institutions. People had always supported Church ritual and rules because they had been forced to. For instance, some communities were not aggressive or extreme; they just did not want to participate. Take the tiny commune, Ris-Orangis, where the inhabitants simply did not want to finance their local curé; and equally, they did not support the radicals who wished to build infrastructure for their “primitive religion” and said they too would have to do so at their own expense. In another example, the hamlet of Mennecy closed their church because they claimed their priest had lived with concubines. Thus, dechristianization could be an expression of anger that cooled to indifference or discontent. Dechristianization was also a way to settle scores between rivaling parties: town versus city, rich versus poor, Protestant versus Catholic, etc. Another reason for the destruction of Church property was the simple, practical side of making way for municipal improvements after its sale. The change of regimes prompted the removal of the symbols of the king, the tombs of aristocrats, and even the physical remains of the kings themselves in Saint

Denis, where mortal remains were scattered and lost alongside the remains of commoners next to the Cathedral. Further, when the 1793 war struck, revolutionaries melted down bells, grills, and railings for armaments. Church property and building were used for military storage, prisons, and saltpeter factories. Thus, the sale of property, political and ecclesiastical changes, and the war accounted for a great deal of the revolutionary vandalism that overlapped with what appeared to be the rejection of Christianity. Many peasants might have been Christian, but they were also anticlerical. Christianity and anticlericalism were not exclusive. Peasants did not enjoy paying the tithe, and men hated that their sex life was reported to the parish priest by their wives during confession.

McManners and McLeod both agree that dechristianization cannot be considered exclusively the fault of the central government. It was not entirely a phenomenon that occurred from the top-down but had popular support.

It expressed the accumulated resentment against church and clergy of many sections of the population. This violent rejection of Catholicism was mainly an urban phenomenon, but it took both bourgeois and more popular forms. And the events of the 1790s made it equally clear that the countryside included both areas of fervent Catholicism and those where the Church was a much more peripheral feature of life.⁶⁵

The Revolution demonstrated the fault lines and divisions in the French population that would split and fracture again later in the nineteenth century. For many Catholics, the Revolution had the effects of strengthening their loyalties, but it

⁶⁵ Hugh McLeod, *Religion and the People of Western Europe: 1789-1989* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009). 5.

also seemed to accelerate indifference that had been prevalent before the Revolution. By the 1770s and 1780s, in the larger towns, and in some villages and small towns, and in the ports to the south of Paris, half or more of the population failed to do their Easter Duties. Where Catholic weakness can be measured and recognized in 1793, we find advanced dechristianization later in the nineteenth century. A similar trend of low Catholic worship can be found where the Constitutional Church had dominated.⁶⁶

To understand the failure of dechristianization, it has to be admitted that unbelief was born prematurely during the French Revolution. It was hastily conceived in the cradle of war and inhumanely enforced. French Catholic society was not truly prepared to abandon the faith of their ancestors. Unbelief was too radical of a break with the past, and as a movement it led to violent, totalitarian measures, often violating the creeds of the Rights of Man. In the struggle to create a society from scratch in a new, radical way, revolutionaries sought new solutions. Only some of the revolutionaries were materialist atheists; others such as Robespierre had held on to a belief in a higher, universal power. Dechristianization was an attack on intransigent clericalism and conservatism—it was largely political. In part, it represented class revenge on the Old Regime due to the inequality and wealth of the nobility and the Church.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Further, dechristianization was more deist than atheist. Dechristianization was infused with the ideas of the deist Enlightenment and it came with the pretensions of a new, universal religion. McManners notes that:

Almost to a man, they were deists, and the religion they introduced was a national, philanthropic deism. “*Adore un Dieu*,” Voltaire had said in his *Poeme sur la loi naturelle*, “sois juste, et chéris ta Patrie.” From Rousseau, they took the teaching that men can communicate with God without any intermediaries, save the inspiration of the majestic fecundity and beauty of Nature. Rejecting the Christian idea of original sin, they believed in the God-given search for happiness here on earth. The State itself was founded on this basic principle of our existence. “All men,” said the Declaration of Rights, “have an invincible inclination towards the search for happiness; to achieve it by their united efforts they formed into societies and established governments.”⁶⁷

The attempts to create new cults to replace Christianity demonstrate the reluctance to let go of the trappings of religion and its functional role of uniting people as a social unit. Since the powers of Catholicism did not provide ideological support for the Revolution, solutions had to be sought elsewhere. Due largely to the Oath, French Catholicism had made itself incompatible with liberal democracy and held on to pre-Revolutionary ideas, so people rejected it. It would remain conservative. Rather than the revolutionary idea that society was a social contract, traditional legitimacy rested within small elite groups at the highest echelons of society, and it was even better if they were related to old nobility. An uncomfortable, nagging concern remained between the Church and liberal democracy. Unbelief emerged among the faithful by an internal, individualistic conflict of personal moral

⁶⁷ McManners, *The French Revolution and the Church*, 77-78.

autonomy in a liberal defined self versus that of obedient, Catholic humility embedded in a hierarchical authority structure. Catholicism had tied Christianity to a political ideology that it would not attempt to escape until Leo XIII issued *Rerum Novarum* in the 1890s, which permitted Catholics to embrace alternative political orientations. Republicanism and Catholicism had become two incompatible ideologies, which delegitimized Catholic authority. With the loss of respect for Catholic authority, religious beliefs could be redefined. Without a divine order, everything could be rewritten.

French revolutionaries sought a new way to bind citizens to the state. Not yet having secular education to teach the universal values of the republic, they sought to create it through social and religious rituals. The revolutionary cults were created with the hopes of regenerating society and replacing Catholicism, which had become intransigent and antirevolutionary. Inspired by Rousseau's idea of promoting a civic religion, the Hébertists, as they became known, sought to transcend the secular and religious divide and to abandon the reliance on Christianity. Rousseau had described a civic religion that affirmed the existence of God, the afterlife, and the moral duty to God. Thus, in this scheme of things, people would be bound to both the temporal and spiritual goals of society and religion.

The dechristianization phase foreshadows the second half of the nineteenth century. It is possible to argue that the dechristianization phase was no more than an episodic blip in cultural history and to minimize its importance. Indeed, Alfred

Cobban and François Furet, in their revisionist history of the French Revolution, both argue that the Revolution itself had little real lasting impact. However, its lasting impact was perhaps seen more on the mental shape of the nineteenth and twentieth century.

Dechristianization occurred again in later anticlerical struggles in countries such as Spain, Italy, and Russia. In the long view, the struggle against theocratic rule and established Churches in the nineteenth and twentieth century often went hand in hand with modernity (industrialization, liberal democratic revolution, anticlericalism, socialism), although modernity did not preclude religion. Before the Revolution, unbelief previously existed only in the background, undermining the organically entrenched culture of Christianity built up over centuries. However, it is worth noting that what weakened Christianity was more than just unexpected historical events. Numerous historical factors created the conditions for this episode. The true proof is that anticlericalism and unbelief resurfaced again for a brief moment during the 1870 Commune and then in a very significant way at the end of the nineteenth century during the Third Republic.

Unbelief and dechristianization in France were not born from nothing. The emergence of unbelief was not simply a contingency. It represented the social and political struggle of several hundred years of challenging the theocratic rule of an established Church and its claim to be a universal religion.

Early Modern Europe and the origins of unbelief –the Printing Press, the Reformation, Religious Wars, Rationalism and Natural Philosophy

Before the printing press in the sixteenth century, the Church stood at the center of intellectual and village life and significantly impacted the flow of ideas. With the printing press, this relationship greatly weakened. The proliferation of books and pamphlets spread and multiplied the sources of ideas and created more readers. James Turner noted that “The Printing press effectively ended Church regulation of learning.”⁶⁸ For example, Carlos Ginzburg’s work *The Cheese and the Worms* proves how these ideas could reach non-elites and when they did, they began to think more readily for themselves. The focus of his study, the non-elite miller Menocchio, read critical books that led him to various heretical convictions. He went around telling the local townsmen and women that God had been born through natural causes, he denied the immortality and the divinity of Christ, he was critical of the scriptures, and he treated all religions as being equally valid.⁶⁹ Ginzburg's work raises the question of just how many other Menocchio’s there had been. In another telling study, Robert Darnton noted in *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (1995) that the most widely read books had not been the works of the philosophes, but by popular writers. It was not the great elite intellectuals that people were reading but the popular works, entirely forgotten today, that disseminated radical ideas to the larger

⁶⁸ Thomas Bender, *Without God, without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore; London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 8-12.

⁶⁹ Carloz Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms* (John Hopkins Univ Press, 1980).

public. Darnton's larger contribution to the historiography of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution was that in previous histories of the French Revolution, the 'aristocratic revolt' against the monarchy was the typical narrative for the impetus of the Revolution, while Darnton argued that there was a popular revolt from below. Thus, literacy and the printing press produced a market for popular pamphlets that sometimes ridiculed the Church and the King. Further literacy and the printing press played a significant role in undermining authority and consequently the social order.⁷⁰

Wealth and trade also increased the number of world travelers. In the book *The European Mind (1935)*, Hazard suggests that Europe underwent two significant changes before the turn of the 18th century. First, he argues that culture and wealth moved from southern Europe and the Mediterranean to northern Europe and the Atlantic. The new wealth in Northern Europe created the foundations of a commercial society: the emergence of joint-stock companies, banks, and stock exchanges augmented the number of institutions where the Church held little to no authority and which came to increasingly absorb the energies of men and women. Second, the New World and global exploration opened Europe to new ideas and cultures inspired by travel literature, which influenced thinkers such as Montesquieu (*Persian Letters*) to question the truth of religious claims. Europe experienced what amounted to a sea change. This change occurred notably through such thinkers as Pierre Bayle, Bernard de Fontenelle, Richard Simon, Montesquieu and growing numbers of articulate,

⁷⁰ Kingsley Martin, *The Rise of French Liberal Thought* (New York: New York Univ Press, 1956).

sophisticated deists who looked to make sense of the religious diversity of the world. Rather than seeing that God had neglected all the people outside of the Middle East, deists believed that God made himself known universally across the world through reason and the examination of His creation, nature.

In terms of politics, established Churches went into political decline during the Early Modern period. Europe did not end up in theocratic states; it ended up with powerful monarchs such as Henry the VIII of England and Francis I of France, who undermined the power of the Church. Religion was subordinated to the state; while state Churches remained the rule, Church power became increasingly excluded from legal and political power. Additionally, the power of religion spent itself in the wars of religion that created the conditions to make the secular state essential, although it advanced haphazardly. Charles Taylor suggests the term secularism is widely mischaracterized regarding its origins; secularism is not the relationship between the state and religion but the result of a democratic society coping with religious diversity. Secularism was adopted to protect certain groups.⁷¹ Thus, the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century played a key role in nurturing toleration, which would later give unbelief the space to grow until it would allow non-Christians deists such as Voltaire to carry on a life-long crusade against Catholicism.

The Reformation did untold damage to the influence that Christianity held, for it not only paved the way to religious toleration and freedom but also created an

⁷¹ Charles Taylor, "The Meaning of Secularism," *The Hedgehog Review*, vol. 12, no. 3 (Fall 2010).

internecine struggle within Christianity that undermined its social and intellectual integrity. Keith Thomas' work *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1976) describes how the reforming tendencies within Christianity proved to be a key catalyst for its transformation and decline. The Protestant Reformation deserves credit for redefining "religion" from a mode of life and a practice to a belief.⁷² After this, it became important to ask "what do you believe?" instead of "how are you a Christian?" This shift flaunted personal opinion and inquiry in the face of authority. But more importantly, religious thinkers led the way to disenchantment. The Early Modern period was when the fabric of reality, filled with the voices and ghosts of the supernatural began to disappear before the onslaught of sober religious radicals and religious skeptics. In the Middle Ages church bells rang to ward off the evil spirits who caused thunder and lightning, miracles at holy shrines never ceased to be reported in Catholic regions, and people sought to supplicate themselves before Saints to cure diseases. Magic and superstition had once freely mixed. The Lateran Council of 1215 ruled that the Eucharist and the holy oil had to be locked up or they would be stolen for their magic powers. Processions were formed in towns to ward off the plague, bad weather, and the mysterious shadows that played between the fears of illness and misfortune.⁷³ Protestant sects called many accepted practices of Catholics superstitious or superfluous, undermining the credibility of Catholics and ultimately a broad spectrum of Christian doctrine. When Protestants tried to look for authentic

⁷² Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Scribners, 1971).

⁷³ Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 25-50.

Christianity, they developed a rationalizing tendency to strip away all the unessential or unsupported additions added over a millennium of tradition. Looking for the true Christianity would also inspire an evaluation of the Bible and its place in history.

During the Reformation, Protestantism spread in France, particularly in the southwest parts in Bordeaux, La Rochelle, and in the Cevennes in the southeastern part of the Massif Central. Its emergence resulted in violent opposition from Catholics during the Counter-Reformation, leading to vicious and bloody conflicts over several decades during the reigns of Charles IX, Henri III, and Henri IV. The massacre of Protestants on Saint-Barthelemy Day in 1572 remains a tragic and horrific symbol of the internecine struggle. When Henri IV converted from Protestantism to Catholicism, the conflict was temporarily subdued with the Edict of Nantes, a policy of toleration. Notable for the history of unbelief, during this period, writers took skeptical positions to religion, Michel de Montaigne being the prominent example. Montaigne was a Catholic of probably Jewish origin, and maybe a deist. His famous “Que sais-je?” became a humanist motto. Later with the rule of Cardinal Richelieu and Louis XIII, the crown reneged on the Treaty of Nantes and besieged the independent Protestant city of La Rochelle because it had allied with Charles I of England. Toleration ended with Louis XIV: the Sun King officially abolished the Treaty of Nantes and caused the exodus of many Protestants out of France in 1685. All the religious bigotry and violence discouraged religious zealotry and cast skepticism on religious claims. Unbelief found its first home discretely among the libertines: Theophile de Viau, Cyrano de Bergerac, Scarron, and others were a small

group of independent thinkers. They criticized Catholic dogma, rejected clerical authority, and pointed out the hypocritical intolerance among priests.

In the Early Modern period, a strain of thought developed within philosophy that was independent of Church authority. Critics of the period often called it rationalism, and they believed it was the height of hubris to make claims about the nature of reality based on reasoning outside of God's revelation. Rationalism appealed to reason as the highest authority and thus always played a subversive role. René Descartes is often considered to be the founder of modern philosophy and the beginning of the rationalist tradition for his attempt at breaking with the past and using reason alone to seek the truth. Before Descartes, universities traditionally focused on theology, law, and medicine. After Descartes, philosophy became an important discipline. By the definition of Anselm in the 11th century, theology was the pursuit of faith trying to understand the world within the tradition of revelation and scripture. Descartes rejected this method and sought to understand the world outside of religious authority through reason, which could be shared and known universally. Indeed, he trusted in reason so much, his proofs for the existence of God made no use of religious faith. Instead of depending on faith, he used philosophy as a new and independent form of inquiry to seek a foundation for all of human knowledge. And in constructing a theory on the mechanical function of nature through analyzing its physical components, Descartes displaced the divine within intellectual inquiry. Thus, Descartes had begun the project of constructing a new way of knowing the world, which famously started with his radical doubt of everything

but his own thoughts.⁷⁴ According to the historian Lucien Febvre, the result of Descartes' ideas was the beginning of the modern mind.

The importance of Descartes in breaking with the Christian tradition has attained some consensus. This thesis is supported by two Catholic scholars, Cornelio Fabro in his work *God in Exile: Modern Atheism* and by Michael Buckley at the *Origins of Modern Atheism*. This is also supported by Gavin Hyman in *A Short History of Atheism* and in older works such as Paul Hazards *The European Mind 1680-1715* (1935), and Basil Wiley's *Seventeenth Century Background* (1934). They see the reliance on reason, philosophy, and science promoted by Descartes as a method that caused Catholic theologians to shut out or severely minimize religious experience or the transcendent from inquiry. Any reference to the transcendent became a distortion and a misunderstanding. Descartes' rationalism heralded the beginning of the mechanical-materialistic philosophy. The historian Lucien Febvre said it was worth remembering that "Meslier, Diderot, d'Holbach and La Mettrie himself claim to derive their atheistic materialism directly from Descartes."⁷⁵

Independent rationalism, dissatisfaction with religious strife, and intellectual liberty led to the reformulation of humanity's relation to God. It inspired a renaissance in philosophy and learning that grew outside the control of Christianity.

⁷⁴ Tyler Roberts ThD, *Skeptics and Believers: Religious Debate in the Western Intellectual Tradition*, produced by The Teaching Company 2009, lectures 4 & 5.

⁷⁵ Cornelio Fabro, translated by Arhtur Gibson, *God in Exile Modern Atheism: A study of the Internal Dynamic of Modern Athiesm, from its Roots in the Cartesian Cogito to the Present Day* (New York: Newman Press, 1964), 365.

Ernst Cassirer's work *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (1933) sees the period of the Enlightenment as a cultural turn. Cassirer argues that "The various fields of knowledge—natural science, history, law, politics, art—gradually withdraw from the domination and tutelage of traditional metaphysics and theology. They no longer look to God for their justification."⁷⁶ Peter Gay added the interesting addition that modern thought was able to break with Christianity because Western scholars read and valorized the literature of pagan antiquity. *The Rise of Modern Paganism* (1966) claims that the eighteenth century in France represented a bridge over Christianity to the classical world. Bypassing religious thought, *philosophes* used the ancients as ammunition against traditional Christian society. In western society, the classics of antiquity and the Bible offer two very different traditions (causing some historians to refer to Christianity as an Eastern influence on the West).

The independence of philosophical and religious thought represented the attenuated state of religious belief that emerged from the growth of science and doctrinal disputes: deism and fideism. Fideism, the belief "that faith is in some sense independent of, if not outright adversarial toward, reason," expressed religious agnosticism that doubted the ability of reason to settle religious questions.⁷⁷ Most prominent among them was Blaise Pascal and Pierre Bayle. Bayle's critique of custom and superstition was a role model for Voltaire and his dictionary the model

⁷⁶ Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton Univ Press, 2009), 159.

⁷⁷ Amesbury, Richard. "Fideism." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2017. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2017.

for Diderot's Encyclopedia. Bayle was born in Toulouse in 1647. His father was a minister in the Reformed Church; however, after a brief stay in the Reformed Academy of Puylaurens in 1669, he converted to Catholicism. After balking under the authoritarian teachings of the Jesuits, he reverted to Protestantism. Outside of France, Bayle became an expatriate anti-Catholic voice. He published an influential monthly journal, *Nouvelles de la Republique des Lettres* that many Catholics denounced. His greatest work was his *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique*. In this work, he examines the problem of theodicy with the intent to undermine the dogmatic claims of all metaphysical systems. He attacked the Cartesian system of self-evident, clear and distinct ideas but also Christian dogmatics, aiming his pen at the problems of the Trinity, the immortality of the soul, and transubstantiation. Both Pascal and Bayle blend into a tradition that could also rightly be called skepticism (a brand of rationalism really).

More important than fideism was deism. The freethinker and historian Leslie Stephen charted the trajectory of deism in England in his book the *English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (1902). He argues that the rationalist tradition of Descartes and Spinoza led to religious controversy, redefinition, then the birth of deism. Deism provided a key step toward unbelief because it removed religious authority and doctrine and held reason as the sole authority. Many of the influential thinkers of the Enlightenment were deists, which was partly from disgust of the disputes over religion in the conflicts leading up to and culminating in the Thirty Years War that ended in 1648. Deism kept the major insights of a monotheistic God without the

doctrinal complications. It was articulated most fully in England with Edward Herbert of Cherbury, John Toland, and Lord Shaftesbury. It emerged partly out of the attempt to make a “reasonable Christianity.” However, a significant byproduct was to question the status and authority of the Bible.⁷⁸ Deism emerged in England and spread to France after Voltaire’s exile in England. Deists were sometimes called naturalists and promoters of natural religion versus supernatural religion (the term “naturalist” subsequently became synonymous with “rationalist,” and the term “freethinker” was first associated with Anthony Collins 1763 work *Discourse of Freethinking*). Fabro maintains that “Deism came to represent one of the most striking stages of the breakdown of theology and the consolidation of atheism in the modern age.”⁷⁹ It is worth noting, however, that Fabro conflates deism with atheism (anyone not Christian wandered into atheism in this view).

An example of the importance of deism and the spread of unbelief can be seen in the life of Denis Diderot. Diderot’s deism was held together tenuously by a science-based worldview. He believed that God’s providence was expressed through the “purposiveness” of nature. He understood God by studying his works. However, the problem of evil in the world undermined his deism, which was the same weak spot that the skeptic David Hume later leveled against deism. Having already rejected Christian thought, he was unwilling to accept classical Christian and mystical thought. To understand God only through reason, Diderot felt reason could not

⁷⁸ Dorinda Outram, *The Enlightenment* (Cambridge [u.a.: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 118.

⁷⁹ Fabro, *God in Exile*, 323.

reconcile God's impotence in the face of evil and suffering in the world. Instead, Diderot ended up interpreting the world entirely by the materialistic viewpoint of deism but dropped God from the picture. Humanity is in control of its moral life. Combining the rationalist ideas of Descartes and Spinoza with the empirical ideas of Bacon and Locke, Diderot embraced a wholly materialistic worldview. He also adopted parts of Leibniz and his metaphysics that united the cosmos through forces and processes identified through individual monads. This helped Diderot embrace a dynamic and vitalistic view of nature, one that he believed could change and even evolve. He flirted with ideas of biological evolution, but he could not prove them.⁸⁰

In France, Voltaire was the most famous Deist among the philosophes. He eschewed Christianity and wanted a religion of God and reason. The argument from design had persuaded him of the existence of an all-powerful designer. In the *Dictionnaire philosophique* Voltaire would say in the entry "Faith" that it is evident there is a "necessary, eternal, supreme, intelligent being." Indeed, Voltaire cynically believed that the idea of a supreme being was required to maintain the social order. When Voltaire attacked religion, he was not supporting atheism, although he is perhaps remembered this way today. He believed God was necessary for morality and to explain the occurrence of the universe. Nevertheless, his views of God seemed to become more and more pessimistic, hence his popular work *Candide* that listed one

⁸⁰ Ibid., 398-411.

hardship or catastrophe after another to his protagonists, wishing to show the absence of divine intervention and the prevalence of injustice in the world.

In the eighteenth century, if fideism and deism had been an intermediate step to unbelief, the materialist turn represented the last. Materialism was aided by the genius of scientists, especially Isaac Newton, who was a devout Christian. His publication of *Principia* in 1687 helped solidify the foundations of a new outlook on life through the scientific method that used mathematics to explain motion and mechanics. Newton's theory of gravity said that every body in the universe attracts every other body in the universe. He did not ask why it was the case but rather sought to describe observable phenomena. Importantly, he backed his claims through mathematical proofs or demonstrations. His claim that bodies attracted one another was counter-intuitive, and therefore intellectually shocking and exciting, and the math made it undeniably persuasive. His creation of calculus to describe the motion of the planets created a sensation that took two hundred years to work out. Newton through his theory of gravitation claimed to "demonstrate the frame of the System of the World."⁸¹ And when he said world, he meant universe. Thus, through human reason, math, and an examination of the physical world Newton had enlightened all of humanity about the nature of the universe. This was a great impetus to science and materialism.

⁸¹ As cited in John P McKay, *A History of World Societies. Vol. c, Vol. C*, (Boston, Mass.; Palgrave [distributor: Basingstoke : Bedford/St. Martins, 2012). 599.

The problem with materialism was how implausible the idea of biological evolution seemed. It was an idea that went as far back as ancient Greece. Darwin was indeed one of the most significant contributors to the popularity and persuasiveness of unbelief, providing an evidence-based argument for an idea that had before seemed like speculation without real substance. However, before Darwin, developments in science in the 1740s had made the conditions for materialism more plausible. In 1740, Abraham Tremblay, a Genevan employed as a tutor in Holland, noticed that a freshwater polyp, a plant known as a Hydra behaved more like an animal than a plant—it moved, and it was sensitive to movement. Further, it possessed the power of regeneration. If it were cut, it would grow back, and the dismembered parts became autonomous animals of their own. Tremblay put the little polyps in 50 jars and packed them off to scientists across Europe. The humble polyp cast doubt towards a separate creation, and it caused some scientists to speculate the possibility of change across species, calling it “transformism.” For some it suggested self-creation. In 1748, Benoit de Maillet’s publication *Telliamed, or Conversations between an Indian philosopher and a French Missionary on the Diminution of the Sea*, sought to explain fossils that were found at high altitudes by arguing that the earth was two billion years old, much older than the thousands of years suggested by Biblical scholars. De Maillet also speculated that the earth had been formed by chance and not by design and that all animals, humans included, had developed from primitive sea creatures. More, in 1748 Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte Buffon, published *Histoire naturelle*, the first of 36 volumes he wrote over a forty-year period. Buffon drew on his research

of microscopic observations of seminal fluids, which convinced him that living and inanimate matter were separated only by degrees of being and that life was a property of matter.⁸² With such evidence, scientists searched to explain life with the materialist explanations and the methods at their disposal--and it must have been very tempting to play with the deepest questions of existence that culminated in the grandiose statement of Darwin in his magnum opus, *The Origin of Species* (1859) (who makes an association of his own theory with that of Newton's):

Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.

In the history of unbelief, there was before Darwin and after Darwin. Before Darwin unbelief attacked the incoherent messages of religion and the Bible; after Darwin materialism provided a compelling godless account of human history that was based on the use of rationalism and empirical facts that could be debated and demonstrably proven. Religion would have to change and adapt in confronting the newly fortified and intellectually powerful arguments of materialism.

It was clear to all that science challenged or problematized several key claims of the Judeo-Christian story. In 1830 Lyell published *The Principles of Geology* that claimed the Earth was much older than the 6,000 years given by Ussher's chronology

⁸² Nick Spencer, *Atheists: The Origin of the Species* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 98-103.

based on the Bible. And of course, in 1859, Darwin's *Origin of Species* challenged the moral order of the organic universe. Roman Catholics used to believe that humanity and the rest of the animals existed on different moral planes from higher to lower forms of life. Darwin explained the mechanism of how humans developed from the same place as the field mouse. People could no longer interpret the Bible literally without being laughed at as an antiquated relic of a bygone age. However, this was a slow process in the nineteenth century. As late as 1869, literalists of Biblical interpretation such as Christopher Wordsworth in England tried to make sense of the truth of Jonah being swallowed by a whale, which he justified by noting that Jesus referred to it in the Gospels in Mathew 12:40. Similarly, in an effort to make sense of the new scientific information, Wordsworth argued that before the seven days of creation by God, the earth had existed but without form and void.

Paoli Rossi in *The Dark Abyss of Time* (1979) recounts how traditional religious ideas beginning with the Englishman Robert Boyle (1621-1691) were redefined by the natural philosophers (the scientists). Rossi contends that people like Boyle redefined the "Cosmos" into a "universe" of infinite time and space that in terms of human perspective provided a second Copernican Revolution. Deep time cast human consciousness into a "dark abyss" that no longer provided a meaningful foundation to human history—a re-centering with no center. The immensity of time without humanity was unfathomable and incomprehensible and thinking about it served only to alienate. The role of science thus conceived consistently and repeatedly displaced humanity. No longer was Earth at the center of the universe, and

neither was humanity at the center of creation according to Darwin's theory of evolution. The very size and age of the universe boggles the mind and renders humanity into an invisible, silent blip in the great mystery of the universe.

At the same time that the theory of deistic materialism gained traction among a few elites, the first fully articulated theory of atheist materialism appeared in France from a covert manuscript by Abbé Meslier in 1729. Meslier presented materialism as the replacement of a supernatural beginning or force in the universe. He presented his arguments using Cartesian logic, but rather than prove God's existence, *he used the method of Descartes* to prove the truth of materialism. This work would be passed among the Enlightenment philosophes, but it was Voltaire who aided in the manuscripts distribution. However, Voltaire detested atheism, so he removed the atheist arguments while keeping the harsh anticlerical attacks on the Church. His clandestine and illegal version had become so popular that in 1748, La Mettrie said from Berlin that Frederick II had a copy in his library.

Notably, Meslier did not use theories of science to come to his conclusions. Alan Kors in his work *Atheism in France 1650-1729* (1990) situates the emergence of modern atheism resolutely on the shoulders of Christian theologians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Kors book seeks to explain how the "boundless theistic confidence" and the "utter unthinkability of atheism" was undermined by a process that God's philosophical defenders had constructed.⁸³ Kors boldly argues that atheism

⁸³ Alan Kors, *Atheism in France, 1650-1729, Volume I: The Orthodox Sources of Disbelief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), iv.

did not emerge from the traditions of freethought but from the internal debates of the French theistic community that sought to ridicule it. In their efforts to refute the best and most powerful arguments for atheism, they expounded atheist arguments and an atheist worldview, pushing it into intellectual life. In the scholastic debates, theologians were divided between the use of Aristotle and Descartes. Aristotelians accused Cartesians of removing Providence from natural philosophy by emphasizing the laws of mechanics and giving matter the power of motion. One had no need of God they argued. Conversely, the Cartesians accused the Aristotelians of logically leading to categorical naturalism. Because the Aristotelians conceived of matter with forms and faculties, capable of acting with regularity, such that there was no incompatibility with matter and no need of creation if one assumed that the forms were eternal. These debates popularized atheistic arguments that persuaded Meslier of the truth of atheism and the falsehood of Christianity. Atheism now had a voice, albeit a small one spreading amongst the elites that trickled down through popular pamphlets.

Alan Kors concludes that “Full blown and systematic atheism may have been a minor stream of Enlightenment thought, but its appearance changed the future of European thinking.”⁸⁴ After Meslier, atheism and unbelief would spread clandestinely through Europe. Between 1700 and 1750 thousands of manuscripts ranging from small pamphlets to long treaties on materialism circulated the black market such as

⁸⁴ Alan Kors, “The Age of Enlightenment,” in Stephen Bullivant and Lois Lee, *A Dictionary of Atheism* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 201.

the *Three Imposters*, *Nouvelles Libertés de penser* (1743), and *L'Histoire naturelle de l'ame* (1745). Many of the books leaked in from the Netherlands. The researcher Miguel Benitez uncovered 130 titles presently in the major libraries of France. Robert Darnton has shown in *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (1995) that there was a whole market for less well-known works where materialist and atheist ideas were disseminated.

Now that atheism had found its avatar it began to spread. Unbelief made its home in the salon of Paul Heinrich Dietrich, called Baron D'Holbach, who had been raised in Paris and attended Leiden University in the Netherlands from 1744 to 1748, the leading center for European education. Having inherited an annual income of 60,000 livres from the family coffers, he was able to finance an indulgent lifestyle that allowed him to pursue a political and intellectual life. His salon was a central meeting point during the height of eighteenth-century radical Enlightenment culture. D'Holbach was a gentlemanly provider for the dinner parties. His work, on the other hand, was done privately. He wrote in nearly complete anonymity, his most famous atheistic works being *Système de la nature* in 1770, *Le Bon-sens* in 1772, and *La morale Universelle* in 1776. It was also D'Holbach who would republish Meslier's *Testament* and reinsert that atheist chapters that Voltaire had omitted. Diderot was a regular member of his salon, along with Jean-Baptiste le Rond D'Alembert, Jean-Jacque Rousseau, Friedrich Melchior, Baron von Grimm, Georges-Louis Leclerc, the defrocked priest Guillaume Thomas Raynal, Marquis de Condorcet, the philosopher

Etienne Bonnot de Condillac, and many others who passed through such as Cesare Beccaria, Adam Smith, and David Hume.

Meslier's *Testament* and Baron d'Holbach's *Systeme de la nature* advocated unequivocal and programmatic atheism that provided a new and startling world for French and European readers. They defended the idea that human beings were entirely corporeal in nature and maintained that matter in particular arrangements permitted self-reflection and thought. The behavior of people, their will, and their deliberations were an effect of the movement and organization of matter that predisposed them to seek pleasurable experience and avoid painful experience. Materialist theorists tried to free people from false notions that prevented them from achieving a better life. Thus, religion ethically needed to be resisted because it supported false ideas that had become an obstacle to human fulfillment. The idea of God was an obstacle to discovering the real laws of nature that needed to be harnessed for the greater good of humanity. The French philosophes, D'Holbach, Meslier, and Naigeon wanted to increase human happiness and minimize suffering.⁸⁵ It is not a coincidence that Jeremy Bentham's theory of utilitarianism was theorized around the same time. He too was an unbeliever. The original ideas in support of atheistic materialism were never simply about proving an idea wrong but were tied to a moral agenda that sought to reevaluate the human condition and traditional values.

Alan Kors concludes that:

⁸⁵ Alan Kors, "The Age of Enlightenment", 203.

By the end of the Eighteenth century, in France above all, the potential atheistic naturalism of such deeds was actualized in the speculative thought of Holbach, Naigeon, and Diderot. Quantitatively, atheism remained a minor current until Darwinism. Qualitatively, it marked a remarkable moment in the history of Christian Europe.⁸⁶

Organized Unbelief: the beginning of Freethought Groups

Just as during the French Revolution, politics would cause the Holy See to take a harder line because of the 1848 Revolutions. Indeed, 1848 would mark a turning point in the religious history of modern Europe: Protestants, Catholics, and the Pope all had to choose their allegiance, and their choice would shape relations between church and state years after. Politically, the 1848 Revolution failed everywhere it broke out. Louis Napoleon effectively ended the French Second Republic after staging a coup d'état in 1851 and creating the 2nd Empire in 1851 that lasted until 1870 with the defeat to the Prussians. In the early stages of the 1848 revolution members of the clergy sympathized with liberal reform and there was little hint of militant anti-clericalism in France. However, the violence that erupted during the "June Days" in '48 moved the clergy more clearly to the right. Further, in Rome, the Italian revolutionaries had occupied the city and caused the Pope to flee. After these disturbances, the clergy voted on the side of the Party of Order that allied the White Legitimists and Blue Republicans moderates against the radical Republican Reds. The Party of Order claimed to defend "religion, the family, work, and

⁸⁶ Alan Kors, "The Age of Enlightenment", 209.

property” and they argued that if the Reds won, it would be a return to the Terror of 1793. The priests that had stood with the Reds became an isolated wing. When Napoleon III staged his coup on the Second of December 1851, the clergy gave it their approval, which marked the definitive break of Catholicism with democratic republican values due to the treatment of the Left opposition. The new authoritarian state arrested politicians, forced its worst enemies to flee into exile, and transported insurgents to the south. When many of the Catholic Bishops supported the coup, such as when the Archbishop of Paris held a Te Deum in Notre Dame to show his support, the fault line between the Republicans and the Right widened.

The turn to the right by the clergy resulted in the growth of anticlericalism. From late 1849 the republican paper *L'electeur du Tarn* began to critique the clergy with increasing frequency and by 1850, it labeled the Catholic party a dangerous political force, although there were sympathetic Republican priests who represented the “true” Catholicism. Some Republicans began to openly reject the Catholic faith indicated by the “civic” funerals among French political exiles in Brussels in the 1850s. Proudhon complained that “the tyranny of priests” worsened and “their avowed plan is to kill science, to snuff out all liberty and all enlightenment. Their anger increases in proportion to their power.”⁸⁷

After the Pope witnessed the republicans take Rome he lost his sympathy with republican reforms. The Syllabus of Errors in 1864 represented the clearest and most

⁸⁷ As cited in Theodore Zeldin, *A History of French Passions 1848-1945, Ambition, Love and Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 1026.

straightforward sign of division between modernity and the Church. The Pope stated openly his refusal to reconcile Catholicism with “progress, liberalism, and modern civilization.” The Duc de Broglie responded, “In this enigmatic form, it seemed to embrace in the same condemnation the press, the railways, telegraphs, the discoveries of science... While believers were lost and baffled, the unbelievers raised a tremendous shout of triumph.” The decree in its context was really a rejection of the secularizing trends in the Piedmontese educational system. However, no one remembers that. On top of this was the decree from the infallibility of the Pope in 1870, which clearly rejected the freedom of inquiry and democratic, egalitarian values. The declaration of infallibility was used to send a message about the central importance of hierarchy and authority within Catholicism. Consequently, in France, when Napoleon III lifted censorship in 1867, there was an outpouring of anticlerical sentiment that included Protestants, “spiritualists,” and unbelievers who railed against the Pope’s conservative position. McLeod argues that religion provided the identifying factor for politics going into the Third Republic:

Under the Third Republic, religion would constitute the most fundamental line of division between Left and Right, not only because of the very different religious policies favored by the two sides, but also because of a difference of language. While the Left justified its policies in purely secular terms (admittedly often enlivened by anticlerical rhetoric), the Right readily used religious language, and justified its policies by reference to the teachings of the Church.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Hugh McLeod, *Secularisation in Western Europe, 1848-1914* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 43.

Anticlericalism provided the energy for a two-party system that helped the Assembly form alliances and created political wedge issues to rally their supporters.⁸⁹ It was too useful to ignore in French politics.

Anticlericals were not by definition unbelievers; they were against clericalism and the established Church. Anticlericalism was a political response and protest of political Catholicism. However, Protestants, Jews, freethinkers, Freemasons, liberals, and socialists could all unite around anticlericalism to thwart the universal claims of the Catholic Church. They united to fight against their common enemy. The masses adopted anticlericalism because they did not want religion to interfere in their lives; however, the leaders of anticlerical were strict and disciplined and did not favor the materialist theories or hedonism associated with their bedfellows.⁹⁰ *Here one can see the undeniable link between politics and the growth of unbelief.* Unbelief grew to challenge theocracy and fight for the *freedom from religion*. Because the Church was in power and embedded in French cultural life, anticlerical and freethought were driven to wage an illiberal, aggressive campaign to overturn Catholic power and reduce religious manifestations into the private sphere.⁹¹ One of the major outcomes

⁸⁹ Zeldin, *A History of French Passions 1848-1945, Ambition, Love and Politics* Ambition, Love and Politics, 1027.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 1030.

⁹¹ The effects of this struggle can be seen today. Americans will often express their religious beliefs the first time you meet them, but French men and women intentionally avoid the subject of their religious convictions because it is considered a private issue. French men and women are generally shocked by the public displays of religion in American daily life.

of anticlericalism was to spark the organization of freethought groups that were militantly irreligious.

Freethought groups mark the mature growth of unbelief in French political and cultural life. At the Congress of Paris in 1889, freethinkers declared that “Freethought has been and always will be the emancipation of the human mind.”⁹²

Article 2 of a freethought group in Paris made clear their irreligious character:

It [the great Association française de libres penseurs] reclaims education [...] exclusively secular et materialist [...] we consider that the idea of God is the source of the support of despotism and inequity; we consider that the Catholic religion is the personification of the most complete and the most terrible aspect of this social ill; the Association de libres penseurs de Paris works for the prompt and radical abolition of Catholicism and pursues its annihilation by all the means compatible with justice. We hold that the use of revolutionary means is a right of legitimate defense due to current conditions.⁹³

This aggressive language demonstrates the militant, intolerant, and illiberal aspect of the first freethought groups that saw themselves in a cultural war. Freethought groups were collections of politically concerned unbelievers who wished not only to remove Catholicism from the public space but also to refute, combat, and put an end to Christianity, something they thought would eventually disappear. They saw themselves as crusaders of the truth who needed to free people from their illusions and errors. Some freethinkers only wished to remove religion from the public space,

⁹² As cited by Pierre Lévêque, “Libre Pensée et Socialisme (1889-1939) Quelques Points de Repère,” *Le Mouvement Social*, no. 57 (1966): 101–41, 109.

⁹³ As cited by, Lalouette, *La Libre pensée en France*, 39.

but others wished to see the ideas of God refuted and tossed into the dustbin of history.

Jules Simon had the honor of starting the first freethought organization in France in 1848. He was not an atheist but a spiritualist and deist. A little-known group was founded by Paul Broca, a young medical doctor with deep republican convictions. He started the “Club de la Cité” in 1848 that held public meetings. Joseph Noulens in Meulan founded a society also in 1849. The groups formed in 1848 did not last long after the rise of Napoleon III. Two other freethought societies were created during the Second Empire. At first, the freethought organizations had few principle functions: they mostly sponsored public talks and provided secular funeral ceremonies. Unbelievers in Belgium opened the next freethought society in 1863, *La Libre pensée*, who stood for the emancipation of the conscience, the need for secular education, civil burials, and birth and marriage ceremonies.⁹⁴

Freethought groups only really emerged in force once the laws forbidding association were removed. In the latter part of his reign, Napoleon III wanted to have a liberal empire and allowed for the freedom of association. Immediately freethought groups reformed in the 1860s during this period of general liberalization. Freethinkers created four journals: *La Libre Pensée* (1866), *La Pensée nouvelle* (1867-1869), a second *Libre Pensée* (1870), *L’Athée* (1870). They spread their message through brochures, tracts, public conferences, large organizational meetings, articles in the

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

press, and also in literature (see Henri Rochefort, Marie-Louise Gagneur, Hector France). While science was part of their platform, the literature focused more on republican values, attacking members of the clergy, and the separation of church and state.⁹⁵

With the fall of the Second Empire, there was a proliferation of Freethought groups throughout France. They formed most rapidly after 1880 and up until the war in 1914. They were predominantly male, with men accounting for 92% of their members. Most members were between 30 and 50 years of age. Few women participated, who were seen as minors and unduly indoctrinated with religion who needed men to create the conditions for their liberation and emancipation.

In 1884, there were 207 freethought societies represented at a conference in Lyon. Their numbers were small but their gathering represented a general trend. In another meeting, 540 groups registered at a conference by the Federation française de la libre pensée. Yet, they were usually ephemeral organizations, many of the groups had a short lifespan, and new organizations would form in their place. Nonetheless, they did manage to create larger federated groups such as The Federation française de la libre pensée that represented 6,000 to 7,000 members. 1905 was the height of the movement in the prewar period with the creation of L'Association nationale des libres penseurs de France that had 25,000 registered members with the well-known scientist Marcelin Berthelot elected as the first president. Notably, the height of freethought

⁹⁵ Jacqueline Lalouette, *La république anticléricale: XIXe-XXe siècles* (Paris: Seuil, 2002), 229.

groups coincided with the struggle for the separation of the church and state in the first years of 1900.⁹⁶

*The first members of freethought societies were primarily composed of radicals and socialists, a union that portrayed the anticlerical mission and the larger social project of social reform. Organized unbelief aligned itself with the politics from the population that fed its groups, namely the working class. The intellectual emancipation of the worker was seen as directly related to their social, economic, and political emancipation. To achieve their goals one group set five main principles: international peace; national peace; the tools to the worker, the land to the laborer; and the realization of liberty, equality, and fraternity for the triumph of the Republic.*⁹⁷

Secular French nationalism also became a new organizing principle. The rise of freethought societies coincided with the anticlerical political struggle of the Third Republics with the Church over education, the Dreyfus Affair, and then the separation of church and state. The Republican citizens would be French before they were Catholic, a continuation of the First French Republic during the French Revolution. Irreligion coincided and worked with the construction of this new nationalism. They united in agreement to not baptize their children and to live a secular life, finding confidence in their mutual defiance. To solemnize this new set of social orientation,

⁹⁶ Lalouette, *La Libre pensée en France*, 39-67.

⁹⁷ Pierre Lévêque, "Libre Pensée et Socialisme (1889-1939) Quelques Points de Repère," *Le Mouvement Social*, no. 57 (1966): 101-41, 109.

freethinkers created new icons and symbols. Just as Catholicism had saints, freethinkers had their own heroes that they wished to honor with statues and monuments. They had their own martyrs such as Etien Dolet (1509-1546), burned at the stake for heresy in France, La Chevalier de la Barre, executed in France for blasphemy in 1766, Michel Servet, burned alive in Geneva in 1553, and the execution of Francisco Ferrer in Spain, accused of having fomented violent action in Barcelona in 1909. They were the martyrs and saints of freethought, a symbol of the freedom from religion and reminders of the oppression of the Church.

Freethinkers and anticlericals aimed for the secularization of the Third Republic, a fairly forgotten iconoclast movement between the years of 1880 and 1914. The stage was set for conflict after the Left won a majority and controlled the Chamber of Deputies, the Senate, and the President in 1879. Republicans felt particularly threatened by the Catholic schools, which they viewed as leverages of continued power against them. Anticlericals claimed that the Church would use its influence to dominate and control society, eventually subverting democracy into a theocracy. These fear tactics gave wide support for the “laicization” of education, public spaces, and institutions. Laicization provided the insurance that the Republic would survive. In place of religion being taught at the schools, Republicans hoped to replace it with an alternative civic republican education. Félix Pécaut, harking back to 1793, even proposed a lay religion for the state. This was supported by liberal Christians such as Henri Buisson who proposed a Christianity that would be free of dogmas, infallible books, and clerical authority. He had ideas for hymns and

ceremonies that would create a new mystical civic religion. However, this made too many republicans uncomfortable. Instead, they focused on secularizing education to inculcate respect and support of republican government. The fight was led by Jules Ferry, the Minister of Public Education, who hoped to turn education into the centerpiece of society. Lay schools were going to unite Frenchmen and women in patriotism, progress, and democracy. Ferry not only ordered that education be obligatory and free, but he took the clergy out of influential positions in state education and made it a law that only secular, public schools could issue degrees. Up to this time, most girls were taught by nuns in both state and private schools.⁹⁸

Now that monks and nuns could no longer teach in the public schools, the Third Republic laicized other parts of civic life by removing religious observances in public spaces: republicans passed new laws that made it possible to work on Sundays, removed the posts of army and hospital chaplains, gave mayors control over religious processions and city bells, and abolished public prayers. In 1884, divorce was restored to the Civil Code (it had been removed by Louis XVIII in 1816). The greatest public struggle was the removal of state funding for Catholicism that culminated in the great struggle of the separation of church and state. With a majority in the Assembly, in 1901, Emile Combes, the Prime Minister rejected the authorization of all religious orders, turning out 20,000 monks and nuns from their monasteries and nunneries. In 1904 more than 2,500 private teaching establishments

⁹⁸ John McManners, *Church and State in France 1870-1914* (New York: Harper, 1973), 55-64.

were closed in efforts to severely curtail state-funded religious education. Then in 1905, the government passed a law for the separation of church and state and confiscated Church property for the second time in a little over a hundred years. French Catholicism lost half of its priests in the process, and the clergy were removed from the state payrolls.⁹⁹ They now had to find their own funding. Separation was the great achievement of the socialists and radical alliance, but some of the important changes were in the details because the militants sought to remake France cosmetically.

The removal of religious symbols targeted schools, hospitals, and courthouses by official means, decrees, arrests, memoranda or by illegal vandalism and destruction. In some towns, they ordered the retreat or removal of the public presence of the cross or statues, as was done in Carcassonne in 1881, Arles in 1901, Lunel in 1904, Lorient in 1906, Vergongheon in 1908, etc. Destruction and mutilation played a significant role also with sometimes spectacular drama. For example, before the separation, in Montceau-les-Mines in August 1882, minors on strike destroyed six crosses and unsuccessfully tried to dynamite a large cast iron statue of Notre-Dame-des-Mines. Preceding the separation in 1905, the destruction of religious sites multiplied. According to Pierre Vallin, there was so much vandalism, authorities stopped counting the number of knocked over crosses in the region of Combreignac

⁹⁹ Robert Gildea, *Children of the Revolution: The French, 1799–1914* (London: Penguin, 2009), 358–360.

(Haute-Vienne). *Le Semaine du diocese de Paris* counted in 1902 and 1903 the vandalism of 80 crosses, six calvaries, and six statues.¹⁰⁰

Anticlerical fervor easily crossed into illiberalism and intolerance as a point of revenge and justice for having formerly had Catholicism imposed upon them.

Anticlerical governments in small cities made illiberal appeals to forbid by law the right of priests to wear their soutanes in public. This was considered at the highest level too: during the drafting of the Separation Law, in 1905 M. Chabert suggested in the Assembly that priests not be allowed to wear their ecclesiastic costumes outside of their functions. However, the law did not pass, and such laws only occurred in local regions controlled by anticlerical and freethinkers. Public officials also sought to remove the religious symbols from schools, as had been done during the 1870 Commune. The first memorandum that prescribed the secularization of local schools for the Third Republic dates from 1882 and a more firm resolution was passed again the 9th of April 1903, but many of the schools had not applied the laws. A memorandum was sent out again in 1906 with the same requirements. The hospital and the individual rooms at Montpellier and at Rouen were secularized by changing their names and removing all religious symbols. Clerical regions resisted it and acted in anger when the religious signs were taken down, especially in the courts and hospitals. When some jurors had to take the stand and saw no religious symbols present, they would ask that a crucifix be provided so they could swear before it.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Lalouette, *La Libre pensée en France*, 259-332.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 259-332.

All over again, unbelief had become as political as it had in 1793. It just occurred with less violence. By failing to support republicanism, Catholicism engineered its own precipitous decline and encouraged the formation of alternative social groups that would embrace modern, democratic, republican values. Social absorption into freethought appeared to be a result of the democratic, humanist value rallying around anticlericalism. People organized because they had a common cause, whether they were able to recruit and convert others into atheism remains hard to judge. However, freethought groups were based around their shared anticlerical values, but other groups, such as the socialists, would blend in with freethought groups that would eventually absorb and supplant their irreligious mission with an economic and social one.¹⁰² After 1905, the focus of the radical and socialist left moved from attacking the Church to reforming capitalism. Further, a split occurred among freethinkers: radical republican freethinkers would come to see socialism and later communism as a new dogma that violated the chief goals of freethought.¹⁰³ The alliance against God was a purely negative alliance, and once they overcame their common political opponent, socialism began to supplant unbelief as a meaningful social cause.

The social role of freethought was not entirely clear. Indeed, unbelief has never provided a clear political platform among western societies. They were against organized, politicized religion but beyond that, they diverged on opinion. Victor

¹⁰² Pierre Lévêque, "Libre Pensée et Socialisme (1889-1939) Quelques Points de Repère," 101–41.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 102-109.

Charbonnel, a prominent freethinker, declared that the politics of freethought were socialist. He said they must build a republic of progress and regeneration that continued the work of the 1789 Revolution.¹⁰⁴ The June 30, 1902, issue of the Freethought journal, *La Raison* said that “There are no opponents on the Left. The socialists will teach, stimulate, lead, and succeed.” The values of socialism slowly grew to be the unifying principle that would render the irreligious components secondary and even impractical.¹⁰⁵ The socialist and working-class nature of the freethinkers and socialists caused them to resent the participation and influence of the middle class. In 1908, at a departmental conference of Freethought in 1908, one member accused the “bourgeois” freethinkers of too readily sacrificing the ideals of freethought to their interests. The group L’Avant Garde of Poinçles-Larrey thought middle-class members needed to undergo a special examination to test them for their sincerity because he said: “one cannot be a freethinker without being a socialist.”¹⁰⁶

One of the problems was that socialists needed the support of Catholics and non-Catholics alike. In 1912, *La Raison* claimed that socialists should appease Catholics by abandoning their anticlerical agenda and suggested accepting the liberty to teach for Catholics, proportional representation, and marginalization of the Freemasons from the party.¹⁰⁷ Such statements caused a kneejerk reaction among freethinkers who responded by making efforts to take back the direction and purpose

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹⁰⁶ As cited in, “Libre Pensée et Socialisme (1889-1939) Quelques Points de Repère,” 114.

¹⁰⁷ *La Raison*, Février 1912.

of the freethought movement. In 1912 at a meeting of the National and International Federation of Freethought, representatives declared a return to a focus on the struggle against religion.¹⁰⁸ After 1912, freethought groups changed their focus away from socialist programs, partly because many of the prominent leaders of the freethought groups were from the middle class. The non-socialist freethinkers sought to reaffirm their irreligious mission. The Secretary of the International Federation of Freethought, Eugène Hins said that certain French groups had “turned Freethought away from its true role and to have scattered and wasted its efforts in throwing it into pacifism and socialism.”¹⁰⁹

There were other factors that accounted for the decline of freethought. Other groups had emerged to absorb the liberal and individualistic values of unbelief outside of freethought. For those in the middle class, the Freemasons had long provided an avenue of entry into a community outside of Catholicism. In the eighteenth century, Freemasonry had been deist, monarchical, and aristocratic in tone. This changed in the nineteenth century: Freemasonry became atheistic, Republican, and committed to scientism, pulling its members mostly from the middle classes. Where freethought groups had been mostly working class, Freemasons came mostly from the middle class. Because political organizations were illegal in the Second Empire, lodges provided a meeting place for political discussion circles. After 1870, most of the leading republicans had been Freemasons, and it expanded its members

¹⁰⁸ Lévêque, “Libre Pensée et Socialisme (1889-1939) Quelques Points de Repère,” 118-119.

¹⁰⁹ As cited in Lévêque, “Libre Pensée et Socialisme (1889-1939) Quelques Points de Repère,” 119.

during the Third Republic. By 1896, Freemasonry had 364 lodges and 24,000 members.¹¹⁰ Thus freethought groups and Freemasons overlapped and split according to a class dynamic that would ultimately account for many freethinkers being absorbed into socialism.

It is evident then that the political turmoil of the nineteenth century and Catholic domination created a religious contest. Freethinkers were the civil rights defenders for unbelief who really had only one significant agenda item—secularize society and the state. The arrival of freethought symbolized organized irreligion symbolized the pluralistic divisions in French society—not only were there Jews and Protestants in France, but there were those who had no religion and were willing to rally around that cause. Freethought groups provided a common platform for the emancipation from the Church that had not yet been fully achieved—it was a movement to achieve civil rights for unbelief. Its existence depended almost entirely on the strength of Catholicism. They were two sides to the same coin. The political ascendancy of either would inspire their opposite to action. Thus, absorption into freethought represented a particular moment in France. They came together to change society so that it would reflect and incorporate their new secular values. Unbelief had no clear positive doctrine that socialism or liberal democracy possessed. Since they could not agree, attendance and enthusiasm would decline greatly in the twentieth century due largely to their success.

¹¹⁰ Adrien Dansette and John Dingle, *Religious History of Modern France Vol.2*, (Freiburg; Edinburgh: Herder Nelson, 1961).

Conclusion

In thinking about the growth of unbelief and the dechristianization campaign, I made several large sweeping evaluations based on numerous works in the field. To summarize, first, and primarily, the Protestant Reformation represented a break with centralized authority that would later encourage people to decide religious questions on their own. Intellectual and spiritual relativism thus entered after the Reformation—it meant the surrender of a universal Christian creed. In conjunction, the discovery of the New World and the engagement with other cultures allowed a greater degree of religious skepticism, as seen in the likes of Montaigne and Montesquieu. The break with authority trended towards relativism and freebelief, which was greatly facilitated by the printing press and a growing literate society that emerged out of the Scholastic tradition, which produced thinkers such as Descartes. The challenge to authority created a subculture heavily critical of Catholicism, Protestants playing no small part. The moral failings of Christianity during the Wars or Religion encouraged some thinkers to turn to Deism and natural religion, seeking a universal solution to the doctrinal squabbles of Christianity and the problems inherent in the Bible. The turning back to ancient ideas of republicanism and the pagan ritual worship of the state demonstrated how antiquity provided a cultural bridge to a distinctly non-Christian past. This was most readily shown in philosophy and the triumph of rationalism dating back to Greek philosophy, which had always partly been

independent of religious domination. The challenges to Catholic doctrine from science, philosophy, and Biblical criticism all represented the results of free inquiry. The ideas of the Enlightenment and the revolt of the nobles against absolute monarchy created the foundation for liberal reforms that demanded equality before the law, the abolition of privileges, democracy, and the liberty of conscience. Then during the French Revolution, when the priests refused the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, revolutionaries saw another moral failing of the Church. When the Catholicism failed to support egalitarian, democratic revolution, it created a rupture between radicals and conservatives. The Revolution provided an opportunity to replace Christianity. Some people were able to accept this because their conformity to Christian authority had been challenged for centuries, but also because the population was less Christianized than the authorities who ruled above them. In looking for an alternative to Christianity, unbelief would erupt on the political scene in 1793 when people created new pagan cults, and later still, formed the first freethought groups that helped push the Republican government into an aggressive anticlerical campaign in 1902 and 1905. Thus, dechristianization partly represented the slow and steady growth of unbelief over several centuries that would triumph in the Third Republic, only facing a temporary setback during the Vichy regime. It was the slow accretion of Western cultural history.

During the French Revolution, as during the Protestant Reformation, Catholicism faced a grave challenge to its place as a universal religion. Throughout the nineteenth century, Catholicism would adamantly continue to reject pluralism

until Vatican II in the 1960s. Instead, in the long nineteenth century, Catholicism fought a rearguard, reactionary battle to reestablish itself as the universal Church through clericalism and alliances with conservative governments who were content to use religion to support their regime. Most importantly, after the Revolution, people might remain Catholic, but the authority of the Catholic institution declined in social influence. France is one of the most dechristianized countries today because of its struggle with democratic, liberal revolution. While it can be noted that people were still nominally Catholic up until the 1960s, with 85 percent of French people declaring themselves believing Catholics, obedience to the Church had greatly diminished. In Paris in the 1960s, only 15% went to Church regularly. The majority of Catholics participated only in the social rituals of baptism, marriage, and burial. In the country as a whole, 26% were regular churchgoers in 1961, yet “two thirds of these church-goers moreover were women; the majority of them were middle class; only between 2 and 10 percent at most of the working class practiced regularly; the very rich and the very poor on the whole kept away.”¹¹¹ While the most significant decline in religious worship would take place in the 1960s Cultural Revolution when women began to abandon the Church, the respect and admiration for Catholicism took a serious blow during the 1789 Revolution that would slowly work itself out over the next two hundred years until France reached one of the lowest rates of

¹¹¹ Zeldin, *A History of French Passions 1848-1945, Ambition, Love and Politics Ambition, Love and Politics*, 983-984.

attendance and the highest rate of self-identified atheists in the Catholic world.¹¹² The Churches and established religion in Europe became less important, and the rift would start first and most dramatically in France.

A historian of atheism and religion, Bruce Callum, noted that established Churches experienced a significant decline in the modern period. Religion in Europe lost its supporting structure, its spine. He wrote, “secularization fillets the religious spine out of the body of human culture.”¹¹³ The French Revolution was the informal conclusion to the Protestant Reformation that had individualized religious belief and practice by challenging clericalism. However, to disestablish the Churches, the nineteenth century would be a war of ideology between the various political alignments (mainly socialists, radicals, liberals, royalists, and religious conservatives). Religion would become the hallmark of the Counter-Revolution still being played out in theocratic sub-cultures in Europe, the Middle East, Asia, in fundamentalist groups across Africa, and the Evangelicals in the United States. These movements reject pluralism and wish to create a society that will be regenerated by religious ideology.

¹¹² Pew Research Global Attitudes Project Spring 2011; “Religions in France | French Religion Data | GRF.” Accessed July 31, 2018.
http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/countries/france#/?affiliations_religion_id=0&affiliations_year=2010®ion_name=All%20Countries&restrictions_year=2016.

¹¹³ Callum G. Brown, “The secularization decade: what the 1960s have done to the study of religious history.” In Hugh McLeod and Werner Ustorf, *The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

The dechristianization campaign in the French Revolution signified the political emergence of unbelief in Western culture. In the nineteenth century, the masses and not just the elites would adopt unbelief and a critical attitude towards Christianity. However, unbelief was not an entirely negative campaign because unbelievers added it as a principle of other creeds to fill the gap left by the delegitimization of the monarchy and Catholicism. Unbelief was a convenient argument to challenge the Catholic bid for political power that was very useful for the Left.

Unbelief became tied to the Declaration of the Rights of Man and liberal reform. In France, this meant more than anything the *freedom from religion*. Unbelief need not have been republican, D'Holbach and his coterie of atheists in the Enlightenment tended to be conservative politically and Voltaire had supported enlightened monarchy. However, in the struggle against the religious domination of a Church that claimed to be universal, unbelief grew in relevance for those on the Left. The republican state, to provide liberty, had to be secular. The universal claims of the established Churches wrought division and discontent rather than unity. The modern republican state in France had to be secular without an established religion to create a new universal bond. The functional role of Catholicism that tied people to a set of moral and political practices during the Old Regime was replaced by the universal creed of liberal republicanism, nationalism, and democracy that promised a religion of progress. Consequently, on one hand, unbelievers led a civil rights movement of

emancipation, and on the other hand, they led an illiberal movement of dismantling Catholicism from the public space.

The republicans and radicals of the Third Republic abandoned the idea of creating new public cults like those of 1793 (although they considered it!) and instead focused the state's efforts on inculcating republican values to students through secular education that would emancipate them from the false ideas of the past. The people would be forced to be free through induction into universal reason. Then, democracy and education would bring world peace and allow the people to share in the wealth of the nation, or so republicans hoped.

Unbelief was never as powerful as it seemed, and it has only begun to culturally triumph over religion since the 1960s. Unbelief struggled partly because its birth in the totalitarian dechristianization phase of 1793 did much to discredit democratic revolution in the nineteenth century. Dechristianization had polarized the political struggle, convincing devout Christians of the dangers of democracy (the United States being largely ignored). Since secular rule was rejected on the Right, unbelievers united with socialists, Protestants, Jews, republicans, and Freemasons in anticlerical campaigns to overturn theocratic rule that granted unbelievers many political victories. Many of those on the Left became free-believers who rejected the authority of the priest and the Bible. The final triumph of the Protestant Reformation against Catholicism ironically ends in secular governments, freethought, and, to some degree, unbelief.

Chapter 2. The crisis within Catholicism – the exclusion of the middle

As discussed in chapter one, changing political and moral values significantly impacted religious belief in nineteenth-century France. Within Catholicism, there was a struggle between a reforming wing and an opposing wing of diehard traditionalists who resisted any challenge to the hierarchy and the doctrine of the Church. This chapter will examine, first, the political context, and second, the reformers who strove to reconcile their faith with Catholicism, but failing, abandoned it. The political history of French Catholicism is the story of two Frances, one Catholic and one Republican; for every hesitant step that liberal Catholics made in embracing democracy, egalitarian values, and the freedom of conscience, the Holy See, after reflection and close observation, responded with condemnation and censorship. This problem can be seen in the testimonies of the clergy who left their posts discussed in the second part of this chapter.

Liberal Catholicism will be considered in three parts. First, the testimonies of the priests who quit the clergy will be examined. They became so common they were given the name the *évadés* in the newspapers. The *évadés* were not explicit republicans or radicals; rather they were priests who abandoned their posts. Their departures demonstrate their shift to liberal values. They found themselves at odds with the hierarchical, authoritarian organization of the Catholic Church. André

Bourrier, a convert to Protestantism, detailed and collected confessions in his journal *Le Chrétien français* that cataloged the former priests' complaints.

André Bourrier revealed that many members of the clergy were deeply troubled by the intransigence of the Church and began leaving in higher numbers. He wrote, “[The resignation of priests] has been a veritable signal within the rungs of the clergy.”¹¹⁴ The role of religion became a cultural war within France that animated believers and unbelievers alike and caused people to change camps in both directions. For example, the scholar Frédéric Gugelot notes a trend of intellectuals *converting* to Catholicism in his book *La conversion des intellectuels au catholicisme en France 1885-1935* (1998). From 1885 to 1935, he counts approximately 150 conversions of intellectuals, while at the same time there was a surge of priests leaving the Church. A great debate was burning inside the minds and hearts of a great many French men and women.

Second, Charles Loyson's life will be analyzed. He left the Church because the Catholic culture in France failed to accommodate the sympathetic liberals and moderates. The life of Charles Loyson provides a clear example of how a genuinely passionate Catholic was disciplined and then pushed out of Catholicism.

Third, Catholicism was extremely tardy in addressing the great abuses and harms that lower classes suffered in the nineteenth century during the process of

¹¹⁴ André Bourrier and Librairie Fischbacher, *Ceux qui s'en vont, 1895-1904* (Paris: Librairie du Chrétien Français : Librairie Fischbacher, 1905), 46.

industrialization. Social Catholicism was a movement that sought to address the working-class problem; however, its efforts were too late and too feeble to reverse the ebbing tides at the pews. Catholicism needed a middle ground to embrace moderate reformers, and it needed to support democratic, egalitarian values if it wished to keep hold of the population. Not having an inclusive middle and not embracing egalitarianism were two very significant factors that caused the rise of religious indifference and unbelief.

Traditional, orthodox Catholics considered liberalism an atheistic dogma that had displaced God and the Church. As they saw it, secular society had declared equality and liberty as sacred idols in place of God. At the center of the Old Regime was the alliance of throne and altar based on hierarchy, temporal obedience, and spiritual salvation in the afterlife. Or, to put it differently, where once God had been the unifying factor that brought people together in society, “the people” became the new sacred. With the French Revolution, the people replaced the King, and the secular city replaced the heavenly city. Those imbued with liberal ideals rejected authority and the centralization of the Church, asserting their individuality and freedom of conscience. The monarch and the Church, which had once been at the center of society and worshiped, were replaced by terrestrial goals. The new political goals of democracy and equality took the energies and absorbed the minds of the people, who invested their time, their minds, and their hopes in progress. The ideology of progress manifested itself in such forms as the French Revolution, nationalism, liberalism, social democracy, communism, fascism, etc. Consequently,

liberal Catholicism represented a significant step towards the spread of unbelief by the dilution of Catholic traditions and a weakening of obedience. The failure of the Vatican to accommodate its liberal wing pushed many people away from the traditions and practices of Catholicism. Once the liberals broke their ties to practice and obedience the road to spiritual separation and indifference lay open to them.

Catholic liberalism emerged after the French Revolution, which had changed the French political tradition. The republican, radical tradition challenged the special place Catholicism held in the social hierarchy of society. The Catholic Church in the Old Regime had played a paternalistic role alongside the King. The Old Regime had defined each person as a subject, not a citizen, and as the children of an all-encompassing and powerful monarch who ruled by hereditary and divine right. Nineteenth-century radicals and liberals no longer accepted this political order, changing the notion of the government from that of a paternalistic family to that of a set of rational institutions. The new order demanded civil rights for adult males and political rights for men of property. The French Revolution spread the concept that men were autonomous citizens endowed with political rights, and not passive, dependent subjects of the monarch (and the Church).

The Catholic tradition of ecclesiology opposed this liberal order as much as it supported the Old Regime. Ecclesiology dealt with questions about the authority of the Pope, the rapport between the episcopacy and the papacy, the role of ecclesiastical councils in ecclesiastic governance, and the proper relationship between church and

state. The French Catholic Church was called Gallican because it established by the Declaration of the Clergy of France in 1682 that the authority of the prince would limit the temporal power of the Church, the general councils, and the bishops. Further, the Declaration of 1682 gave the French monarch the power to select bishops, decentralizing the power of the papacy. Ecclesiastical authority was based on a clear demarcation of the absolute power of bishops over priests, and priests over laymen. It was a paternalistic authority that the clergy imposed over their flock by giving the sacraments and protecting them from doctrinal error. This divinely ordained hierarchy required obedience at odds with the individual autonomy of liberal politics.¹¹⁵

According to the Catholic Church, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen proclaimed by the French Revolution in 1789 was a new sacred decree that sought to replace the authority of Christianity and to enshrine the will of the people. A natural social inclination inherent to human nature justified natural rights as found in the social contract of Locke or Rousseau and threatened to replace the laws of God. Humanism superseded religion as the progenitor of moral worth and values, providing a competing and compelling theory as an alternative to Christianity. Catholic authorities believed this new secular ideology was unstable and dangerously relativistic. Secular, public authority was felt to be no more than the fickle will of the people. In contrast, Catholics viewed the social nature of humanity as part of the

¹¹⁵ Gabbert, Mark A. "The Limits of French Catholic Liberalism: Mgr Sibour and the Question of Ecclesiology." *French Historical Studies* 10, no. 4 (1978): 641–63.

natural law provided by God that was virtuously guided by universal Christian law. By removing the only universal authority of God, French society had embraced liberty without restraints—a dangerous slippery slope that ended with degeneracy and sin. Catholics feared that humanist values would constantly be redefined for selfish, hedonistic reasons. Freethought humanism was felt to be a fundamental threat to the Christian message, but also a danger to the stability of society. Society unbound would inevitably tear itself apart without the order provided by God’s word and the supervision of his messengers. There was a clear truth and a clear law articulated by Catholicism that was supported by the spiritual authority of the Church. Toleration for false belief was not a part of official Catholic doctrine until after Vatican II in the 1960s.

The Catholics who diverted from Catholic orthodoxy often supported *theological* and *political* liberalism. The defining characteristics of political liberalism were a premium on inner motivation and a desire to be liberated from external controls with an emphasis on egalitarianism versus hierarchy. The entry point into unbelief begins with the problems of theological liberalism, which was a reinterpretation of Catholic doctrines as an attempt to reconcile them with contemporary science and social science. Protestantism and Catholicism were both put under stress by these two trends. Protestantism in nineteenth-century France experienced a religious schism that broke it into two camps: orthodox Protestantism and liberal Protestantism. The majority practiced a conservative, evangelical Protestantism founded on the doctrine of salvation by grace alone pursued by reading

the Bible, believing in its literal truth, and following its teachings. A minority of Protestants that included most of the prominent members of French society, such as Ferdinand Buisson, adhered to a liberal Protestantism that resembled a philosophy more than a theological system. They rejected a literal reading of the Bible and emphasized religious individualism, and were indebted to Pierre Bayle and John Calvin. They supported the liberty of thought, individual inquiry, and were skeptical of received truths. Their openness permitted them to question the Bible and doubt the central tenets of Christianity such as the resurrection or the divinity of Jesus.¹¹⁶

The liberal Catholic religious crisis echoes the problems of authority and reform in the Protestant Reformation. In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor argues that one of the chief causes for the growth of secularism in the West, and a principal point of the Reformation, was the rejection of external mediation. This caused the locus of religious life to shift from corporate life to individual experience. The inner personal commitment of the believer contested the central project of Christendom. As each person sought to affirm their reasoning powers and opinions, religious authority was resented or less appealing. The Reformation caused the hierarchical and vertical orientation and mediation of the Church to lose ground to a horizontal order that did not have an explicit space for the sacred, leading to a new conception where God acted through a universal providence no longer resting in the Church, king, or

¹¹⁶ M. B DeBevoise, Lawrence D Kritzman, and Brian J Reilly, *The Columbia History of Twentieth-Century French Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 135.

priest.¹¹⁷ One result was that deism and humanism became competing models to Christianity.

The liberal and rationalist tradition in the West, buoyed by the science of those such as Isaac Newton, created a set of values at odds with tradition that proved revolutionary in politics but also in spiritual belief. Jonathan Israel in his book *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (2001) details the formation of radical thought that seemingly erupted in the eighteenth century out of Spinoza, which was deistic/pantheistic, rational, and mostly secular. In the tradition of Max Weber, Peter Gay, Ernst Cassirer, and Margaret Jacob, Israel argues that the Radical Enlightenment was a significant break with conventional thinking that pushed thought outside the sphere of religion. Israel claims that the radical tradition was universalist, egalitarian, and republican. The radical Enlightenment developed within a philosophical tradition that helped foster a liberal consciousness that pushed Catholics away from authority towards doubt, where unbelief and belief cohabited. *Political* and *theological* liberalism combined in the nineteenth century to provide a powerful tonic for the secularization of the European mind. In a similar line of argument, Owen Chadwick asserted that Christian political liberalism provided the intellectual space for unbelief to thrive.

Christian conscience was the force which began to make Europe 'secular'; that is, to allow many religions or no religion in a state, and repudiate any kind of pressure

¹¹⁷ See Fransico Lombo de Leon and Bart van Leeuwen, "Charles Taylor and Secularization" *Ethical Perspectives* 10 (2003), pg 78-86 and Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 2007).

upon the man who rejected the accepted or inherited axioms of society. My conscience is my own. It is private.¹¹⁸

The most important claim of the liberal in Western Europe was religious. The dissenter, Chadwick argued, provided the necessary social force that created liberal faith. Toleration of religious opinion led to the toleration of religious practice. The freedom of religious opinion was not possible without the freedom of opinion. Consensus about the dangers of different religious opinions had not changed markedly by 1860, but political constitutions had been modified to protect it. “Liberty to attack religion rose less from the decline of religion than from love of liberty” Chadwick claimed.¹¹⁹ Further, the idea of liberty became the zeitgeist, i.e., the galvanizing cause of the era. Before the 1860s, the notion of liberty had been an instrument of justice, good government, or a way of practicing enterprise and protecting private property. A generation later it became a quality of life—a good in itself that fostered “moral personality, moral development, self-realization.”¹²⁰ A fully developed human being is a free human being. Critics such as Fitzjames Stephen and Pope Pius IX pointed out that this threatened social cohesion because society is held together by consensus. Liberal opinion threatened to tear it apart by permitting unhealthy disagreement and factionalism. They were convinced that religious liberty generated skepticism and anarchy. In the newspapers, freedom of opinion allowed for the freedom to criticize and debate, which was believed to have undermined

¹¹⁸ Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge England; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 23.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

Christianity by removing the gravitas and sacred character of belief; and once Christianity had been dragged down to the profane by equating religious belief with philosophical opinion, skepticism had triumphed. Stephen gave this warning about unrestrained intellectual freedom:

The vast majority of mankind live by commonplaces, half-truths to which they became attached and accustomed and which, without thinking deeply, they suppose to be true. Unlimited freedom of thought means that all these commonplaces are cast into a caldron and men no longer have stable principles to guide their moral beings.¹²¹

Political liberalism had very practical implications for the Church that were felt at the start of the French Revolution. During the French Revolution and the civil war that ensued, the clergy and the Church experienced enormous loss and violence to their assets and persons that deepened the gulf between republicanism and Catholicism. To pay the debt owed by the French Government at the end of the eighteenth century, it was the Church who lost its wealth above all others. Another issue of contention was the political domination by the Republicans. When the Revolution spread to Italy, Pius VI was captured and brought to Valence France, where he died in captivity for not renouncing his temporal power. Furthermore, his successor, Pius VII, was arrested by Napoleon after the French invaded the Papal States again in 1809. Pius was imprisoned and kept in isolation, where he was pressured to recognize Napoleon's appointed Bishops. Pius was not released until

¹²¹ James Fitzjames Stephen and Stuart D Warner, *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Incorporated, 2014),115; Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century*, 43.

1814 when Napoleon had lost his gamble for European domination. Then, after two decades of reasonable stability, during the 1848 Italian Risorgimento, Rome was taken, and the Pope was forced to flee. In 1860, the Pope lost all of the papal estates, except Rome, to Piedmont and the forces of Garibaldi, because Napoleon III protected Rome from Piedmont annexation. However, when the Second Empire fell to the armies of Bismarck in 1870, the French troops left Rome, leaving it undefended, so it too was taken by Piedmont. By 1870, Pius IX considered himself to be a prisoner in the Vatican, surrounded by liberals who, as he saw it, illegally confiscated Church wealth and property. These factors alone were perhaps enough to turn Catholic leadership against any of the revolutions in nineteenth-century Europe. Generally speaking, revolutions of the nineteenth century were a direct threat to the Pope's temporal power; thus, it must be admitted that the conservative nature of the Papacy was directly tied to the abuse the office suffered and its loss of temporal power. Thus, practically speaking, calls for a liberal Christian revolution outside the Vatican would be a hard bargain for any Pope to authorize and it is no surprise that it was roundly rejected.

During the nineteenth century, the French Catholics acquired new allies in the bourgeoisie that helped it form a powerful political block. The French bourgeoisie of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century were often supporters of the spirit of Voltaire. During the Old Regime, the nobles, clergy, and king were united and shared many privileges. The bourgeoisie, resentful of these privileges, were as a result critical of the Church and the nobility. At the beginning of

the nineteenth century, their loyalties began to change; in the midst of the violence of the Revolution, they began to support once again the Church as a force that could restore social order. With the rise of socialism, the fear of revolution only grew during the nineteenth century. It threatened the sanctity of private property (the aristocracy and the Church could commiserate on this point), and the bourgeoisie was pushed to accept conservative Catholicism as a measure of self-protection. However, as a politics of convenience, they did not want a free Church outside of state controls and neither did they want clerical domination. They wanted to have social order without having the Church meddle in their private lives, so the elites became firm supporters of the Gallican Church. The Gallican Church was subordinate and financed by the state, managed largely through state administrators who represented the bourgeoisie.¹²² “Catholicism was to be public in its defense of order and private in its non-interference with the interior life of the elite.”¹²³

While there are clear Christian elements in the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man, the Holy See ignored what was Christian in the revolutionary values of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Instead, the Church would be consumed with the struggle for political domination and control, which brought the Church squarely into a political alliance with conservative elites. This alliance would have significant repercussions because conservatives mostly neglected the urban, lower working class,

¹²² Norman Ravitch, *The Catholic Church and the French Nation, 1585-1989* (London: Routledge, 1990), 63-64.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

which grew enormously with the rise of the Industrial Revolution. The proletariat dreamed of another, more complete social revolution to address the inequalities of society, which spurred them into revolutionary socialism. Socialist ideas were at first romantic and utopian that later evolved into a simplified Marxism. All of this frightened the Catholic bourgeoisie.¹²⁴

The Roman Catholic Church's hostility towards socialism was probably so disastrous for Catholicism because French socialism to a significant extent had grown out of a genuinely popular religious and moral sensibility, and it was at one and the same time the expression of working-men's religiosity and of a counter-culture in the midsts of bourgeois society.¹²⁵

Another reason that Catholicism remained conservative during the nineteenth century is that it saw itself as providing a political and social alternative to the chaos of liberal revolutions. Work was done by the French historian Emile Poulat, especially *Eglise contre bourgeoisie. Introduction au devenir du catholicisme actuale* (1977), that suggests that the Church was not simply a bulwark of tradition and loyalty to the Old Regime, but rather it was trying to construct and preserve a society around the idea of an eternal truth, so that it could offer an alternative to the new modern relativism inherent in liberalism and the freedom of conscience. In this sense, Catholics had a utopian vision of a Christian society, which if rightfully built and maintained, could minimize the ills and excesses of sin, greed, and abuse for the greater good of all. What this utopian Catholic society looked like separated the

¹²⁴ Robert Rouquette, S.J., "France," in M. A Fitzsimons and Jean Bécarud, *The Catholic Church Today: Western Europe*, (Notre Dame [Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 215-242.

¹²⁵ Ravitch, *The Catholic Church and the French Nation, 1585-1989*, 86.

conservative and liberal wings of French Catholicism. This can best be seen in its extreme form in the life of Lamennais.

Hugues-Félicité Robert de Lamennais led Catholic Liberalism in the 1830s. His views went through several transitions, starting in fact with conservative Ultramontanism, but what concerns us here are his liberal Catholic ideas. With a small group of loyal followers including Lacordaire and Montalembert, he tried to bridge the gap between the authority of the Church and the autonomy of the individual by supporting civil and political liberty and the separation of church and state. At the same time, Lamennais tenaciously defended Ultramontanism by rejecting Gallicanism. He believed Gallican Catholicism had compromised itself. The Concordat and the Napoleonic French Empire were seen as a corrupting influence on French Catholicism; instead of being the champion of the true Christian social mission, Gallicanism defended the values of the wealthy and powerful. The phases of early Liberal Catholicism follow the vicissitudes of Lamennais' efforts. True Christianity concerned itself with the well-being of the poor and embraced egalitarianism.

The journal *L'Avenir* acted as Lamennais' public platform where he defended both the values of liberalism and Ultramontanism, the centralized power of the Papacy—a seemingly at first contradictory position. He called for the freedom of education so that Catholics could create their own independent universities: Catholics considered the government-controlled universities to be a bastion of irreligion. The

Catholics were happy with primary education, which was handled mostly by the Church, but not the higher levels of education. Lamennais targeted the lycées that were created in Napoleon's time to absorb the students of merit as well as the Old Regime specialists' schools that taught the necessary technical skills for a modern military (later known as the grandes écoles). The anticlerical influence of the civil training schools was a real fear: August Comte testified to the irreligious culture within the French lycée. Pickering notes how they were filled with republican, anticlerical values.¹²⁶ Second, *L'Avenir* called for the freedom of the press, association, and even conscience (something Catholics were not permitted to support). The French state at this time held despotic control over the press, subjecting it to intense scrutiny, fines, warnings, and suppression. *L'Avenir* also called for the freedom of association because the laws forbade new religious organizations unless they received state authorization. Third, *L'Avenir* demanded the freedom of worship so the Church could run its affairs free of government influence, which was to be achieved by the separation of church and the state.

What is most interesting to consider in Lamennais' liberal Ultramontane program was his Catholic solution to modernity. By embracing both the authority of the Pope and the freedom of conscience and democracy, he was attempting a modern fusion (something closer to the political reality for Catholics in the United States). Lamennais' vision of a future Christian utopia was built around a romanticized

¹²⁶ Pickering, Mary. *Auguste Comte: An Intellectual Biography*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 20.

understanding of the middle ages as a time before the princes of Europe had fully seized power, when the Church flourished, and French culture was thoroughly Christian. During the medieval age, partly because religion was not dominated by secular authorities, Lamennais felt that Christianity was all-pervasive in society. He believed that an independent Church gave a better guarantee of spiritual liberty for the people. Free from the corrupting influence of secular governments, in other words, the Church would have a greater role in society.

Lamennais, in his last years as a Catholic, focused on the social aspect of the Catholic mission and did not think that religion should be a private affair. It should be active and engaged in public life, but the Church should be separated from the state so it could act without hindrance from conservative and corrupting administrators. Catholicism would curb the negative tendencies of men and women and encourage the greater good over self-interest. Liberty was a central value, but it had to be regulated to ensure equality and the greater social good. His motto was "God and Liberty." Thus, Lamennais had a utopic vision of a new, rechristianized society that would bring the people into a new age of progress, with an independent Church led by the Pope as its light and guide.¹²⁷ Lamennais was nearly alone in his program for social justice among the Liberal Catholics, and his ideas would have to wait until 1891 before Leo XII, with his encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, saw the merit in his position.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 70-76.

In 1831, Lamennais took his ideas directly to Rome to argue his case before the Pope, but the Pope would see him only condition that he would not discuss his liberal program. Then shortly after in 1832, Pope Gregory VI rejected Lamennais' liberal program, after pressure from Klemens von Metternich, in the encyclical *Mirari vos*, which rejected the liberal notion of religious pluralism and the theocratic democracy advocated by Lamennais. After the encyclical, liberal Catholics gave up their demands for separation and instead demanded that Catholics be given the same rights granted to other individuals and institutions. Lamennais' brand of Liberal Ultramontanism reached its high point in 1848, perhaps best symbolized by the parish priests who participated in the first days of the revolution. However, the violence of the June Days and the taking of Rome caused Pope Pius IX to fully turn against liberalism; instead, Ultramontanism became the ecclesiological companion to conservative politics. *Because of this failure of support from Rome, the underlying theme of liberal Catholicism after 1848 was the rejection of ecclesiastical hierarchy and the support of democratic reform.* The small group of liberals who survived after 1850 attached their secular, liberal politics to neo-Gallicanism as a form of resistance against the centralizing authority of the Pope.¹²⁸

During the Restoration, the Church had regained much of its status and position in society. Between 1830 and 1850, Catholicism was on the defensive, which allowed for the alliance of different internal factions. However, once Louise

¹²⁸ Ibid.

Napoleon was Emperor after the fall of the Second Republic, power shifted back to the Catholics. One of the unifying issues was education. The passing of the Loi Falloux in 1850 put the Church hierarchy firmly in alliance with the Empire. The Loi Falloux made religious education compulsory in the primary schools, allowed Catholic congregations to create private secondary schools, and gave more Catholic representation in the *Conseil supérieur de l'instruction publique* for the administration of the universities. Montalembert, a champion of the liberal Catholic cause, encouraged people to vote for Napoleon's ascension as Emperor because, he said, to vote against Napoleon was to vote for socialist revolution. Napoleon was happy to gain the support of the Church and the Constitution of 1852 guarded the interests of religion. While it granted freedom of religion, it allowed for Cardinals to sit in the Senate, and religious processions were given a free pass by the government to showcase their religious enthusiasm with great pomp and ceremony. Further, the President could authorize the establishment of religious communities for women by decree, which resulted in the creation of 982 communities between the years of 1852 and 1860. The illiberal side of Napoleon and the Church also expressed itself: the works of Voltaire and Diderot were proscribed, while censorship laws were imposed on books, pamphlets, and newspaper articles that expressed any hostility to religion.

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¹²⁹ Charles Stanley Phillips and Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (Great Britain), *The Church in France 1848-1907* (New York, N.Y.: Russell & Russell, 1967), 58-60.

Within the ranks of the clerical intelligentsia after 1850, there were two significant groups, the neo-Ultramontanes and the so-called Liberal Catholics. Interestingly, Lamennais' collision with the Pope caused him eventually to abandon the cause of Catholicism altogether. Men such as Veuillot, an outspoken and biting journalist for *L'Univers*, led the Ultramontanes in their defense of Catholicism and the supreme authority of the Pope over the French Government. The Ultramontanes continued to fight for an autonomous Church that could elect its own Bishops and handled its own affairs. In general, the Ultramontanes sided with whoever came closest to the favored relationship they once had with the Bourbon monarchy and conservative policies. They favored an absolutist Pope working in alliance with an absolutist monarch.

In contrast, Liberal Catholics were liberal because they accepted the principles of the Revolution, although some to a greater degree than others. They believed in more equality and democratic participation. Their belief in democracy was a primary reason for their resistance to papal domination. Mid-nineteenth century Liberal Catholics did not, however, wholeheartedly accept the synthesis of modern science and research with the traditional faith. They did not believe fully in freethought or the untethered right for people to think for themselves. In fact, they took little interest in this, and it did not become a major component of the Liberal Catholics program until late in the nineteenth century with the emergence of a group of scholars called the Modernists (discussed in Chapter 3). Rather, their concerns were political, not theological. They valued both freedom and authority and sought to chart out a

compromise that incorporated democratic politics. They were politically liberal Catholics, not theologically liberal Catholics.

The liberal values promoted by reformers such as Montalembert, Dupanloup, or Lacordaire had a difficult time due to political and military attacks on the Papacy. Napoleon III supported the Church because it was useful to his legitimacy, but he was also sympathetic to the cause of Italian unification. He gave military aid to the Kingdom of Piedmont Sardinia in 1859 to defeat the Austrians and to take territory away from the papal states. While he gave with one hand, he took away with the other. He also placed troops in Rome to guarantee the independence and security of the Pope. Under this assault, Pius IX turned wholly against the rising tide of liberalism and socialism. From the Pope's point of view, Camilla Cavour of Piedmont was attacking Christianity by taking papal territory and by closing monasteries and convents in the Piedmont kingdom. When the Italian army took Rome in 1870, the Pope considered himself a prisoner in the Vatican.

In response to his troubles, Pius IX condemned wholesale many of the ideas of the modern period. In the Syllabus of Errors of 1864, Pius singled out the entire liberal agenda. His list of errors included: the supremacy of reason, philosophy without faith or revelation, Protestantism as a true form of Christianity, salvation outside of Catholicism, communism, socialism, secret societies, public schools free from ecclesiastical authority. Pius labeled some errors moral, such as the lawfulness of rebelling against the legitimate princes, divorce, challenging the temporal authority

of the Pope, and the most famous of them all, the claim that Catholicism must reconcile itself to “progress, liberalism, and modern civilization.” The Syllabus appears to us today as a kind of willful blindness or burying of one’s head in the sand; however, Pius IX was at least, and finally, taking a stand officially on the political and intellectual changes in the last two hundred years. Instead of embracing modernity, he called it an error. Further, Pius embraced the popular expressions of Catholicism that members of the clergy must have only coolly supported. Pius IX held the first General Council in three hundred years in 1868, the Vatican I, where he declared the Pope infallible and affirmed the commonly held belief of the Immaculate Conception (Mary was born without original sin) as new dogmas of the Church in the age of democracy and triumphant reason.

There seemed to be very little breathing room for Liberal Catholics. In the developments after the Franco Prussian war of 1870, the Catholics allied themselves once more with the counter-revolution. The Communards, of course, aggravated the situation by declaring the separation of church and state and then confiscating Church property, which had also been done during the 1789 Revolution. In their zeal, some even pillaged and vandalized religious symbols. In Paris, anticlerical feelings had bubbled over, largely due to the close alliance the Church maintained with the Second Empire but also because the Second Empire claimed its legitimacy from the principles of religion. From the Catholic perspective, the violence of the Revolution had been unleashed once again as angry revolutionaries killed priests for impeding the execution of municipal decrees: seventeen priests were shot, including the

Archbishop of Paris, Georges Darboy, 5 Dominicans and their servitors. The violence and fear of revolution caused the Catholics to throw their lot in once again with the antirepublican conservatives, who formed a coalition called the Party of Order, consisting of Orleanists and Royalists, with hopes for another Restoration that would put an end to the Third Republic. Strangely, the candidate for the throne, Comte de Chambord, would not accept the crown unless the government agreed to adopt the Bourbon flag and drop the tri-color, which ultimately cost him the opportunity. Pius IX responded “What! Henry IV thought that Paris was worth a Mass and Henry V thinks that France is not worth une serviette.”¹³⁰

The years 1876-1884 saw the turning of the tide against the Party of Order and the triumph of the Republicans. The Republicans would gain the assembly and save the Republic after the tireless work of Gambetta’s political campaign. Here, had the Liberal Catholic voice been dominant, much may have been avoided, but no overtures or calls for accepting republican government were made, and when they were, they were suppressed. Instead, the division of two Frances continued. The most significant case in point is Henri Didion. Didion was considered to be one of the greatest preachers of his era. A Dominican, Didion gave a sermon in 1880 in the respectable Church La Trinité, in Paris, where he called for a reconciliation between the Church and modern society. During the sermon, members of the audience denounced him and made complaints to his superiors. As a result, Didion was silenced and sent to a

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 176-77.

Corsican convent for eighteen months and no longer permitted to give sermons except to a small community of nuns in Paris. He was not allowed to freely practice his ministry again until after the Ralliement in 1892.

Added on to this intransigence, the Church offered no real response to the anticlerical challenges that came from the natural sciences, biblical criticism, positivists, freemasons, and freethinkers. After the 1860s, freethinkers were on the rise throughout Europe, preaching anticlerical propaganda that sought to cure society through the removal of religion. When writers like Renan wrote profane, secular histories of the Church such as *Life of Jesus* in 1863, no significant intellectual response met him on the same ground. “The Catholic Church was scandalized [...] but unfortunately was content to answer him by abuse rather than by argument.”¹³¹ There was no sustained or developed response to the challenge. The seminaries, where champions of reform and an intellectual argument could be nurtured, focused rather on training their students for devotion and pastoral care; their intellectual training was weak. The British historian of French Catholicism C.S. Philips argues that this led to an “inferiority complex” among the clergy that grew in response to the many attacks against them and their lack of education. Lacking the tools to respond, the educated clergy held themselves above or aloof from the communities they served and this fostered an authoritarian attitude.¹³²

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 188.

After Pius IX, who ruled longer than any other pope in history (1846-1878), Leo XIII sought an end to the political struggle that had served only to alienate the moderate and liberal Catholics. Leo was a statesman with an aristocratic finesse who sought conciliation and unity among the laity to provide stability. In France, the schools had been secularized, and there were calls for separation of church and state in the Assembly. Having lost France, the Church had no serious allies in Europe and anticlericalism and freethought were at their historic highpoint. In Germany, the Church was recovering from the Kulturkampf as well as a small group of discontent Catholics who protested Papal infallibility by separating with the Vatican.

Leo XIII sought a way out of the deep division of modern politics. His greatest contribution to Catholic doctrine was the encyclical of 1891, *Rerum Novarum*, that sought to address the problems of the age that Pius IX had failed to settle. First, in 1888, he issued the encyclical *Libertas Praestantissimum*, which defined the nature and limits of freedom and what “modern liberties” were acceptable. In an important step away from the Syllabus of Errors, it confirmed a limited principle of toleration and guaranteed the liberty of non-Catholics. This tried to address the accusation that if the Catholics were able to dominate the state, they would not return to the policies of Louis the XIV and the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes.

The encyclical *Rerum Novarum* stated that Catholicism was compatible with any government guaranteeing the practice of Catholicism and emphasized the importance of addressing the social problem of modern times. He started the *Ralliement*, a call for Catholics to accept the civil power (republicanism mainly) and

to separate the identity of Catholicism as exclusively tied to conservatism and monarchy. Further, we see a rebirth of Lamennais' social program: Christians were to address the evils of society, namely the exploitation of labor by capital. Abuse and exploitation were denounced as a deadly sin; all workers should be well treated. It thus criticized liberal capitalism and admitted the principle of state intervention to help the common good. Further, the encyclical admitted the right of association of the workers. However, there was a conservative side to Leo's embrace of civil society: he hoped that civil governments would see that the Church had the power and ability to save property, authority, and modern society from its revolutionary tendencies.

Rerum Novarum still opposed socialism and communism as these violated the natural right to property. The encyclical, rejecting Marxism, explained that it was not possible to eliminate all kinds of inequality and that class antagonism was not, in fact, a natural condition. Collective property was seen as an injustice because people had the right to the fruits of their labor. As a point of inspiration for the Christian social mission, *Rerum Novarum* looked to the stories of the apostles and their acts of charity and generosity. While the encyclical defended individual property, it also sought to ameliorate and improve the conditions of the working class: it stated that there should be regulation and limits to working hours and conditions and people should be given a fair wage that could support a family. *Rerum Novarum* accused capitalism of mistreating people due to greed and unchecked competition, and it accused capitalist

of failing in their Christian obligation to treat people with kindness and to recognize their needs.¹³³

Nonetheless, the middle ground advocated by Leo XIII had defined limits. While it supported to some degree the Liberal Catholic agenda, Leo XIII was not willing to accept the challenge to Catholic dogma and doctrine (see the next chapter). Theological liberalism was still squarely rejected. In 1893, the encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* showed the limits of Catholic reform and how far it would go regarding modernizing traditional doctrine and acknowledging modern scholarship. The encyclical states:

“For all the books which the Church receives as sacred and canonical, are written wholly and entirely, with all their parts, at the dictation of the Holy Ghost; and so far is it from being possible that any error can co-exist with inspiration, that inspiration not only is essentially incompatible with error, but excludes and rejects it as absolutely and necessarily as it is impossible that God Himself, the supreme Truth, can utter that which is not true.”¹³⁴

Leo XII was not ready to grant the reinterpretation of the core medieval creeds of Christianity.

While Leo XIII was in many ways a step in a new direction, he did not control the Bishops in France, and although he may have encouraged Catholics to embrace

¹³³ William R Cook and Teaching Company, *The Catholic Church: A History* (Chantilly, Va.: Teaching Company, 2015).

¹³⁴ “Providentissimus Deus (November 18, 1893) | LEO XIII.” Accessed July 19, 2018.

http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_18111893_providentissimus-deus.html.

republican democracy, the fault lines were too deep to overcome in one generation. It was not until World War One that Catholicism and the Republic were really reconciled, during which the priests and republicans fought side by side and shared the same horrific struggle. Until then it was a battle for political turf and the future of the Republic. Thus, in France, the Ralliement was not able to mend the fences between Catholics and Republicans. Instead, a series of crises further divided Catholic authoritarian France and republican democratic France. The rise of strongman General Boulanger in 1889 rallied the conservatives and Bonapartists to a leader who might end the Republic. Boulanger sought populist support through the promotion of the Revanche—revenge against Germany for the loss of Alsace-Lorraine in 1870 to Germany. De Mun, the leader of the Social Catholic movement that sought to win back the working class, rallied the Catholics to Boulanger. However, in a year, Boulanger's attempt would come crashing down after he was indicted for treason, after which he fled the country and ultimately committed suicide in Brussels over the grave of his former lover in 1891. The episode exposed the authoritarian tendencies of many Catholics.

Leo XIII worked patiently in the early years of the 1890s to recover from the Boulanger Affair and to support the Ralliement by cajoling and criticizing members of the Church leadership. There were signs of the Ralliement's success with the abatement of anticlericalism and Catholics working in support of governance. Unfortunately, after a few quiet years, the rancor and division were reignited with the Dreyfus Affair. The controversy revolved around a Jewish officer in the General

Staff, Alfred Dreyfus, who was accused of passing secrets to the Germans. He was found guilty, underwent public humiliation, and sent to the Ile du Diable in French Guiana, a miserable and fever-prone location. However, discrepancies in the case came to show that Dreyfus was, in fact, innocent and the public began to call for a retrial. The uncertainties caused public clamor and debate among the public intellectuals, of whom the most memorable was the great novelist Emile Zola, who accused the government of violating the principles of justice for which the Republic stood. Catholics were too happily and easily convinced of Dreyfus' guilt; antisemitism ran rife, especially in the principal Catholic journal *La Croix*.

Antidreyfusards (conservative monarchists and Catholics mainly) viewed the Dreyfus Affair as a conspiracy against the army and the nation that was financed by the Jews. Those in support of Dreyfus, the Dreyfussards, viewed the crisis as a vicious campaign against justice and feared that conservatives were using this as a rallying point to overthrow the lay republic. The astonishing result was that a case about one man's guilt or innocence turned into a national struggle between Catholic royalists and anticlerical republicans.¹³⁵ What feelings of goodwill the Left had had for Catholicism during the Ralliement were lost in the Dreyfus Affair. The controversy provided political momentum to carry out the separation of church and state and the closing down of unauthorized congregations, as discussed in Chapter One. The Dreyfus Affair effectively eliminated the middle ground for moderate,

¹³⁵ Ravitch, *The Catholic Church and the French Nation, 1585-1989*, 96-99.

liberal Catholics, thereby accelerating the departure of liberal-leaning members of the clergy.

By 1905 French Catholicism lay wounded and injured, just as in 1793; it lost its income and assets once again and was cast out into the streets on its own where it would be henceforth dependent on its own resources. The growing trends of secularization, especially schooling, across Europe only helped draw the picture that the Church was under siege. Leo XIII died in 1903 and his successor, Pius X, did not have his finesse. Pius X came from a low-income family and spent part of his life as a pastor; he was an extremely pious, humble man, and is still remembered for these qualities today. He was also a deeply traditional and acted with a heavy hand. Offended by the Separation of 1905, he offered no compromises with the French state and surrendered an opportunity to have a working dialogue with the government that may have saved some remnants of Catholic resources in France.¹³⁶ He resolutely rejected Movements to reform Catholic dogma in 1907 and had several members of the Church condemned or excommunicated.

Next came the rejection against the leftist members of the Church. Le Sillon was a Catholic socialist movement founded by Marc Sangier, following the Ralliement in 1891. Sangier built a secular, Catholic socialist group as an alternative to the anticlerical socialist and radical groups that embraced the liberal values of democracy and equality of the different classes. Sillon groups held open discussions

¹³⁶ Phillips, *The Church in France 1848-1907*, 330-331.

to bring the classes together peaceably and work towards social justice. Pius X condemned le Sillon in 1910, largely at the bidding of the right-wing organization the Action Française.

The long nineteenth century ended with the triumph of a centralized, despotic pope who stifled discussion, blocked intellectual inquiry, and hindered the relationship with the urban working class.

André Bourrier and leaving the Church

After Lamennais, the hope and idea of a Church that accepted and embraced the autonomy of the individual lived on in those who remained attached to Catholicism, in particular for liberals like Charles Loyson and André Bourrier. The testimony of André Bourrier and other former Catholics during the Third Republic demonstrate that a liberal, independent mentality had provided the vehicle for their spiritual transformation. Bourrier gave up the priesthood in 1895, joined the Protestant Church, and led an anti-Catholic campaign that encouraged priests to abandon Catholicism. *He represented at the grassroots level the spiritual revolt against conservative Catholicism.*

Bourrier broke with Catholicism after a long internal struggle. He said that his “experience and his reason had finally come to weaken the foundation of the dogmas

until they fell, one by one.”¹³⁷ What he once considered a force for good, had begun to look like a work of corruption that developed servility and baseness in the masses. He said he was “obliged to see that the bad was taken with the good, that the tree, judged by its fruits, was a bad tree, that the exceptions were the result of other principles, other causes; individual men were sometimes more valuable than the system.”¹³⁸ With such disturbing thoughts, he realized over time that he was no longer Catholic. The Church had become for him a school of lies. His mother and family caused him to hesitate from abandoning his occupation; nonetheless, on August 31st, 1895, at 43 years old, he handed in his resignation. In his official letter, he said he found it difficult to adhere to Pius the IX and the decrees made by the Council of Trent. He accused the Catholicism of being a religion of authority that insisted not on real faith but the commandment *to believe in believing*. He told his superiors that he left Catholicism not because of skepticism but because of his faith in Christ. Not knowing what to do, he considered it beyond his capabilities to try to create a new Church as someone as famous as Charles Loyson had tried and failed to do. So he joined the Reformed Church of France, the liberal branch. He says he knew how unpopular it was in France and that such a decision would have social costs. As a minister of the Reformed Church, he dedicated himself to challenging Catholicism

¹³⁷ André Bourrier and Librairie Fischbacher, *Ceux qui s'en vont, 1895-1904* (Paris: Librairie du Chrétien Français : Librairie Fischbacher, 1905), 2.

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, 3-4.

and providing a haven for other defrocked or resigned Catholic priests such as himself.

Bourrier promoted his anti-Catholic agenda through his journal *Le Chrétien français*. He published the first issue October 1, 1897. First, he printed it once every two months, then every month, and finally every week. Collecting and publishing the resignation letters of priests was the priority of the journal that he later published in a book *Ceux qui s'en vont* (1904). The priests became known in the press as the *évadés*. This simply meant the clergy who left, were defrocked, or evaded their Church responsibilities (it also has the active connotation of “escapee”). Bourrier sought to remove the social stigma attached to defrocked priests. He honored their courage and sincerity in leaving and congratulated former clergy for staking out their independence. Further, Bourrier created a refuge for defrocked priests, a kind of halfway home to help rehabilitate and integrate former priests back into society. He was convinced that there was an increasing exodus of priests quitting their posts and that there had been a mass exodus after the publication of his journal, although he does not produce definitive evidence. Rather he saw himself, the many resignation letters he published, and his journal as the necessary proof. In his own words, his work was “the signal of a true debacle in the ranks of the clergy” and “Rome has taken alarm.”¹³⁹ He sparked others to comment on the current predicament: for example, the conservative response in the article “The Debacle of the Clergy,” in the

¹³⁹ Bourrier, *Ceux qui s'en vont, 1895-1904*, 46, 187.

May 10, 1900 edition of *L'Autorité*. The journal's editors were offended that Bourrier's call to reform had begun to be repeated. *L'Autorité* cited a Jewish journal that viewed Bourrier himself as the symptom of a much deeper internal crisis. The Jewish article said that the real sign of a change in French culture was that in the past those priests who had left the Church remained social pariahs, but Bourrier represented the end of this stigma and the rehabilitation of former priests as a humane and important task.¹⁴⁰ Bourrier led a rescue mission to save fallen clergy from the prison of their position who were victims of "sacerdotal oppression" and who were suffering from spiritual anguish. *L'Autorité* rejected the claim of the Jewish journal that a "profound cultural change is operating in the mind of the crowd."¹⁴¹ Nonetheless, a study done by the Prefecture of Police noted that Bourrier had attracted the following of half a dozen former priests at the Temple of Belleville in Paris and some six hundred members to his parish, numerically split with half Protestant and half Catholic, who were attracted to his form of open and primitive Christianity.¹⁴²

The resignation letters in *Le Chrétien français* were selected among all the dioceses and all the rungs of the clergy. Bourrier noted that they were far from complete, believing that several volumes would be required. The journal attempted to reconcile religious faith with the recent progress in science and politics. Therefore, it

¹⁴⁰ *L'Autorité*, 10 May 1900, "Le Debâcle du Clergé"

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² *Archives Nationales*, 4761 (in évadés folder).

served the interests of anticlericals, Protestants, and unbelievers alike. For Bourrier, Protestantism offered an alternative spirit by its valorization of individual spiritual autonomy and its comfort within scientific exploration in history and exegesis. Bourrier said his readers sometimes went “all the way to atheism, others towards Protestantism, and some towards a kind of neo-Catholicism that Harnack himself called ‘a place outside the Church for intelligent Catholics and secret protests.’”¹⁴³ Some of the letters came from Christians and some from unbelievers and ranged from respectful, to anguished, to violent denunciation.

In a letter, Maurice Guillemot said the mission of *Le Chrétien français* was to publicize the nearly 200 members of the clergy who left per year—a fact the Holy See preferred left kept in the dark. Custom labeled them “defrocked.” Guillemot said that it was backward to injure the men with these insults, who have the right and freedom to leave. All of this made Bourrier something of an anticlerical ally and an enemy of the Church. A critic said of Bourrier’s agenda:

Despite the bad luck that has increased the sorrow that has overburdened the vision of Bourrier, who is an abbé, a pastor, a rotating wave, a vagabond of an imprecise religion and indeterminate God, and who in reality is a man who cannot stand being beaten. He musters all his height and effort against Catholic assertions, and he dreams of a common and fraternal religion where all creeds are confused within the peace of Christ.¹⁴⁴

Liberty versus Authority

¹⁴³ Bourrier, *Ceux qui s’en vont, 1895-1904*, 186.

¹⁴⁴ As cited in Bourrier, *Ceux qui s’en vont, 1895-1904*, 155.

In looking at England, James Livingston called the crisis of personal sincerity the “ethics of belief” a phenomenon that dealt with the conflicting demands between consenting to the requirements of the Church and intellectual honesty.¹⁴⁵ Believers were no longer able to treat as certain what could not be proved.¹⁴⁶ John Barbour labeled the crisis “the ethics of *disbelief*” for those that deconverted from Christianity. The ethics of disbelief are the “moral considerations that guide what an individual can believe in good conscience and the scruples that guide how one informs other people, beliefs, and doubts.”¹⁴⁷ The resignation letters reveal five dominant themes: a discomfort or rejection of dogmas, a crisis of sincerity, moral revulsion, spiritual independence, and a desire for a more primitive less convoluted religion. Together they make a complex of liberal values that undermined their faith.

To examine the personal accounts of the *évadés* who left Catholicism is to look at deconversion testimonies. The social scientist H. Streib (2009) defined deconversion as

[...] a disengagement from a religious tradition which, in retrospect, is considered absolutist and authoritarian. It is an exploration of spiritual or secular alternatives, and is a change that is likely to be associated with transformation in terms of faith development.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁵ See James C Livingston, *The Ethics of Belief: An Essay on the Victorian Religious Conscience* (Tallahassee: American Academy of Religion, 1975).

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ John D Barbour, *Versions of Deconversion: Autobiography and the Loss of Faith* (Charlottesville; London: University Press of Virginia, 1994).

¹⁴⁸ Raymond F Paloutzian, Sebastian Murken, Heinz Streib, and Susan Rosler-Namini, “Conversion, Deconversion, and Spiritual Transformation: A multilevel Interdisciplinary View,” in Raymond F Paloutzian and Crystal L Park, *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 2015, 218.

The studies of deconversion suggest that there are common paths, giving five notable factors: 1) the lack or loss of validating or reaffirming religious experience 2) intellectual doubt, 3) moral critique, 4) emotional suffering, 5) the disaffiliation with the group. With the idea of deconversion as progress, the five factors show the typical stages in spiritual development towards unbelief.

In considering the five factors delineated by deconversion studies, we can see that the *évadés* experienced intellectual doubt and moral critique; however, the question of personal autonomy versus authority was the most important and powerful reason for leaving the Church. In fact, intellectual and spiritual freedom were the reasons for nearly all the resignation letters submitted by the *évadés*. This is the overarching theme under which all other reasons can be subordinated. Ultimately they wanted to be free from the constraints and limitations of Catholic dogma and censorship.

The importance and place of dogma within their faith played a crucial part in the resignation letters. The rigid ideal of what it meant to be a good Catholic left little room for nonconformity. However, the requirement of believing the dogmas could change; if the Church were to loosen up the requirements of obedience to the declared dogmas, or let priests criticize and discuss the problems that scholars found when they researched their origin, many defrocked priests might have stayed within the Church. Of the letters, only a minority appeared to be written by completely

disillusioned unbelievers. Most of the resignations were sympathetic to the Church in tone and language. They left with a sense of sadness.

The rejection of dogma and Catholic ritual was tinged with rationalism, i.e., their reason had to be satisfied before their hearts. Elements of Catholic dogma were believed to be unfounded and a “harsh burden upon belief” said Abbé Granjon.¹⁴⁹ The loss of faith in Catholic dogma was tantamount to disbelief in Catholicism because they had vowed always to uphold the teachings of the Church. The Abbé F. Granjon declared that the dogmas represented only the dead teachings of the Catholic Church and that with “an open heart to Jesus Christ” he left. He “could no longer believe.”¹⁵⁰ The Abbé Tournier admitted to being a disciple of the reformists Albert Houtin and Alfred Loisy (see next chapter) who both left Catholicism after causing a public controversy. Tournier said he never had the strength to confront the Church to try to reconcile his convictions with the Council of Trent. Instead, he hid in the Church until his health forced him to quit.¹⁵¹ The enforcement of dogma for Tournier and Abbé Vidalot caused great resentment. Vidalot said with exasperation that dogma had replaced thought. Empty ritual, public display, and exterior religious practice took the place of sincere worship and spiritual investigation. Dogma and ritual had “made the people neglect the worship for the heart and the mind.”¹⁵² The Abbé Bourdery had been named professor of Dogma and Philosophy and Central Procurer

¹⁴⁹ Bourrier, *Ceux qui s'en vont, 1895-1904*, 68-69.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 48-49.

of missions in China. He lost his belief because of the central importance the Holy See put on dogma. For a long time, he no longer believed in Catholicism. He said he wanted to, but it would not come. As a result, he told his superior that “it cannot work.”¹⁵³ The only dogma he continued to believe was the dogma of Jesus Christ, the Jesus of the Gospels. He rejected all other dogmas, especially the mass and confession, which he singled out.¹⁵⁴

Abbé Granjon complained that while Catholics struggled to resolve the problems of the old dogmas, there were constantly new ones being added. “When one thinks to have finished making them, they define new ones and then require them with a threat of damnation—thus they grew over the centuries to become articles of faith, changing the conditions of salvation.”¹⁵⁵ The Pope’s declaration of infallibility particularly displeased Granjon: “in the point of view of history, it is a counter-truth; in the point of reason it is blasphemous; it supposes deification of a man.”¹⁵⁶ Abbé Chaboe Lemeunier said that rather than promoting Jesus’ teaching to love others as oneself, Catholicism provided extensive counsel that amounted to the following: “you can be good all your life, but if you refuse to bow under a single dogma, no matter how small, you are a traitor, a renegade, a heretic, a pariah.”¹⁵⁷

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 68-70.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 140.

Abbé Boisseau wrote with eloquence and passion about how dogmas and ritual had undermined the ability of priests to defend the faith:

At twenty years old, with blind enthusiasm and the sincerity of our souls, we fell in love with the good. We saw in the Church the true incarnation of the thought of Christ; we said to ourselves, we will be the success of the apostles. To take the sacerdotal, we studied four years in the seminary, where we learned an old science, rambling and dead, that fires in our society like an arquebus in a modern arsenal. Our superiors appreciate among us those who are best gifted with the ability to be molded and shaped. It was the promotion of exclusively passive virtues, which was to give their consent to curb their will, their intelligence, their heart, under the dancing stick of Catholic authority...others entered this world to have a little place for their elbows, a little liberty, with hopes to find men capable to help, lead, and channel their efforts. What an illusion; they woke up machines to sacraments, propagators of lucrative devotions, merchants of receipts. They saw only skepticism in the place of their ardent aspirations.¹⁵⁸

St. George Jackson Mivart, an Englishman, wrote one of the clearest articulations of the negative weight of Catholic dogma on the conscience of the priest. George Mivart had been a member of the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia, a Member of the Council of Linnean Society, and a defender of the Catholic Church against Darwin's theory of evolution, for which he became particularly famous. However, he believed in evolution himself but differentiated between the inanimate and the animate as well as the purely animal and the rational. He rejected evolution as an explanation of the development of the human mind.¹⁵⁹ At the end of his life, Mivart repudiated ecclesiastical hierarchy and was buried without religious rites. However, his friends claimed that his illness had impaired his

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹⁵⁹ "CATHOLIC ENCYCLOPEDIA: St. George Jackson Mivart." Accessed May 27, 2016. <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10407b.htm>.

judgment, and they sought to rehabilitate his place within Catholicism; as a consequence, Mivart was given a Catholic burial in 1904, four years after his death.¹⁶⁰ During his life, controversy hovered over him, his orthodoxy especially came into question after he published the letter "The Continuity of Catholicism" (originally in *Nineteenth Century*, January 1900) that Bourrier reprinted. Bourrier said Mivart's essay was one of the most referenced and best articulations of the general sentiment of the *évadés*. The article makes a case for *theological* liberalism.

In "The Continuity of the Church," Mivart accused the Church of not being conscious of its history, suggesting in fact that instead of being based on unchanging universal truth, it was a living institution that had changed its doctrines over time. This is the nature of human institutions he suggested—"to cease changing is to cease to live." He implicitly called the Church sick: "a gifted man of healthy and sane mind that is active must change his mind and his views according to the development of his intelligence."¹⁶¹

Mivart exposed the intransigence of the Church on three grounds. First, the Church had changed its stance officially on the structure and nature of the universe. The Church had once regarded the Earth as the center of the universe and the sole object of God's care. The Earth had been held to be the sole focus of God's energy that focused on the salvation of humanity. In the story of creation, God had been

¹⁶⁰ Francis Aveling, "St. George Jackson Mivart, Ph.D., M.D., F.R.S., V.P.Z.S., F.Z.S.." in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 10, (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911). 17 Mar. 2016 <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10407b.htm>>.

¹⁶¹ Bourrier, *Ceux qui s'en vont, 1895-1904*, 76-78.

anthropomorphized as a being who had descended from his throne, had made humanity in His Image, and then imposed the terrestrial nature of the human being upon the form of Jesus. The Catholic Church no longer promoted such a straightforward, anthropomorphic image of God and the Cosmos—it was too difficult to believe. Second, Christianity had become more inclusive and open than it had once been. Catholic theologians admitted that a deist who lived an honest, good life could be assured of salvation. This had once been inconceivable. Third, some people who had been repulsed by Catholic symbols chose to worship God as symbolized in Zeus or Apollo, or in female form. Could one worship like this, Mivart asked, and receive salvation? Yes, was the answer he received. This was not the same Christianity of the thirteenth century. Fourth, certain beliefs that were never a part of early Christianity, like the virgin birth of Jesus, had crept into Catholic dogma. Mivart argued that if the Church could only admit that it had been reforming itself throughout the centuries, then it would see the need to reform itself in the present. The real problem was not the Church's intransigence but rather its unwillingness to be open and honest about how it had always been in a state of change.¹⁶²

To liberal Catholics, the Church had always been in the process of change. That Pope Leo XIII in the encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* had tried to deny this fact was willful blindness. Leo XIII maintained the New Testament and the Old Testament were sacred, true, and canonical in all their parts because they were written

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 76-81.

with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Since they had God for their authority, the scriptures could not contain errors. Bourrier and Mivart accused the Holy See of playing false with the clergy. Mivart said, “despite these affirmations and the official sanction, these doctrines seemed to be abandoned today among educated Catholics.” The declaration of the Pope was only an empty motion. Instead of admitting the difficulties of archaic dogmas, “there is a ferocious intolerance...to which the Church seems to be returning.”¹⁶³

Liberal Catholics wanted the freedom of inquiry, open discussion on the merits of the dogmas, and the reform of age-old, outdated doctrines to bring the Church in line with modernity and current beliefs in science and history. For the sake of not teaching something they did not believe, they wanted to avoid teaching dogmas that they no longer held to be true. But because they were told to maintain the Catholic line of defense against all critics without being given an opportunity to discuss how to respond openly, they left. Their deconversion was an act of spiritual growth and independence. For Bourrier and Abbé Chateau, their spiritual development meant Protestantism. In one sense then, the troubles of the Catholic Church continued to be the rejection of authority that had divided Christianity since the Protestant Reformation. Abbé Chateau demanded that “the obscure dogmas, the tyrannical laws, the criminal abuses and the scandals must disappear. Liberal Christianity killed the Ultramontanists; the Protestant Reformation is a seed of fertile

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 79.

ideas.”¹⁶⁴ The Reformation continued to absorb people, showing dynamism whereas Catholicism, standing on the bedrock of an ancient and venerable institution, remained stubborn and resolute. Bourrier was hoping to see this discontent channeled into the growth of Protestantism. However, in France liberal Protestantism continued to constitute a marginal minority.

Liberal Catholicism and Protestantism demanded theological liberalism. Their liberal view of the Scriptures represented a partial transition in the deconversion process and a central stage in the development of unbelief. Liberal Catholics and Protestants crafted a pared-down Christianity with a simple doctrine that reduced the tenets of belief to a minimum: revelation was treated as no more than the expression of inspired human authors and dogma was renounced. Protestantism became a moralism with a religious and spiritual basis. While deism had gone into decline in the late nineteenth century, liberal Christianity equated to much the same thing. *Deism had been the stepping stone for unbelievers like Diderot. In the same sense, liberal Christianity represents a halfway mark in the history of unbelief.* Liberal Christianity was a step further away from organized religion that had within itself the power to regenerate itself. Liberal Catholics that abandoned the Church left the forms, the rituals, and even the Bible in a precarious position. Catholic critics were quick to point out: liberal Protestantism left the believer in the spiritual wilderness—they were free, but alone.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 124-126.

This desire for freedom was expressed in several ways. First, liberal Catholics could just leave the Church and cross into nonconformity and individualism. In *Versions of Deconversion* Barbour claims deconversion narratives had acquired a new meaning where people began to give a narrative of escape from Christian belief without providing an account of their final positive convictions. By the early twentieth century, people could articulate a deconversion without reconversion to a new creed or system of belief. Secular existence did not require it—they remained suspended in skepticism says Barbour.¹⁶⁵ Many of the resignation letters present their departures from Catholicism in just this way. *Adopting the new methods of social science and the moral values of liberalism had created what Taylor called the “buffered self” that provided them existential security, a level of certainty, and relief from spiritual fears of damnation or annihilation. Liberal Christianity was creating a New Age religion where the institutions and dogmas of the past were no longer necessary.* These liberal values overlapped with secular humanism that provided a nexus of rationalist, liberal moral values that created a less defined spirituality—a spirituality that detached itself from outdated moral institutions of an intransigent Catholicism. Second, leaving Catholicism allowed the subject to reinvent him or herself away from social pressure. For many, this meant a break from the demands of their families that had haunted and defined them most of their life. The Church and the family sometimes constituted a tremendous burden. Emancipation from the

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 73-74.

Church and the family was thus liberation from their youth, their parents, from their predetermined life path.

Several évadés expressed a clear desire for nonconformity and freedom from the burden of family and Church. Abbé Goerung, a priest from the Versailles diocese, abruptly left Catholicism after his mother died in 1899. On his walk home, he dramatically and symbolically hung his soutain on some bushes, relieved from “the hypocrisy that had been for too long imposed.” He discarded the priest’s cassock like a corrupt piece of trash, too uncomfortable to keep with him a second longer. To seal his rupture, he repeated the words of Luther, “I cannot do otherwise, may God help me.”¹⁶⁶ The Abbé Renard, a professor in Belgium at the University of Gand expressed the same sentiment as Abbé Goerung. Renard had spent 20 very long years among the Jesuits. He remained in the Church to protect his relationship with his mother, who suffered from a great deal of pain at the end of her life. He had saved her from suffering the additional anguish of her son’s crisis of faith, and this provided her the needed strength to confront the ailing pain of her body. His mother took precedence over his wishes. After his mother died, he lost his energy and became lethargic. His life felt meaningless and no longer having the guidance of his mother’s will, he left the Church and married. He had remained Christian in appearance only for his mother. In reality, science had long ago “taken his life.” Thus Renard lived an outer life of conformity for his mother and a secret inner life. *Spiritually numb, the*

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 84.

death of his mother freed him from the social obligation to believe. The convergence of liberal individualism, science, and a rejection of the self-denying values of Catholicism caused his deconversion. Renard spoke of science with a zealous and passionate tone:

...a fresh breath that enlivens the intelligence and fosters ideas that have throughout the centuries directed the conscience by creating an important and significant place for the truth of reality. As science progresses, each conquest is a decisive blow delivered to the supernatural. I declare, late without a doubt, but with all the force of my conscience as an honest man, my right to liberty...If my resolution does not have your admiration, I am persuaded that, between the unbelieving priest and the man that wants to be sincere, your esteem would not be withheld.¹⁶⁷

Emancipation from the family also took the form of moral resentment. Several of the *évadés* were angry for the kind of education they received as children that had put them on the path to becoming priests. The Abbé Lecomte, who served on a mission in the Congo and in Asia, accused the Church of having swallowed up the entirety of his life. He never took a vacation. For as long as he could remember, he had been under the watch and care of a priest who had never permitted him to leave or have any independence. He accused his elders of committing child abuse by indoctrination. They forced him to be in small seminary until he was 20 years old, then at 20 he lived in a Grand Seminary school with his *soutane*. He says it had always felt like a prison. Worse, he felt mistreated, “Where are the commandments to treat children like this?” he asked with indignation. He had been taught to be obedient, disciplined, to unquestionably accept his servitude to the Church. The

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 94.

whole time he had been “crushed by an absolute authority, while being ignorant of the world that surrounded [him]. [He] was chained to truly insensible and ridiculous superstitions and fetishes. [People] are imprinted with servitude to the sacerdotal.” For Abbé Lecomte, the members of the clergy and the children of France were victims of organizational oppression. They had become prisoners of religious close-mindedness and timidity. “Look at them,” he said, “they are all marked with an indelible stigma, a seal of slavery.”¹⁶⁸

The *évadé* L.P. Patel, expressed a similar moral outrage in his resignation from the congregation of Oblates de Marie after serving for 12 years. At first, the Church had been his great joy, because as a priest, he had been the pride of his parents. However, he said he had been poorly prepared to face the unknown. While a student, he had been kept so busy with his studies that he had never had time to make his own choices. Only when he donned the priests garb did he realize and feel the “illegitimate link” he had with Catholicism. When he realized this, it was too late. The moment to act, between his eighteenth and twentieth year, had been lost to his years of training because of the “voice against nature” implanted by despotic hosts. He called the vow of celibacy a form of “servile dependency and hypocrisy.” Severs contends that his family and his elders stunted his growth and will. After his education, he no longer had any personal initiative. He had been “deprived of [his]

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 54.

personality” as an instrument Catholicism where he was taught not to develop himself but to remain a child in tutelage.¹⁶⁹

Finally, the *évadés* stressed intellectual honesty alongside moral integrity and independence. The Abbé Felix Frapereau, a former priest of the Angers diocese, resigned the 28th of July in 1900. He wrote that he had been attached to the religion of his mother and had hoped to live and die within the Catholic faith, but his conscience would not allow it. Over the years, his spirituality had shifted among the various forms of Catholicism, from the most fixed orthodoxy to the most open liberalism and during his spiritual development had met many active minds, far from being timid. He said liberalism was at the same time a politics as well as a conviction, further it was an expedient that produced a disposition for boldness and critical autonomy. Frapereau concluded after his years of wandering that “Truth wants us to love it for itself, and one follows it for its beauty.”¹⁷⁰ A mind with cares of absolute sincerity does disinterested research. He saw both Catholicism and Protestantism as subjecting others to a system, forcing them to take part. “Was this a servant of Jesus?” he asked. The Church was sinning against the truth by maintaining two truths: one for the crowd and one for a small group of privileged elites. Frapereau left the Church with this mantra, “All the truth! All the enlightenment! And enlightenment for all!”¹⁷¹ He believed that the clues from the science of religion had encouraged people to search

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 51-53.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 87.

the reasonableness of their conscience, not in authority, their spiritual guidelines and duties.

Patel, Goerung, Lecomte, and Frapereau, asserted that spiritual and intellectual liberty are two key factors in the moral development of human personhood. Their educations, their families, and Church authorities had stunted their growth—to be men, to grow, they had to leave. It is as Chadwick said: “A mature man is a free man. He has the right to be persuaded and convinced.”¹⁷² These men wanted their freedom for self-realization and to be the masters of their destiny, but also to have a say in what orders they obeyed. Deconversion meant liberty while Catholicism meant servitude and self-abnegation. They accused the Church of the immoral practice of stifling the growth of human personality and consciousness.

Behind the individualistic revolts against Catholicism, the *évadés* rejected traditional moral values that were no longer in line with their freer more open liberal mindsets. The social historian Ralph Gibson argued that, on the whole, deconversion occurred because of the rejection of what he called *Tridentine Catholicism*, a strenuous, austere doctrine that had been formulated as a response to the Protestant Reformation. This version of Catholicism was a religion of a small urban and clerical elite who were intolerant of diverse forms of popular religions. They were obsessed with sexual repression, morality, and using threats of hell and damnation to keep the masses in line. Gibson argued that beginning in the latter half of the eighteenth

¹⁷² Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century*, 29.

century, first the elites, and then in the nineteenth century, the masses began to reject this form of Catholicism.¹⁷³

The deconversion of the *évadés* thus represented a larger, greater cultural phenomenon. People turned away from Catholicism because their modern values no longer aligned with the moral principles of the Church. People no longer liked or desired what Catholicism had to offer. The historian Gibson argued that one of the significant reasons for the dechristianization of France was the development of moral individualism. He is careful to note that it was not because the Church was politically or morally corrupt (as the anticlericals often stated). Rather, after the crisis of the Reformation, the members of the clergy adhered too strictly to a rigorous standard of out-of-date moral values. These values were a product of the Catholic Reformation, codified in the canons of the Council of Trent, that tried to impose on the mass of French men and women a particularly difficult and demanding religion, a religion developed by and for a small urban elite, which could only be imposed on the population at large by immense effort and systematic intimidation. The Catholic Reformation created an intellectual's religion. Hostile to popular culture, this elite religion rejected the world as a vale of tears and a den of iniquity; it emphasized morality (repressive sexual morality), it resisted forms of spontaneous religious expression by laymen, and it relied heavily on the threat of damnation to keep the

¹⁷³ Ralph Gibson, *A Social History of French Catholicism, 1789-1914* (London; New York: Routledge, 1989), 227-267.

faithful in line.¹⁷⁴ According to his argument, the dechristianization of France was a result of a growing rejection of a specific model of Catholicism (Tridentine Catholicism) that asked too much of its followers. It was a model developed before the Council of Trent that codified the Counter-Reformation. The Counter-Reformation promoted an anti-liberal Christian subject that would be at odds with the later rejection of dogma and overbearing moral demands.

The Vatican had long hoped that the clergy would be revitalized by the demanding requirements of the Counter-Reformation, which was to clean up the clergy and raise the moral standards for entry into the priesthood. The Counter-Reformation started by reforming the seminaries that were solidly in place by the eighteenth century that focused not so much on intellectual training but character development. The teachers at the seminaries developed a particular kind of person and personality. "This person was to be docile and obedient, serious-minded, modest, and reserved," Gibson says. "He was also taught the rejection of the world."¹⁷⁵ The reformed clergy were to be set apart and distinct from the rest of the population to maintain the respect and sacredness of their profession. They were not to engage in normal social activities, not to be friendly with their parishioners, nor participate in profane activities, such as going to the local tavern. This distance was reinforced by the distinctiveness of their dress code, the tonsure, and the cossack. Further, they resided in their parishes. The reformed clergy did not have the defects of their

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

predecessors; they largely did not have sex and they lived in their parish as chaste, conscientious residents. In the eighteenth century, many were of urban origin, for example, in 1789, 40% came from towns. The reformed clergy were themselves a representation of urban life as they often carried a hostility to popular religion that took the form of trying to replace old local saints with new ones, limiting superstitious practices, and making the focus of the religion on the next world.¹⁷⁶

The reformed clergy tried to make a clear separation between the sacred and the profane. Where before the mass had been a time of socializing, gossiping, eating, and drinking, it became a solemn and respectful event. For example, before the reformed clergy had taken control, people were known to wander about the nave during the liturgy. Catholic rituals such as funerals, baptisms, and marriages had been treated as social events. Religious processions had been treated as picnic outings to meet with friends and family and religious festivals were treated as occasions for feasting and fornicating. The reformed clergy tried to replace this frivolity with gravity and solemnity. This kind of Catholicism helped foster private revolt and deviance because of the suffocating and self-abnegating moral creed. The liberalization of Catholicism in this sense meant, breaking free from authority for the sake of spiritual optimism and levity. *This provided the breaches in the first line of Catholic defenses.* This was not outright rebellion, but rather a partial distancing that changed the nature of their religious practices and their convictions. Gibson argues

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

Tridentine Catholicism had lost its appeal and pushed people to reject the Church for social and moral reasons. We see in the *évadés* a rationalist, liberal, individualistic personality that rejected and replaced the Tridentine Catholic moral personality.

Abbé Peyron, the parish priest of the Frejus diocese, lends support to Gibson's evaluation. In Peyron's travels around the world among different cultures, he saw how people could be happy and free without the burden and fear of dogmas that taught them they were corrupted by sin and in danger of eternal damnation. They did not need confessing, communions, or crucifixion of the flesh. What does one make of this he wondered? Were they going to Hell? If the threats of damnation were accurate, this would mean only a thousandth of humanity would be going to heaven. Final judgments about God, hell, and sin gave them troubled consciences and haunted the clergy. Rejecting such a message, Peyron turned to a different vision of Jesus and a different Christianity. It was a primitive religion devoid of the accumulated dogmas. He saw in Jesus a "tender and vigorous soul, with pity and love, who preached forgiveness, softness, happiness; he was someone who did not formulate intolerant dogmas." Jesus did not excommunicate anyone, "no one but the Pharisees and the priests!" Peyron remarked.¹⁷⁷ He refused to see in God a tyrant and a persecutor of the innocent, and he left Catholicism to find another kind of Christianity. "They have made the great religion of Christ a gross fetishism and the most oppressive tyranny."¹⁷⁸ He believed the Church intolerant and guilty of preaching hate, leading

¹⁷⁷ Bourrier, *Ceux qui s'en vont, 1895-1904*, 130.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 130.

more and more members of the clergy to leave Catholicism, producing the present contemporary debacle.

Only one évadé, amongst the letters published by Bourrier, explicitly said that he had left the Church because of contemporary Catholic politics. Abbé G. Russacqu, a former priest of the Orleans diocese, did not leave the Church because he ceased to be Catholic but because he had been persecuted for his politics. “I withdrew” he lamented. “The persecuted have a right to remove themselves. It was with tears and not without regrets.”¹⁷⁹ When he entered the clergy, he had not been told that dogmatic orthodoxy would impose a confessional politics. His first significant break with the Catholic ranks came during the Dreyfus Affair. He refused to support nationalism at the cost of justice and the life of an innocent man. In his eyes, the Church only saw that Dreyfus was Jewish and used this to profit from religious polemic. To hide his politics, he refrained from voting. His colleagues did not forgive his support of the left and surrounded him in “an atmosphere of defiance and hostility.” He believed that the Church should not have played politics, but rather it should have sought to build a bridge between the political divisions to support reconciliation and peace. He believed that Catholics could not let go of the memory of when Catholicism was the privileged religion of the state. With dismay, Russacqu said, “Those who are injured by the spectacle of political influence, who are called to

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, 109-110.

the faith, who do not cherish the memory of the old regime, and who rally to liberal patronage and republicanism, we persecute.”¹⁸⁰

None of the *évadés* in the letters published by Bourrier admitted to being atheists, although members such as Marcel Hébert and Victor Charbonnel would later become freethinkers. Hébert wrote the most aggressive and combative denunciation of Christianity among Bourrier’s published letters. Hébert had been pushed out of the clergy because of a small unpublished essay he had given to some of his students who were no longer attending the Lycée. Word got out of its radical and heretical contents, and the authorities expelled him from his employment at the school. His expulsion accelerated his rupture. Next, he published the essay, *Souvenirs d’Assiss* in *La Revue Blanche* in 1902. He stated he was not an unbeliever, but neither was he Christian. He no longer believed in a personal God due to the problem of evil. After reading historical criticism, the Gospels and Christ appeared to him as no more than the idealization of the human conscience. For Hébert, Christianity became a collection of symbols and myths. While Bourrier treated him respectfully, Hébert critiqued his journal *Chrétien français* for continuing to promote Protestantism. Liberal Protestants, he said, were “still chained to the infallibility of a book and a man, Jesus Christ...Protestantism is a half measure, an equivocation, like symbolic Catholicism; these are the expedients of transition. Cultivated humanity will move beyond these

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 107.

phantoms.”¹⁸¹ Hébert turned to what he called the cult of truth, justice, and solidarity—a new set of principles that worshiped progress.

Looking at Bourrier’s project today, it appears that the pleas of Bourrier and the *évadés* to leave Catholicism and join the Protestant movement came to very little. The crisis he claimed for Catholicism may have been very real; nonetheless, his liberal, primitive Christianity did not create a sustainable new Church remembered today. In France, the breaking away from Catholicism left the *évadés* without foundation, without support. They were cast adrift into a place between freethinkers, Protestants, and the unattached. There was no sustained momentum to join the Protestants. Bourrier represented the height of the Protestant campaign. Theodore Stanton concluded this in 1893, which could be said after 1905 as well:

[Protestantism] has, at most, only a small band of followers, nearly lost to view in the vast army of Catholicism and Freethought. Furthermore, the Liberal wing is losing ground and the Orthodox wing gaining slightly, not an encouraging sign in these days to those who hope for the final triumph of faith over the growing tendency towards infidelity. The real truth is that about the only strength left in French Protestantism today lies in the fact that there is a certain *éclat* associated, in the eyes of the upper classes, with being a Protestant, much as is the case in America and England, in the same rank, about being a Roman Catholic. It distinguishes you from the multitude, and in these democratic times, human nature, especially when it is that of the “upper ten,” is very keen for elimination from “the vulgar throng.”¹⁸²

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹⁸² Theodore Stanton, “The Correspondence,” in Paul Carus, *Monism: Its Scope and Import. A Review of the Work of the Monist ... By the Editor (Dr. P. Carus), Etc.* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Co., 1891), 451.

The missing middle: Charles Loyson

Certes la tentation est grande pour le prêtre qui abandonne l'Église de se faire démocrate; il retrouve ainsi l'absolu qu'il a quitté, des confrères, des amis : il ne fait en réalité que changer de secte. Telle fut la destinée de Lamennais. Une des grandes sagesse de M. l'abbé Loyson a été de résister sur ce point à toutes les séductions et de se refuser aux caresses que le parti avancé ne manque jamais de faire à ceux qui rompent les liens officiels. Ernest Renan, *Souvenirs d'enfance et de jeunesse* (1893)



Tombe au cimetière du Père-Lachaise



¹⁸³ Wikimedia Commons contributors, "File:Hyacinthe Loyson by Pierre Petit, 1870.jpg," *Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository*, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Hyacinthe Loyson by Pierre Petit, 1870.jpg&oldid=175717234](https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Hyacinthe_Loyson_by_Pierre_Petit,_1870.jpg&oldid=175717234) (accessed August 3, 2018).

¹⁸⁴ Wikimedia Commons contributors, "File:Père-Lachaise - Hyacinthe Loyson 01.jpg," *Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository*, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Père-Lachaise - Hyacinthe Loyson 01.jpg&oldid=140906760](https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:P%C3%A8re-Lachaise_-_Hyacinthe_Loyson_01.jpg&oldid=140906760) (accessed August 3, 2018).

When people turned away from traditional, conservative Catholicism, France lacked a viable alternative to absorb their spiritual energy into a meaningful movement or organization. Protestantism had a marginal ability to acquire and grow its numbers. Further, liberal Christianity was competing with organized groups such as the Freemasons and freethinkers in attracting these wandering souls. French Catholicism lacked a moderate middle to hold onto the liberal reformers. This lack of a middle facilitated the growth of unbelief. The best example of trying and failing to make a new middle was not Bourrier but Charles Loyson, also known as Père Hyacinthe. Loyson holds particular interest because he illuminates another contour of the religious crisis in the second half of the nineteenth century. Loyson wanted to reform Catholicism, but he refused to convert to Protestantism. Bourrier's small group of Protestants left few traceable marks, nor did Loyson's reformed Catholicism. The Church had so come to dominate French culture, that it seemed that the only viable spirituality that could hold weight and significance was Catholicism. Religious faith in France was going to sink or float with the successes or failures of the Church.

Charles Jean Marie Loyson (1827-1912) represents the failure of the middle in French religious life. He was one of the most renowned *évadés* of the nineteenth century who left the Church out of a desire to promote a simpler and more progressive Catholicism. He was perhaps the great symbol of Catholic reform after Lamennais. In 1845, he entered Saint-Sulpice and was ordained in 1850. He taught philosophy at the Avignon Seminary, Theology at Nantes, and later officiated in his ecclesiastical capacity at St. Sulpice in Paris. In 1860, he decided to become a

Carmelite monk, where he took the name Père Hyacinthe and entered their order in Lyon where he began to attract attention and fame for his progressive sermons and oratory talent. He soon received an invitation to deliver his sermons at the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris. His time in Paris was controversial, however, due to his progressive views. Loyson considered himself a liberal Catholic. In 1861, he defined his liberal position as having a sincere respect for liberty that was united with authority and dedicated to the needs of civil society necessary for the particular century or the country where he lived. He said that liberalism meant the disdain of error and of vice without losing affection for those who erred.¹⁸⁵ In more practical terms his liberalism amounted largely to the wish for decentralized authority, to a much greater inclusion of other faiths and believers, and after 1869, to rejecting the infallibility of the Pope. He especially yearned for a more participatory role for members of the clergy such as himself.

His honored role and assured place in the Church came to an end when the Vatican called him to Rome in 1868 and told him to preach only approved, uncontroversial subjects. However, he was not able to hold his opinions to himself. In 1869, when he presented before the International League of Peace, he declared that Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism were great traditions of peace and civilization. For conservative Catholics this was heretical. His speech before the League of Peace at Paris set him apart from the more cautious and conservative

¹⁸⁵ Houtin, *Le père Hyacinthe dans l'église romaine, 1827-1869*, Vol I, 112.

Catholics in his willingness to praise a multicultural, religious cosmopolitanism that he believed civilized humanity and shared the same virtues. He declared, "It is a most palpable fact that there is no room in the daylight of the civilized world except for these three religious communions, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Judaism!"¹⁸⁶ This sounds rather innocuous to the reader today, but this caused a round of criticisms against Loyson. Critics called him a liberal for considering Catholicism to be the equal of the two incomplete traditions of Protestantism and Judaism. After he had been asked to rescind this heresy, Loyson revolted. Instead of humbling himself before the Vatican, he wrote a manifesto, delivered before the Barefooted Carmelites at Rome, that expressed his displeasure with the Papacy. He blamed the Church leadership for all the problems that it currently faced.

My deepest conviction is that, if France in particular, and the Latin races in general, are delivered from the social, moral and religious anarchy, the principal cause is without a doubt, not within Catholicism itself, but in the manner in which Catholicism has for so long been understood and practiced."¹⁸⁷

Because Loyson was unwilling to submit, the Vatican excommunicated Père Hyacinthe on October 10, 1869, for his defiance. Forced to leave, he retook his original name, Charles Loyson. He traveled to America for a short time where he was hailed as a hero among American Protestants, but he did not abandon the Catholic faith.

¹⁸⁶ Houtin, *Le père Hyacinthe dans l'église romaine, 1827-1869*, 201.

¹⁸⁷ Loyson, letter of demission "Paris-Passy, 20 Sep 1869," in Albert Houtin, *Le père Hyacinthe dans l'église romaine, 1827-1869: avec un portrait*, 322.

Loyson's departure from the Church caused a dramatic pause among Catholics. The Ultramontanes feared he would create a schism as great as Luther's. Loyson's name was known, and he had become famous from his sermons at Notre Dame in the 1860s. Loyson's views provided liberals and progressive Catholics a public voice for their views. However, Loyson did not make a loud public declaration when he had the ears of the Catholic world. He represented what might have been. In the US where he was greeted by throngs of supporters, mainly Protestants, he was treated like a hero and invited him to give public speeches. He turned them down however and kept silent. He did not want to injure the Church so loudly. Plus, he discovered in the United States that his radicalism had its limits. For instance, he was shocked by a Protestant family that had not baptized their children because they considered baptism by blessed water a superstition. In their eyes, only the spirit was necessary.¹⁸⁸

The Church's critique of his liberal position pushed him to make a bolder stance for what he believed. Refusing to accommodate him, it increased his radicalization as a rogue Catholic. His estrangement from the Church and his sense of divine purpose caused him to ponder starting a Church of his own. Before his rupture, he had already fallen in love with Emilie Jane Butterfield Merriman, an American woman he had converted to Catholicism, and she fed his sense of purpose. They both maintained that Christianity was the only true religion, but that it was not

¹⁸⁸ Houtin, *Le père Hyacinthe dans l'église romaine, 1827-1869: avec un portrait*, 1920, 9-15.

limited to a single expression or form. Catholicism was not a defined and unchanging tradition, but one that had many possibilities that could be further perfected. In Loyson's mind, he walked a middle line between liberalism and the fanatic idolatry of the Pope. While he potentially caused a rift in the Church, what he truly sought was a greater unity among Catholics that would bring people back to the pews. He thought the conservatives had turned the Church into a political party, thus repulsing those of different political tastes.¹⁸⁹

The celibacy of the clergy weighed heavy upon Loyson. Several years after his excommunication, he married Emilie Merriman in 1872. She had been converted to Catholicism by Loyson and had fallen for him in the process. She both loved and venerated Loyson as a future prophet for a reformed faith. Loyson and Merriman saw themselves as the potential leaders of a great mission that might sweep over the Christian world. They optimistically and naively thought that, rather than making a public declaration of disobedience like Luther's, they would acquire followers by the example of their marriage, their union of love. It failed to work. "I did it for God and humanity," he said in his twilight years, "for reason and for the conscience, but I do not hide the holy inspiration of love."¹⁹⁰

Not finding a way to channel his talents and his sincere feelings of being on a spiritual mission to redeem Catholicism, he languished until he received an offer from

¹⁸⁹ Loyson, letters, April August 1871, in Albert Houtin, *Le Père Hyacinthe (Loyson). Réformateur catholique, 1869-1893, Vol 2*, 1922, 76.

¹⁹⁰ Loyson, journal, May 1910, in Houtin, *Le Père Hyacinthe (Loyson). Réformateur catholique, 1869-1893*, 123.

a break-off group of Catholics in Switzerland. Loyson was invited to Geneva, Switzerland, to set up an independent Church without the approval of the pope. The Church in Geneva had a loophole that allowed the local parishes to choose their priests. Loyson, then tried to find a way to circumvent the Vatican hierarchy by promoting the establishment of national Churches within an international federation as a way to decentralize the hierarchical order. However, he eventually felt that he was leading a small sect, and so he resigned. He was determined to provide an alternative to Catholicism while saying he did not want to abandon Catholicism. In 1879, he returned to Paris after his ten-year exodus and opened up a separate Church. In 1880, he united a solitary “Catholic” church with the Gallican tradition by taking the name Gallican Church. He joined forces with the Old Catholics, where Loyson continued to advocate national Churches as part of an international confederation. Loyson articulated its principles as the rejection of the infallibility of the pope, the election of bishops by the clergy and Christian people, reading of the Holy Scriptures in the national language, freedom to marry for priests, the freedom and morality of the confession, and the elimination of fees for Church activities.¹⁹¹ With his mission defined, the great orator that had once overflowed the pews at the Cathedral de Notre Dame took his perch in a small church in the Rue d'Arras and gave it his utmost, but alas, he only ever had a handful of followers in 1893. After the sad disappointment,

¹⁹¹ Houtin, *Le Père Hyacinthe (Loyson). Réformateur catholique, 1869-1893*, 228-229.

he eventually abandoned his separatist Church from a lack of followers and funding which was to leave him without an occupation and a clear mission until his death.

Loyson's rupture with Catholicism occurred in several stages. First, ambition underlay Loyson's actions. He received great encouragement from his Carmelite fathers who told him he had been blessed with special gifts. An elder told him he was the sign of God for which he had prayed to help renovate the monastic order. This fed Loyson's ambitions and sense of purpose. He was later aided by the support of his wife, who felt that he had a divine purpose and a God-given plan. After Loyson's death, a colleague wrote about his experiences with Loyson at the monastery. He said that his "pride led him to believe he knew Church interests better than the Church; that it was in need of profound changes and that he would be its reformer."¹⁹² This ambition ultimately resulted in his creation of a rival Church, hoping to attract members with his oratory powers, progressive values, and fame.

Second, his rupture occurred from his desire to find a remedy to a religious crisis that Rome failed to recognize fully. Like Bourrier, he felt France was in the throes of a significant spiritual crisis. For Loyson, the spiritual crisis was both material and intellectual. He said that economic misery entombed too many people in despair and inequity, which had not been seen since the time of Samuel. He considered the unchurched working class to possess a morality lower than that of idolaters. In 1867, Loyson wrote that unless France turned toward God, the French

¹⁹² E.L., *L'Univers*, May 9 and 10, 1912 as cited in Houtin, *Le père Hyacinthe dans l'église romaine, 1827-1869*.

would be vanquished by the Prussians. How sadly vindicated he must have felt in 1869! To Loyson, French society was “plunged in skepticism.”¹⁹³ In their correspondence, Frédéric Le Play and Loyson commiserated on the worsening condition of faith in France. Le Play was convinced that theology no longer touched or concerned ordinary French citizens. He concluded that the theology that Catholicism taught to win back the people worked better when they were already true believers. Instead, Catholicism needed to enlist the aid of the new forms of knowledge as found in the social sciences. Loyson believed that the social sciences should be enlisted as a new arm Catholicism. This sentiment caused Loyson himself to change his teachings. In his last years in the Church, he had ceased to teach the dogmas. In 1867, he gave six conferences on the subject of civil society and its relation to Christianity that had a temporal focus: domestic society, sovereignty, religion in the life of nations, the upper class between the nations, war, and civilization. As noted above, in response, the Pope personally told him to stop preaching unless he received official approval. However, Houtin, his biographer, said that Loyson at this time “could no longer preach the Catholic dogmas imposed by a strict dogmatic authority.”¹⁹⁴ The greatest service he could render to the dogmas was to talk about them as little as possible. His religion was too profound and open for the Christian religion of the middle ages, or so his biographer Houtin concluded. What is clear, in trying to deal with the perceived religious crisis, he strayed further away

¹⁹³ Loyson, letter, 5 October 1867 in Houtin, *Le père Hyacinthe dans l'église romaine, 1827-1869*, 190.

¹⁹⁴Houtin, *Le père Hyacinthe dans l'église romaine, 1827-1869*, 190.

from traditional Catholicism. The Christian message had to be relevant to and resonate with the people.

Loyson was motivated to find an alternative to Ultramontanism and the infallibility of the Pope. He passionately objected to the consecration of the values enshrined in the Syllabus of Errors and the doctrine of papal infallibility that turned liberals against Catholicism. He predicted and feared that future developments in the religious life of the people would henceforth diverge, leaving conservative and traditional thinkers behind. The secular world would continue without the influence of the Church. In his testament, he wrote, “The one who is most at fault, is not France, but the Church...It has never ceased to dream of temporal power and clerical reaction, and it has poorly pursued these ambitions with the mask of a Catholic Republic and Christian socialism.”¹⁹⁵ The Holy See was destroying itself with its intransigence: “Leave these men encased in a path to the abyss with their fanaticism as blind as it is self-centered and domineering” was his fierce condemnation of his superiors.¹⁹⁶

In one of his letters in 1884, he wrote that there were three challenges to Catholicism: rationalism, Protestantism, and Ultramontanism. He wanted to hold a line between all of these. Rationalism, he said, suppressed revelation and turned the Bible into a wholly human production. In addition, it had transformed religion such

¹⁹⁵Loyson letter to Archbishop, 1st April 1904 in Houtin, *Le Père Hyacinthe (Loyson). Réformateur catholique, 1869-1893, vol 2, 286.*

¹⁹⁶Loyson Journal, 1868 October 1868 May to May 1869 in Houtin, *Le père Hyacinthe dans l'église romaine, 1827-1869.*

that it derived “truth” entirely from human nature and reason. Protestantism retained revelation but removed the living Church and replaced the collective faith of the Church for individual faith. Ultramontanism was a false Catholicism. It was the error that perhaps most revolted him because it came from within the Church. He called it Papism because the Pope had become a false idol: the declaration of infallibility had turned a man into a minor deity who claimed to possess a transcendent power above lesser mortals.¹⁹⁷ Loyson’s critique of Rationalism, Protestantism, and Ultramontanism represents a struggle over spiritual authority and autonomy. All three factors are embraced by the spiritual, liberal individualism found among Bourrier’s *évadés*.

Loyson represented a middle ground for those who wanted to stay close to Catholicism; he tried to offer an alternative to the extremes of the spiritual, liberal individualism he saw causing spiritual drift among the people. He held on to some conservative values: he gave sermons on the importance of the family, criticized the practice of divorce, and rejected the implementation of secular schools promoted by the anticlericals. Strangely it did not attract very many people. It was this lack of attraction of the middle road that made Catholicism so difficult to maintain. The lack of compromise suggests that one was either entirely for traditional Catholicism or against it. Loyson recounted how anarchists and young Catholics organized frightening charivaris against him and his independent Church. The conservative

¹⁹⁷ Loyson Letters, 5 Janvier 1884 in Houtin, *Le Père Hyacinthe (Loyson). Réformateur catholique, 1869-1893, vol 2, 245.*

press held a complete silence about his project to avoid giving Loyson any publicity and additional support. Monarchist journals followed him because he continued to support a clerical agenda. A writer of one of the monarchists journals told him that he supported Loyson 80%, but because of his readers, he was obliged to critique him. A republican writer who worked for the Lyon journal *Progrès* said he could not support Loyson's ideas because he made Catholicism less impossible. Loyson concluded sadly, "The truth is that we are alone, surrounded by adversaries and without a place of support. I am between the free thinkers and the ultramontanes."¹⁹⁸ At the same time, he believed that Protestantism had no future in France.

Social Catholicism

Catholicism failed to find a middle ground among liberal-minded Catholics such as Loyson. After the failures of Lamennais in the 1830s and the reaction against the revolution of 1848, liberal Catholicism had been in retreat. However, there was a response among some Catholics to inhumane working conditions of industrial workers and to political liberalism that took the form of social Catholicism and Christian democracy.

The reinvention of Catholicism via the Social Catholic movement turned it from a religion focused on the afterlife and the salvation of the soul, as preached in Tridentine Catholicism, to one focused on the temporal world. Social change was

¹⁹⁸ Loyson letters from Dijon, 18 Nov 1888 and August 1890, in Houtin, *Le Père Hyacinthe (Loyson). Réformateur catholique, 1869-1893, vol 2*, 258.

transforming Catholicism. The secular and the religious intersected with social Catholicism because it concentrated on the material conditions of life. Social Catholicism was secular Catholicism, or perhaps temporal Catholicism. Rather than looking for a new middle ground, Social Catholicism was a radical shift, and it is perhaps because of this that it was hard to make the transition for other Catholics who were unaccustomed to this kind of practice.

While Loyson tried to open up Catholicism to a more inclusive spirituality, others worked on bringing the lower classes back into the fold. Social Catholicism stemmed from the neglected relationship between the Church and the industrial proletariat. Industrial workers were for the most part less religious than the rest of the population, such that many working-class neighborhoods were considered to be missionary areas. Further, industrial communities became less and less religious over time, although the rates of religious participation were diverse and varied greatly from region to region. For example, in the ultra-Catholic diocese of Rodez, 73 percent of the males took Easter communion, against 43 percent at Decazeville and 30 percent in the mining town of Villefranche.¹⁹⁹

Social Catholicism was not a widespread or numerically significant response for it worked slowly and incrementally on addressing the problem. In Catholicism's long history it existed under numerous social systems such as slavery, feudalism, and capitalism. Faithful to its methods, the Church did not provoke revolution but rather

¹⁹⁹ Gibson, *A Social History of French Catholicism, 1789-1914*, 216.

worked by transforming society by constant action from within the system. From 1871 to 1891, social Catholicism could be “regarded as consisting of a single organization, and of three men: La Tour du Pin, Albert du Mun, and Léon Harmel that had as its organ the *Oeuvre des Cercles* and *Rerum Novarum*.” Harmel helped with practical matters such as creating education for adult workers, instituting organizations for help with employment, and providing legal advice and medical consultations. Albert de Mun led rightwing social Catholicism in the 1870s and used the journal *Oeuvre des Cercles* as his mouthpiece. De Mun worked from 1879 onwards to get members elected to parliament so they could get safeguards for the working class translated into law. The enterprise had a strikingly paternalistic character led by the upper classes who sought to help and save those in the lower classes. One result was a retardation in the development of working-class leaders.²⁰⁰

As noted above, in 1891, Pope Leo XIII issued the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* on the 15th of May, 1891 as a response to the decline in Church attendance among working-class Catholics. *Rerum Novarum* outlined the position of the Church and its response to the problems created by the industrial revolution and would define the character of social Catholicism for half a century. It told Catholics that Christian principles must be applied to the working classes and they could not remain indifferent to the abuses of capitalism. Next Leo XIII issued *Au milieu des*

²⁰⁰ Dansette, Adrien. *Histoire religieuse de la France contemporaine, Vol 2*. Paris: Flammarion, 1951, 180-215.

sollicitudes that defined the new political character. The Pope wanted to make a further step by reconciling Catholicism with the Republic and democracy by stating that they were not incompatible. Government is always the rule of men, and if they make good laws and are good men, Catholicism should be able to work with them. However, the results of *Rerum Novarum* were small. The historian Dansette concluded that “When the century opened, *Rerum Novarum* was not yet ten years old and Leo XIII, looking back on the accomplishment of the Eldest Daughter of the Church, could well have asked himself whether his appeal had not gone unheard.”²⁰¹

Social Catholicism sought a middle ground between socialism, liberalism, and the problems of inequality. Catholics such as de Mun and La Tour du Pin created programs in the industrial suburbs by sending social elites to mix with the working class. They hoped to start clubs throughout France and rebuild the faith from the ground up. They planned to meet Sundays for devotional exercises and respectable social amusements. These were called the *Oeuvre des cercles*, which were deeply conservative organizations against the tradition of the Revolution. The *Oeuvres des cercles* were hierarchical and paternal; the working class was to acquire better morals and behaviors through the example of their social superiors. However, Social Catholicism could also be a more direct appeal to the working class, one that accepted the Republic, and organized itself with “worker priests.” It was most successful in Reims where at its height it had some 20,000 adherents. The *Union nationale*, led by

²⁰¹ Dansette, *Religious History of Modern France*, vol 2, 136.

Abbé Garnier, had an estimated membership of 12,500 workers, although many of these members were small shopkeepers and the real participation of the workers is somewhat unclear.²⁰² One of the notable achievements in Reims was the creation of mixed associations between workers and managers. In addition, large festivals of working-class Catholics were held in Reims, a clear sign of its regional success. The meetings could be massive. During one gathering, Garnier gave a speech in the promotion of *Rerum Novarum* to six thousand adherents.

Social Catholicism was a much more successful reform program than Loyson's efforts. It did not make the infallibility of the Pope an issue and avoided heretical ideas. It marked a major attempt of the Church to reach out to the working class that coincided with the Ralliement and the acceptance of Republican government as an acceptable form of government. *However, social Catholicism focused on the problems of this world. Thus, its reforms can be seen as another transitional shift away from traditional Catholicism.* This temporally focused spirituality found its legitimacy in the material well-being of the present life. For example, during the third congress meeting of Social Catholics in Reims in 1896, they decided to found a Christian democratic party, with a national congress limited to wage earners. They made concrete demands for a voice in politics, improved salaries, insurance funds for accidents, sickness, and unemployment, and an arbitration mechanism. Christian Democrats also wanted to limit the hours of work,

²⁰² Gibson, *A Social History of French Catholicism, 1789-1914*, 217-218.

especially for woman and children, to have a share in the profits of their work, and to have certain forms of property free from liability. Léon Harmel led the Christian Democrats until 1901 and advocated separate trade unions for Catholics.

The Christian Democrat Theodore Garnier serves as a case study of how temporal concerns became the priority. He was *Directeur d'oeuvres des Cercles Catholiques d'ouvriers* (Director of Charity and of the Catholic Circle of Workers). As a priest, he made numerous speeches in the Catholic Congresses about the social question and Catholic charity. The journal *Le Voltaire* called him a socialist priest, while the conservative journal *La Croix* said he had the regrettable and distasteful character of pursuing the benefits of the here-and-now.²⁰³ Garnier saw himself as the way between socialism and economic, Catholic conservatism. He believed that the religious crisis in France was at root a social problem. He said that the “rising wave of socialism threatened to submerge all. Only trouble, only violence on the horizon!”²⁰⁴ He planned to take Catholicism to the mines, the countryside, the cities, and the factories so Christianity could be spread through a political platform of ameliorating the material conditions of the working classes. “We multiply everywhere,” he said “the material and moral charity that is the application of the Gospel.”²⁰⁵ He wanted to bring hope to a France that was paralyzed in dealing with its problems. To his critics, he said it was important that he was at least trying to

²⁰³ *Le Voltaire*, 20 December 1895, “L’Abbé Garnier.”

²⁰⁴ *Archives nationales*, 6068.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

confront social ills of society and doing something positive. He hoped to remake France into a Christian nation through the medium of social justice.

He made his appeal by arguing that it was Christianity that had redeemed the dignity of the common man in the eyes of society. Garnier credited Christianity with taming and civilizing the world. In contrast, the French Revolution and the years between 1791 and 1802 were the years without religion in France. In his mind, these were regressive years unchecked by the moderating influence of religion. The social and political problems of France would be best resolved with Christian prudence and values.

Garnier's third way between liberal negligence and socialist revolution consisted in using the Church as the glue that would hold society together, for he believed this had always been its role. He explicitly rejected the ideas of anarchists as utopian dreams. He accused them of naively thinking human beings to be perfect angels and for putting too much emphasis on the corruption of human nature by social institutions. Nonsense, he argued. Society needed order, structure, and hierarchy guided by the virtue and justice that Christianity provided. Led by Christian virtues, he sought to reform temporal society so that it would be fair and humane to all participants. He called for real and practical changes such as making Sunday a day of rest by law, something Christianity had always promoted. He wanted to reintegrate nuns back into hospital work. Workers and managers were to be brought together to improve and manage working conditions. He chastised the rich and powerful who

controlled industrial labor under a new form of wage slavery imposed on the poor and accused industrial managers of stealing the fruits of the worker's labor. The Church teaches respect for the body and for the souls of all, so true and honest Christianity would teach the managers to respect the worker by providing humane and fair working conditions. Further, he called for the management of machines, which he said usurped the place of the worker. They needed to be regulated and rationalized. Work and machines are for the aid of people—people are not for the aid and work of machines. Plus, unemployment and the supply of work should be rationalized because those who cannot work are reduced to extreme acts and immorality. It was better for all of society to help the unemployed. He argued that taxes should be reduced and no longer be taken from the poor to be used for militarism. Further, he wanted to regenerate the institution of the family; with the loss of Christianity in the social life of France, the family has decline that could be seen in the declining birth rate, rising crime, and increased suicide. According to Garnier, most of the problems could be reduced to the lack of virtue in society—the monetary crisis, fraud and corruption in large corporations, the failure to represent people's interest fairly—and all would be remedied by sincere Christian practice.

In short, Garnier believed that Christianity could resolve the material abuses of society, if only they became good Christians. If Christianity were adequately applied to the questions of salary, hours of work, and the habits of personal and professional life, there would no longer be a crisis. Workers and bosses would find just compromises. To save the world, it needed justice on Earth, which Christianity

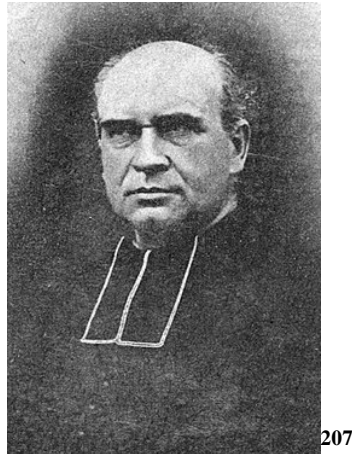
could provide. Garnier promoted a humanist Christianity that sought validation through social justice, compromise and charity for the here and now. If this is compared to the gloomy portrayal of sin and penitence of the Tridentine Catholicism, this is practically and realistically another religion—a worldly one built on practical results and social reform. Garnier advocated ideas that were found amongst socialists; however, he differed from them in advocating the central position and top-down hierarchy of the Church. The Church should be the moral shepherd. He wanted social justice reform but not revolution.

Since the middle ages and the conversion of the barbarians, historical Christianity had claimed that it could regenerate civilization and create a better, kinder, humanity. Yet during the liberal revolution of 1789, the role of Christianity had been deeply put into question. Instead, what was needed was emancipation and liberation from the oppressive forces of human institutions, with which the Church had grown deeply intertwined. Socialism provided one of the great functional equivalents to religion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that promised a total regeneration of society. Garnier sought to co-opt this ideology and make it part of Christianity, redefining Christianity and harking back to Christianity's more revolutionary roots and egalitarian principles.

Of all the Popes, Leo XIII may have supported this but in general Catholic leaders were too intertwined with the Old Regime and medieval Tridentine Catholicism. Catholicism had developed a full-scale ideology of resistance to the

ideas of Bourrier, Loyson, Garnier and the new modern social movements and new methods of interpretation. The ideology of resistance manifested itself in reoccurring papal condemnations of liberalism by encyclicals in 1832, in the Syllabus of Errors in 1864, the new dogma of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary, and the declaration of papal infallibility. Tridentine Catholicism was defended and championed by the Ultramontanes who were highly dogmatic, antirationalist, and zealous in their piety. The Church had essentially made an alliance of faith with the common people that was at odds with scientific and political advancements of the period. When Social Catholicism tried to address the wrongs of society, Pius X criticized it for its lack of deference for authority and hierarchy, condemning it as revolutionary and putting an end to the Social Catholic Sillon movement. Hugh McLeod said that traditional Catholics defended political conditions that supported a Catholic ghetto buttressed by a faith of the masses.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁶ McLeod, *Religion and the People of Western Europe: 1789-1989*, 150-154.



Théodore Garnier

Conclusion

The nature of worship and spirituality had changed in the nineteenth and twentieth century. The age of democracy and liberalism had created a new set of values that required the freedom of discussion, a reformulation of old dogmas, and a recognition of the importance of equality. The liberty and freedom of spiritual exploration to deal with the problems of Church dogma required a more open and middle ground to politics and worship that was politically rejected by the leadership of the Church. The abandonment of Catholicism often involved a moral rejection of a harsh, unforgiving God and the moral rejection of the deification of the Pope as the source of unquestioned authority. This insulted the liberal self that wanted to be persuaded and convinced as a mature, moral person free from the domination of

²⁰⁷ Wikimedia Commons contributors, "File:Garnier, Théodore (France libre, 1897-09-12).jpg," *Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository*, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Garnier, Th%C3%A9odore \(France libre, 1897-09-12\).jpg&oldid=262354752](https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Garnier, Th%C3%A9odore (France libre, 1897-09-12).jpg&oldid=262354752) (accessed August 3, 2018).

authority, tradition, and family. The Church needed a new Reformation to match the new methods of knowledge and individualistic values promoted by liberalism. Liberal Catholicism as seen by Bourrier wanted to connect the Church to the notion of progress and change that permitted a broad foundation of freedom for its practitioners and room for disagreement. Progress meant allowing the freedom of thought but also accepting the notion of a Church in continual spiritual transformation, as the *évadés* felt themselves to be.

Roman Catholicism had built a religious structure of creeds rendered old and out of date at a speed not experienced before the modern period. A liberal and reformed Catholic movement would have provided a space for growth and change within for those who theologically differed. Seeking to protect the faith of the masses, whose questioning of the dogmas and knowledge of theological problems was minimal, the Church suppressed and censored the middling leaders, the parish priests, of the Catholic hierarchy. Not having the status and privileges of the highest rungs of the clergy, they did not have the loyalty or will to suppress their conscience. None of the *évadés* were Bishops or Cardinals. The Church did not possess enough social capital in the age of industrialization and commercialization to maintain their control and submission. It was these parish priests who were educated, informed, and growingly liberal who needed more than tradition to hold their loyalty. Instead, they were told to maintain the Catholic line of defense against all critics; unable to have an open discussion, they left. The Church lost the loyalty of its middling officer class. Their deconversion was an act of spiritual self-realization, moral growth, and

independence. According to the testimonies of former priests, their deconversion meant liberty, which became configured in the development of their “self” that put liberty as an essential part of their moral personhood. Deconversion also meant intellectual freedom and escape from political alienation.

There was no middle ground to bind these middling-level priests to Catholicism. Bourrier represented a weakening of traditional Catholicism. The Protestantism advocated by Bourrier had few adherents as Protestantism did not have the drawing power or cultural support to draw in French Christians, which existed in a feeble form since the time it had been suppressed by Louis XIV in 1685. The effects across the *longue durée* of revoking the Edict of Nantes would come back to undermine French Christianity ironically. The institutional support and networks that might have made Protestantism a spiritual alternative in a Christian market of religious choice was sorely lacking, such that the fate of Christianity in France hung upon the success and failure of French Catholicism. Further, his Protestant brand of primitive Christianity that rejected Catholic dogmas and sacraments closely resembled a kind of benevolent deism. In the process of weakening traditional religion, this liberal religion rejected the forms and rituals that held the Catholic community together. With the rejection of authority, liberal Catholics effectively pushed outside of the Church structure and Catholic ritual, leaving them estranged. But for those who left, what would keep future generations of like-minded people loyal to a standard conception of God? They were creating freebelievers, what Loyson would become at the end of his life. Freebelief lacks the social weight to

bring people together with the will to imprint a coherent belief into social structures and norms that guarantees cultural survival. In the twentieth century, French people would become “culturally Catholic.”

There were other issues as well. Loyson’s attempt to find an alternative to Ultramontane Catholicism failed to attract enough people. People were curious to see Loyson, but not to officially leave the Church to follow an excommunicated rogue priest. The social cost of joining his new Church was too high. Loyson was mocked and critiqued from all quarters. Bourrier and Loyson represent the failed middle ground that might have shored up and protected the Church from losing the loyalty of the faithful. Social Catholicism coincided with this move by making the amelioration of the material conditions of the working class proof of the religious legitimacy of Christianity. Garnier did not argue that people should believe because the message of Christ was true. The legitimacy of Christianity was to be found not by the compelling message of Christianity but by how it could fix and resolve the issues of modern and contemporary life. Social Catholicism can be taken to be a different religion than Tridentine Catholicism. In trying to confront modernity, reformers were attempting to transform Catholicism into something different, which displayed how the original message of Christianity that held firm in the middle ages had weakened and lost the persuasiveness it once possessed.

Catholicism faced numerous crises around the end of the nineteenth century that it failed to surmount. It buckled under the demands of the modern liberal self that

embraced as essential the liberty of conscience, the critique of a rigid hierarchy, and the rejection of a sole authority. Catholicism reeled from the loss of its constituencies who now lived through the misery of industrial exploitation of labor that rendered them deaf and oblivious to the condemnations of hellfire, the requirement of confession, and the calls to mass. The crisis appeared to worsen because of the lack of a middle ground for those who wished a space free from authority that could be inclusive and democratic. Liberal values dislodged people from the hold of authority that was replaced with a confident individualism, which became an integral stage of unbelief—the weakest and most attenuated form of unbelief, but nonetheless a stage that loosened the hold of religious authority everywhere. The liberal self was an emancipated self, always at risk of splintering off and falling into doubt and disobedience.

Chapter 3. Biblical criticism and the left modernists deconversion narratives

"As a professedly historical religion, Christianity required historical evidence of its claims. And, with certain very minor exceptions, this evidence, for Protestants at least, was to be found nowhere but in the Scriptures. Thus Christianity, at least in its traditional forms, stood or fell with the authority of the Bible." - James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore; London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

"But events have causes. If Catholics imbued by the historical spirit have come so signally to grief in our times, if that spirit itself is looked on with suspicion more or less concealed or expressed, why is it? The explanation, I suppose, is a quite simple one; viz., that the historical and the theological methods of mental training are, in fact, here and now, different, and so different as to be, at this time of day, almost -- I fancy I may say quite-- antagonistic. And the antagonism has, in some minds, become a perfectly conscious, or, indeed, a formulated one."

Edmund Bishop, "History of Apologetics," 377 published in *Liberal Catholicism*, 1900

During the nineteenth century, Catholicism experienced an internal movement among its clergy that sought to resolve the problems in the Bible that were uncovered by biblical criticism. A small group of more scientifically oriented priests wanted to reform the dogmas and ideas of the Church to defend the faith. The members of the movement were called modernists, a name given by Pope Pious X, to distinguish these progressive priests from the ranks of the clergy. The modernists made up only a small percentage of the total clergy. Here I will focus on five priests who lost their faith in Christianity as a result of their struggle to reform the Church. After breaking

with the Church, they began to write against the teachings of Christianity. Their rupture was a shocking reversal of everything for which they once stood.

This chapter examines the problems that emerged in modern biblical scholarship that pushed some of the Catholic clergy to abandon their religious vocations. The undermining of the infallibility of the Bible was a significant shift for Christianity and Christians would have to reconcile and reform their doctrines. This proved particularly difficult for Catholicism due to its honoring of doctrines formed in the middle ages and its hierarchical and autocratic structure. The first part of this chapter gives a short account of the emergence of biblical criticism and its ramifications. The second part analyzes the deconversion of the Catholic priests Marcel Hébert, Alfred Loisy, Joseph Turmel, Albert Houtin, and Prosper Alfaric and how they lost their faith in response to the crisis caused by historical criticism. It examines their origins, their education, their intellectual pursuits, how these factors sowed the seeds of doubt, and why they ultimately left the Church.²⁰⁸ Because they were informed insiders, apostate Catholic priests caused consternation among the faithful while delighting freethinkers and anticlericals. How do we explain their exit

²⁰⁸ This analysis is founded largely on the testimonies of Alfred Loisy in *Choses passées* (1912), Joseph Turmel in *Comment j'ai donné congé aux dogmes* (1935), Albert Houtin in *Une vie de prêtre: mon expérience, 1867-1912* (1925), and Prosper Alfaric *De la foi à la raison: scènes vécues* (1955). Each one recounts his rupture with Christianity in a personal memoir. The biography of Marcel Hébert by Albert Houtin is included so as to enlarge the analysis because Hébert fits neatly into the same predicament as the others. However, the book by Houtin demonstrates the anticlericalism and antichristian attitude of Houtin as much as Hébert.

from the Church and their loss of faith? How should we understand their journey into unbelief?

Biblical Modernism

The defrocked priests of this chapter were all originally members of what later came to be called the modernist movement, a group of scholars who engaged in biblical criticism. From approximately 1890 to 1907, the modernists were a loosely connected group of Catholic priests who wanted to reconcile the Church with modern knowledge and the new methods of historical inquiry. *Modernists wished to use a rationalist approach to reading the Bible. They shied away from using miracles as historical proofs and leaned towards a materialistic view of biblical events. Further, they focused on studying the Bible without reference to the official interpretations of the Church Fathers.* The historian C.J.T Talar defines modernism as an examination of the credibility of revelation and the pillars of the Christian faith, or what is referred to as fundamental theology. Modernists looked to understand Catholicism with a modern historic consciousness that stressed the distance between the past and the present. They held that the Bible and Catholic traditions should be understood through critical historical proofs that are based on the documents still in existence. To reconcile the changing understanding of reality and nature, religious thinkers reinterpreted the Scriptures. There were two leading ideas in modernism: the notion of immanence, a belief that the truth of God is dynamic rather than static and is indwelling the universe (versus a transcendent God separate from existence); second is the will in search of

truth that was not static but dynamic that modernists saw developing through the process of living.²⁰⁹ An immanent God acted through history, over time, and Christian doctrine was not necessarily fixed but was under a continual process of change and development. This kind of thinking allowed for a reconsideration of the truths of religion, softened the blow of modern science, and could excuse the discrepancies in the Bible, or at least make them seem less problematic. Loisy and others would suggest that religious scholars should look for the “spirit” not the “letter” of religious tradition and Scriptures. In this, one sees the liberal notion of progress operating within Christianity, with the Church progressing alongside society—or so hoped the modernists.

The biblical modernist movement and the discord it created within Catholicism was largely a result of the historical method being adopted by both secular and Christian scholars. According to the historian H.R. Mackintosh, because of the reassessment of the Bible through historical criticism that took place, the nineteenth century was the most important century for theology since the canonization of the Bible in the fourth century. Because of the discrepancies found in various historical biblical sources, a number of biblical scholars no longer believed that this religious text was integrally true. Rather, the Bible contained myths, errors, and contradictions on the nature of God.

²⁰⁹ Charles Stanley Phillips and Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (Great Britain), *The Church in France 1848-1907* (New York, N.Y.: Russell & Russell, 1967), 308.

In other words, Christianity is a religion of the book. In this book, one finds the sacred words of God written by men inspired by Revelation. For some Christians, today as in the past, it is a miraculous book. In this case, what does one do when errors are found? What do these errors reveal about the book and the Church? How does one decide what to believe?

The modernists were attempting to answer these very questions. In doing so, the partisans within the neo-scholastic theological tradition claimed that the modernists had relativized the divine truth and placed the Church dogmas in the domain of men. The historian Vidler suggests that one could qualify the modernists as agnostics in that their method constrained human reason to the world of phenomena. Vidler recognizes a “vital immanence” in their point of view, where the explanation of religion is found within human life.²¹⁰ All of it amounted to a theological rebellion against the authorities of Catholicism.

In 1907, the Vatican publicly condemned the modernists for their heterodoxy and desire for reform with the encyclical *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, which spelled the end of the short-lived movement. The papal condemnation of 1907 resulted in a series of excommunications (most notably those of Tyrrell and Loisy), the censoring of the works of Le Roy and many others, and then in September of 1910 an anti-modernist oath. Modernism was treated, for all intents and purposes, as heresy. The rejection and

²¹⁰ Alec R. Vidler, *The Modernist Movement in the Roman Church: Its Origins and Outcome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

suppression of the Modernists are emblematic of how closed the Church would remain—not changing its position until Vatican II.

The pope divided the arguments of the modernists into three tendencies: philosophical modernism, theological modernism, and political modernism, all of which he considered wrong and an attack on the religion. Philosophical modernism was an attack on the belief that God could be known with clarity through reason. Philosophical modernists held that knowledge of God came through “vital immanence” of the divine in human beings. Theological modernism was refuted because it considered religion to be a symbolic expression of the collective consciousness—a heretical idea. On a more worldly, quotidian level, political modernism was condemned by Pius X for “advocating an end to fasts and to clerical celibacy, demanding seminary reform, the purging of popular devotionalism, the complete freedom of church and state as an ideal, and the democratization of the government of the Church, especially the Curia.”²¹¹

A premodern, hierarchical structure ran up against a group of enthusiastic reformers, armed with new insights into the nature of reality and new methods of knowledge production, found that “Christian morality, in their opinion, was encumbered by a mass of dogmas that were a legacy from the past and were in obvious

²¹¹ John Ratté, “Modernism in the Christian Church” in “Dictionary of the History of Ideas :: :: University of Virginia Library,” accessed June 26, 2018, <http://xtf.lib.virginia.edu/xtf/view?docId=DicHist/uvaBook/tei/DicHist1.xml;chunk.id=dv1-49;toc.id=dv1-14;brand=default>.

contradiction with the conclusions of modern thought.”²¹² John Ratté summarized the predicament as such:

Roman Catholicism was perceived by its defenders as a closed and perfect system of belief and action. From time to time concessions were made to the epiphenomena of modernity and the perennial tradition of mysticism, but generally the magisterium insisted that “the human intellect could know God from his effects, that the historical proofs of Christ's divinity were perfectly proportioned to the minds of men of all times, that there was an objective supernatural order adequately defined by the Church's doctrine” (O'Dea, p. 86). Accustomed to the use of power by centuries of political experience, the magisterium found it natural to use power to suppress and thus negate the existence of an intellectual upheaval which was evident disproof of the fundamental premise of its life: the unthinkable of an alternative cosmology and another language of theological and philosophical discourse for any man shaped in its ways.²¹³

Historical Criticism and Biblical Exegesis

Historical criticism was broken down into so-called “lower” and “higher” criticism, which was not a hierarchical, value-laden judgment, but simply a definition separating different scholarly objectives. The terms came from the German biblical scholar Eichhorn in the second edition of his work *Einleitung* in 1787. Lower criticism deals with a very close examination of the textual minutiae to arrive at the purest

²¹² Phillips, *The Church in France 1848-1907*, 292.

²¹³ Ratté, “Modernism in the Christian Church” and Thomas F O'Dea, *The Catholic Crisis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969).

possible version of an ancient text. Higher criticism scrutinizes authorship, date, composition, and the authority of entire books or chapters.²¹⁴

Higher and lower criticism both compare the original words in a text with the existing facts and documents; it is a kind or form of historical criticism, and it has a long history going back to the Renaissance in Italy and the Humanists, who examined the Bible in its original Greek and Hebrew. The controversy of the modernists deals almost exclusively with higher criticism. In higher criticism, there are essentially three sources of evidence: written documents, physical evidence, and for the Catholic Church, tradition (which was often held to be sacred and validated by the numerous General Councils during the course of Catholicism's long history). Essentially, higher criticism used relevant interdisciplinary tools to crack, decipher, and interpret the meaning of the text from the past and validate the authenticity of the text. Much of this was done with language. Biblical scholars often asked if the given text or author actually belonged to the given time period it claimed to represent. Were there signs of multiple authors for a single text? Was this the authentic text of the author? When was it actually written, according to its references? Further, the authority of the author of the original text was questioned. Did they live at that time, were they a witness, and above all, who was the author in the first place? Advances in research (techniques such

²¹⁴ "CATHOLIC ENCYCLOPEDIA: Biblical Criticism (Higher)," accessed June 26, 2018, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04491c.htm>.

as epigraphy, numismatics, sigillography, paleography or sphragistics) allowed for the accurate dating of texts and could resolve many of these questions for the first time.

Higher criticism is also referred to here as biblical criticism, which is a method that “in the light of modern philological, historical, and archæological science, and by methods which are recent in their development, subjects to severe tests the previously accepted and traditional views on the human authorship, the time and manner of composition, of the sacred writings, and discriminates as to their objective historical value.”²¹⁵

Higher criticism is a particularly modern concern. Early writers and contributors to the Bible were largely unconscious of the problems that would later arise under the professional scrutiny of historians. Early Church Fathers saw the divine word of the Lord when they read the Scriptures; however, early Christians had to sort out which texts to include in their canon, and they left out certain competing texts, such as those of the Gnostics. For example, the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Philip (only discovered in 1945) were excluded from the cannon. The original leaders of Christianity were aware of inconsistencies in the Scriptures but worked out the problems without concluding that it represented human error. During the age of the Fathers and the Scholastic period, there was little to prompt a critical interpretation. The Humanists of the Renaissance helped begin the close examination of the Bible, but they did not take a historical, critical position; rather, they sought to obtain the purest

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

form of the scripture in their original language. A Protestant, Andreas Karlstadt (1486-154), was the first to make a critical evaluation of the Bible by arguing that Moses could not have been the author of the Pentateuch since it tells the story of Moses' death and maintains a consistent style throughout the book. A series of important intellectuals in the Western tradition followed Karlstadt and offered similar critical evaluations of the Pentateuch. For example, Thomas Hobbes (1651), Pereyre (1655), and Spinoza (1670) all wrote biblical criticism. Spinoza, in particular, had a radical approach to reading the Bible. He studied it in the same manner he studied nature, with an overtly secular approach. He taught that one must start by trying to accurately understand the object in question and proceed by making careful definitions. Next, he suggested that one had to enter into the time period in question and try to understand the social context. Then he sought to understand the social location and circumstances of the author and the context around the actual writing of the text. Spinoza was detailing sound, secular historical method.²¹⁶

The first scholar to examine the Bible in a comprehensive and scientific manner was Richard Simon (1638-1712). Paul Hazard wrote, "With Richard Simon and his *Histoire critique de Vieux Testament*, which was published in 1678, criticism comes into its own."²¹⁷ Simon claimed to be a good Catholic who studied the Bible to defend the Catholic faith against the infidel Protestants. Protestants, in holding their personal

²¹⁶ Paul Hazard, *The European Mind: The Critical Years, 1680-1715*. (New York: Yale University Press, 1952), 180-185.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 182.

readings of scripture to be more important than Catholic tradition, disregarded the role of former Councils and the guidance of confirmed and approved authorities. Protestants held that the dogmas and doctrines of the Catholics could not be found in the Bible. Richard Simon, for his part, concluded there were numerous human additions in the Bible; the task was to figure out what was divinely inspired and what was not. And in a further response to the Protestant argument, Simon went on to contend that without the tradition of Catholic history that framed biblical interpretation, the Bible would be simply too difficult to understand, with its layers of ambiguity; this was ultimately dangerous and could even lead to heretical interpretations.

In *Histoire critique de Vieux Testament*, to refute the Protestants, Simon approached the Bible systematically and scientifically. Hazard places Simon and his treatment of the Bible alongside Pierre Bayle, another figure in the rationalist tradition who sought to demystify or debunk superstitious or false claims and beliefs to better illuminate the truth. Supernatural claims fell under the rationalist agenda, and they were treated as Spinoza suggested, as objects of nature that should be studied with the tools and systems of scientific analysis. The rationalist tradition put reason before tradition and revelation, which Popes would call an error of using reason *a priori*. Simon had put reason before tradition and scripture, so he could expose the problems and weaknesses of the text; so much, in fact, that the Scriptures demanded an authority to interpret the Bible. In short, he asserted the importance of Catholicism by showing that readers of the Bible, a difficult and flawed document, essentially required the Catholic Church's interpretations in order to understand it.

Fully sure of his position as defined by these forthright declarations, Richard Simon let loose his thunders against the Protestants, who, by taking their stand on the Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible, were relying on writings that had been altered and mutilated, so that, rejecting tradition, they rejected, ipso facto, the guidance of the Spirit, which preceded, accompanied and illuminated whatsoever was doubtful or obscure in the said writings.²¹⁸

Simon was inspired by what he uncovered and pursued his inquiry where he found opportunity. Following his career, one has to wonder if his ambition at his discovery of unexplored territory overcame his desire to defend Catholicism or whether he simply wanted a more honest Christianity. After examining the Old Testament, he examined Catholic traditions as well, since that was the pillar of authority. Here too, he used the method of historical criticism to look at the lives of the Saints. He created what became, as his titles suggested, a new field of study: *l'Histoire critique du Texte du Nouveau Testament* in 1689, *l'Histoire critique des Versions du Nouveau Testament* in 1690, *l'Histoire critique des Versions du Nouveau Testament* in 1693. All of this was very risky and bordered on appearing subversive due to the very sensitive nature of the subject. On May 21, 1678, Simon was expelled from the Oratory where he worked, and the Royal Council banned the *Histoire critique du Vieux Testament*. Not wishing to stop, however, Simon published his work on the New Testament under a pseudonym and had the manuscript published outside of France. As a result of his condemnation, it was only later that Simon became fully appreciated by scholars of biblical criticism. Likewise, his influence was minimized because he worked in isolation and outside any institution. Simon's case was typical of historically informed readings of the Bible; it

²¹⁸ Ibid., 190.

tended to land foul with the ecclesiastic authorities, as it easily appeared to undermine rather than bolster the officially approved doctrines. To affirm the position of the Church he attacked the infallibility of the Bible.

Modern biblical criticism would have to wait in France for another century. Instead, it first took root in Germany. The German Protestant, Johann Gottfried Eichhorn (1752-1827) wrote an *Introduction to the Old Testament* between the years 1780 to 1783. Eichhorn had been partly influenced by the freethinking ideas of the English Deists of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century who supported a rationalist interpretation of miracles and prophecies in the Old Testament. Unlike Simon, Eichhorn had students and scholars who followed him. Further, the diffusion of biblical criticism in Germany was more significant than in France because scholars were working with the support of universities. Eichhorn analyzed the Old Testament with a literary eye that saw the texts as products of a Semitic genius. Eichhorn and much of the early scholarship examined the difficulties encountered in the Pentateuch, especially Genesis. Eichhorn analyzed, in particular, the different names of God, Elohim and Jehovah, used in the Pentateuch as a starting point.

Biblical criticism after Eichhorn can be divided into two trends: a left wing that pursued rationalist analysis and a right-wing, exemplified by the Catholic Movers (1805-56), that provided a more positive analysis in favor of Catholic tradition. The Catholic Movers sought to minimize the entirely negative claims of criticism regarding the authenticity of the biblical texts and stories. In order to engage in this debate, they

had to put reason, evidence, and document sources before tradition. The Catholic Movers, who defended the books of the Old Testament, found themselves in the dubious position of using the methods of criticism they sought to refute.²¹⁹

Left to their own devices, scholars of biblical criticism began to make claims that were counter to traditional Christian accounts, uncovering the dirty undergarments of heretofore forgotten history. For example, in Germany, W.M. L. de Wette (1780-1849) pioneered the historical examination of Jewish history and concluded that Moses had not started the Israelite priesthood or rituals of sacrifice during his lifetime. The Israelite priesthood, Wette claimed, developed over many centuries, time during which there had been no centralized priesthood or fixed practices. As Simon had done, Wette challenged the historical understanding of the biblical texts—a direct challenge to traditional Catholic claims. For example, he argued that the *Book of Deuteronomy* dated from the 600s; thus, de Wette asserted that much of the material in the Pentateuch was unhistorical, and its value lay more in demonstrating the religious beliefs of the period in which it was written.

The best known biblical critic of the leftwing rationalist tradition in Germany was Freidrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834). His reading of the New Testament acknowledged the religious and spiritual importance of the sacred writings, but nonetheless scrutinized them in a way that undermined the texts, at least to a degree. Following Schleiermacher, the philosophy of history as proposed by Hegel also

²¹⁹ "CATHOLIC ENCYCLOPEDIA: Biblical Criticism (Higher)."

impacted biblical criticism, most notably with David Friedrich Strauss, who rejecting miracles and interpreted the New Testament as a mythical creation by the zealous followers of Jesus that had emerged from the messianic hopes of the early Jewish/Christians. Focusing on Jesus as a myth, Strauss came close to saying that Jesus had never actually lived. He argued the Gospels were not intended as factual history. The Christ myth personified religious truth but not historical knowledge, which was the approach to religion of a pre-rational people. Not having factual evidence, the real teachings of Jesus remained unknowable.²²⁰

Refutations of Strauss's work helped form what came to be known as the Tübingen, which very modestly means "tendency," school of exegesis and criticism, under Ferdinand Christian Baur, a German Protestant theologian. A student of Hegel, Baur published his fullest reflections in *Paulus der Apostel Jesu Christi* in 1845, a text which adhered to Hegel's dialectic of social and intellectual progress advancing through the conciliation of contradictions. According to Catholic authorities, on the whole, the conclusions of the Tubingen school had rationalist and destructive tendencies.

German criticism came to France through secondary channels and popular works, but generally, it did not make a big impression in France, at least initially. Charles de Villiers (1765-1815), who studied at Gottingen, wrote that "Catholic theology rest on the inflexible authority of Church decisions, with the result that it

²²⁰ "CATHOLIC ENCYCLOPEDIA: Biblical Criticism (Higher)" and Turner, *Without God, without Creed*, 147.

forbids those who want access to the freedom of their reason. Protestant theology to the contrary rests on a system of examination and the unlimited use of reason.”²²¹ The biblical studies in France were dated and mediocre in comparison to the activity in Germany. Duilhé de Saint-Projet, Alfred Baudrillard, and l’abbé Mangenot were a few of the rare Catholics who studied exegesis and who continued to try to defend a literal interpretation. In contrast, Protestant scholars centered on the idea of myth. Conservative Catholic thinkers wanted to be much more cautious and manage religious criticism for the sake of not upsetting popular faith—reason had gone too far and knew no restraints. For instance, Denis-Antoine-Luc, the Comte de Frayssinous, argued in 1825 that there were three errors: the overconfidence of reason, the curious mind, and the excess of science. He argued that the sign of an excellent mind was that it knew when to stop. Frayssinous ignored all critical work since Richard Simon and used the nearly two-century-old arguments of Bossuet.²²²

In France, it took great communicators such as Ernest Renan to popularize and upset the faith of French men and women with the secular and historical version of Christianity that emerged from biblical criticism. Renan said he lost his belief as a result of studying the Bible. In his youth, Renan studied Hebrew at St. Sulpice and became one of its best students. He then turned his curiosity to German exegetics, leading him to discover Strauss’ Hegelian *Leben Jesu*. German exegetics revealed to

²²¹ S. Bianchi, “Les cures rouges dans la Revolution francaise » in *Annales historique de la Revolution francaise*, 1964, 377.

²²² Georges Minois, *L’Eglise et la Science Histoire d’un malentendu* (Paris: Arthème Fayard, 1991), 195.

Renan “historical and aesthetic treasures, but also proved [...] that it was no freer of contradictions, inadvertences, mistakes, and errors than any other ancient book. There is to be found in it fables, legends, and traces of a wholly human authorship.”²²³ His disbelief came about not by science so much as his disillusionment with the divine authorship of the Bible when subjected to scrutiny through the historical method. Renan said in his *Souvenirs*, “My faith was destroyed by historical criticism, not by scholasticism or philosophy.”

On June 24th, 1863, Ernest Renan published his work *Vie de Jésus*, launching him instantly into public controversy and setting off one of the noteworthy events in nineteenth-century Western literature. Renan’s *Vie de Jesus* is a historical work of dedicated rationalism that depicted Jesus as a remarkable mortal man who had been deified by the love of his followers, denied the miracles of Christianity, and became one of the most widely read books of the period.²²⁴ This book communicated to the French public for the first time the conclusions of German biblical criticism. Many in the Church spoke about the “great apostate” and his “sacrilegious work.”²²⁵ Pope Pius IX called him the “European Blasphemer.”²²⁶ The Attorney General of France reviewed the book for Emperor Napoleon III, and after having read it, he brought it

²²³ Ernest Renan, « *Souvenirs d'enfance et de jeunesse*, » Calmann-Levy editor, *Œuvres Complètes de Ernest Renan, Tome II* (Paris: Corbeill-Essonnes, 1948), 866.

²²⁴ Dora Bierer, “Renan and His Interpreters: A Study in French Intellectual Warfare,” *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (1953): 375-389, 381.

²²⁵ Vytas V. Gaigalas, *Ernest Renan and His Catholic Critics* (North Quincy, MA: The Christopher Publishing House, 1972), 7.

²²⁶ Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the 19th Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975) 214.

over to Napoleon and said, “Sire there is nothing to change, not a word, not a comma.”²²⁷ According to the historian J.M. Robertson, the publication of *La Vie de Jésus* gave Renan a worldwide notoriety reminiscent of Voltaire.²²⁸

The historian Gibson notes that, “The crisis point in intellectual deficiency of nineteenth-century French Catholicism is usually seen as coming with the publications in 1863 of Ernest Renan’s *Vie de Jésus*.”²²⁹ There were major responses from the leading Catholics such as Dupanloup and Veuillot, but these were literary and oratorical, and made no attempt to meet Renan on the same grounds of serious biblical criticism. Historians have tended to describe a lack of serious response to Renan by scholars of biblical exegesis. The most significant problem for Catholic scholars was the *a priori* rejection of the supernatural, which Catholics could not accept. Another deep problem was how Catholic intellectuals engaged in argument. When Catholic scholars responded they did so by an appeal to the great theologians of the past. Catholic scholars had great encyclopedic and deep knowledge of this material, but these were books no one reads today, and certainly, the lay public was not convinced by appeals to theological authority from the masters of the past. Only Catholics would be sympathetic to such argument. The Scholastic tradition had created a serious obstacle for Catholic intellectuals to properly engage in debate outside of their institutions.²³⁰

²²⁷ Bierer, “Renan and His Interpreters,” 383.

²²⁸ J.M. Robertson, *Ernest Renan* (London: Watts & Co., 1924), 1.

²²⁹ Ralph Gibson, *A Social History of French Catholicism, 1789-1914* (London; New York: Routledge, 1989), 85.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 85-86.

In French intellectual life, Ernest Renan also played a significant role in that he taught the historical method of examining ancient texts to Alfred Loisy at the College de France, Loisy who later became a giant of the modernists. Loisy considered Renan to be “the first great master of the French modernists.”²³¹ Renan taught that the texts of the Bible had two interpretations: the historical or the traditional. The historical was found by examining their origin and their nature and the second, traditional, was imposed onto them by the inspiration of faith during the evolution of Judaism and Christianity.²³²

The establishment of biblical criticism in France after Richard Simon had to wait until the founding of the Catholic Institutes, which were made possible by the campaigning of a Liberal Catholic Bishop of the era, Félix Dupanloup (1802- 1878). Dupanloup, a devout defender of Catholicism, sought to provide a more modern education to compete with the secular universities. He was deeply embarrassed by the decree of Papal Infallibility after the First Vatican Council. In his time, Dupanloup had fought bravely as a headmaster of the seminary Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet against Catholic malcontents who accused him, in teaching the classics of antiquity, of espousing unbelief. During the Third Republic, the conservatives passed the *Loi Dupanloup* of 1875, which made it possible for Catholic Universities to give degrees; however, the anticlerical left would remove this privilege, reserving university degrees

²³¹ Alfred Loisy, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire religieuse de notre temps: T. 1. 1857-1900. T. 2. 1900-1908. T. 3. 1908-1927* (Paris; Emile Nourry, éditeur: Impr. Jouve et Cie ;, 1931), 176.

²³² Charles Stanley Phillips and Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (Great Britain), *The Church in France 1848-1907* (New York, N.Y.: Russell & Russell, 1967), 300.

exclusively for secular schools. The Catholic Institutes continued by granting certificates instead and many Catholics continued to attend.

So, it was at the Catholic Institutes that biblical criticism would get its beginning. The movement would be led by Louis Duchesne, who initially engaged in historical criticism of the Old Testament without any great controversy. He was a brilliant man dedicated to the practice and science of history; this often meant his debunking or undermining the legends of apostolic origin of the great churches of ancient Gaul, which the Ultramontanes had tried to revive. Duchesne can be called “the Father of modernism;” however, for the most part, he was not one to lead a cause against the censures or put his career at risk. He stayed away from dangerous subjects such as the books of the New Testament, although he did not hide his satirical and critical remarks as long as he was not threatened. Still, his work *Histoire ancienne de l’Eglise* would eventually be put on the Index. More importantly perhaps, while he stayed clear of risky subjects, he was not able to stop his students from applying the critical historical method to the areas he left unexplored. His student Alfred Loisy would take the principles he learned from Duchesne and apply them to the New Testament.²³³

As biblical criticism expanded in France, differing interpretations of precepts and sacred dogmas divided Catholic scholars. In 1893, Maurice d’Hulst wrote an article, “La question biblique” that outlined these differences. He divided the different

²³³ Ibid., 296-297.

interpretations into three parts: a center, a left, and a right. The right, the traditional school, allowed no room for error; God was the author of the Bible and it must be interpreted in this light. The school on the left sought to reformulate sacred dogmas according to historical study. The center took revelation, faith and Christian morality as biblical truths, but they recognized errors in the historical details. The center refused the rigidity of the traditional school while avoiding the danger of relativism on the left.²³⁴

The Catholic Church initially allowed for experimentation. Hulst and Louis-Marie-Olivier Duchesne were the primary defenders of the center modernist position (however, Houtin believed Duchesne to be an unbeliever, and Turmel called him a “Voltarien”). At the Catholic Institute with Hulst, Duchesne held a prominent place among the members of the clergy who studied ecclesiastic history. Hulst and Duchesne searched for a way to establish a middle ground between a heterodoxy that was too critical and a traditionalism lacking the spirit of critique. They had the great responsibility of providing a modern school and modern teachings that aligned with official doctrine and also competed with the secular schools of the Third Republic. Further, Hulst and Duchesne were the response of the Catholic Church to the secular schools supported by the Third Republic. They wanted to build up reputable Catholic schools in dialogue with contemporary research methods and debates. A notable milestone in France was the publication of *l'Apologie scientifique du christianisme* by

²³⁴ Alfred Loisy, *Alfred Loisy. Choses passées* (Paris: Union pour la vérité, 1912), 126-127.

Hulst, hoping to create a moderate approach. In 1887, he launched a call to create a Christian science that would put an end to the misunderstanding between the sciences and the nature of faith. He spoke with the Pope, who authorized conferences on the subject of science so long as it avoided controversial questions. The members of the conference met once every three years until 1900 when it was suppressed after the death of Hulst. Hulst attempted to confront modernity head-on:

It does us no service to deny it: doubt invades us...where does this painful and fatal doubt come? It comes from science... The conflict is flagrant. There is no longer any question about it... The hour has come for nineteenth-century Christianity to have a science of its own, as it had in the thirteenth century.²³⁵

While the moderates represented progressive change, the real crisis came from those on the left, notably: Hébert, Loisy, Turmel, Houtin, and Alfaric—the *left modernists*.

The Left Modernists: Hébert, Loisy, Turmel, Houtin, and Alfaric

The modernist crisis emerged from various conditions, not least was the liberal tradition as represented early on by Lamennais, the scholarly studies of the Bible done in Germany, the continuing progress of science, and the conservative position taken by the Vatican. The center modernists, like Hulst, wanted to reform the conception of Catholicism in response to the doubt invading their faith. However, in seeking an answer, the left modernists wished to pursue their inquiries without restriction, and they began to redefine Catholicism outside the approval of the Pope and the Catholic

²³⁵ As cited in Minois, *L'Église et la science*, 251.

authorities. Take first Marcel Hébert, a student of Hulst and Duchesne, who thought history discredited Catholic dogmas. The Church ordained him in 1876 at Saint-Sulpice. In 1880, Hébert was first a division director at l'École Fénelon then director of the establishment. By nature of his encounter with Duchesne and Loisy, he was infused with a skepticism that considerably weakened his Catholic orthodoxy. In his work, he contributed to the *Bulletin critique* and the *Annales de philosophie chrétienne*. Rejecting the dogma of the Church, he revealed his unorthodox ideas in the *Souvenirs d'Assise* in 1899, published under a pseudonym. In this book, all the principles of Christianity are understood as symbols rather than as literal truths, providing an entirely different understanding to the meaning and purpose of Christianity. In place of accepting the dogmas, Hébert claimed they were symbols of a deeper spiritual need. The dogmas were thus deprived of any historical foundation, a genuinely radical position for a Catholic priest. Further, he expressed the causes of his doubts: the existence of evil, the weakness of the arguments on the existence of God, and the contradictions in the Gospels, especially the Resurrection.²³⁶ A member of the clergy discovered the book, understood that Hébert had written it, and passed his name on to Cardinal Richard. Given the ultimatum to retract or resign, he chose to renounce his post as an administrator of l'École Fénelon. As an act of final defiance, he published

²³⁶ Harvey Hill, *The Politics of Modernism: Alfred Loisy and the Scientific Study of Religion* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 53.

"La dernière Idole" in the *Revue de métaphysique et de la morale*, calling Jesus a "false idol," and he left the Church in 1903.²³⁷

Marcel Hébert was the first to be expelled for his ideas. Alfred Loisy was the next. Loisy played a central role among the modernists and remains the name most remembered today. His book *L'Évangile et l'Église* (1902) was the chief work of the modernists. Loisy entered the seminar of Châlons-sur-Marne in 1874 and was ordained a priest in 1879. He pursued his studies at the Catholic Institute in Paris in 1881. Next, he continued his studies at the *École pratique des Hautes Études* (1882-1883). There, he assiduously attended the courses of Assyriology and Egyptology of the famed secular scholar Ernest Renan at the College of France. Hulst became Loisy's director for his first doctorate thesis and Loisy had also presented twice at Hulst's Catholic science conferences. Early on Loisy displayed troubling signs to his superiors. His first thesis, for example, examined the doctrine of the inspiration of the Bible and the ancient ecclesiastics authors up until Tertullian. The rector read it and concluded that it was impossible to publish. Not only that, he claimed it was so dangerous that no one else should ever read it. However, Loisy's second attempted doctoral thesis succeeded, but after the first, he confessed he had already left the main currents of Catholic thought. His biblical studies led him to deduce in 1891 that the subjects of Genesis and creation were not historical. He firmly rejected the idea that the Old Testament was compatible with the modern sciences such as astronomy, geology, and paleontology. After the

²³⁷ "Marcel Hébert" in Jean-Marie Mayeur, Yves-Marie Hilaire, and André Encrevé, *Dictionnaire du monde religieux dans la France contemporaine* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1993).

second thesis was accepted, he acquired his doctorate in theology in March 1890. His troubles continued, however. He taught at the Catholic Institute until 1893 and began working publishing two books, *History of the Cannon of the Old Testament* in 1890 and *History of the Cannon of the New Testament* in 1891. During these years, he published his lectures that showed his modernist views in biblical criticism. His lectures elicited interest and excitement from the younger clergy, but he drew attention to himself and M. Icard the Superior of Saint Sulpice forbade his students to attend his class on the Holy Scripture, ten years after having forbidden them from attending Duchesne's lectures in fact. In his work and lectures, he taught controversial conclusions. For instance, he concluded that Moses had not written the Pentateuch, that Genesis was not literal history, that the historical value of *the New Testament and the Old Testament* were not equal, and that scriptural doctrine had changed and developed over time. In an interview with the Archbishop of Tours on October 1891 made clear the position of the Church. Loisy cites it verbatim in his memoirs. They had discussed the historical discrepancies around the Book of Daniel. The Archbishop warned Loisy:

“Criticism has never existed in the Church. The whole Catholic clergy is in a state of profound ignorance. In trying to get them out of it one runs great risks: for our theologians are ferocious: they put us on the Index for nothing. Believe me, *mon petit Loisy*, it is necessary to be very prudent. I have helped to engage you in the way of science: that is why I have a right to say to you: Take care! C'est un conseil de père. If you expose yourself to danger, those who think like you will not come to your help... Let us then be the advocates of tradition—des avocats sincères.” A recasting of the traditional exegesis is impossible. “In truth we are working in a closed room. I, too, have tried—very gently—to open the window a little: in all my books I have slipped in something useful. But what one must avoid above all is to compromise oneself.”²³⁸

²³⁸ Translation by C.S. Philips in Loisy, *Alfred Loisy. Choses passées*, 116.

A few days after Loisy's publication on the New Testament, Leo XII responded by issuing the encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* on November 18th, 1893 that condemned Loisy and Hulst for their modernist positions without using their names directly. The encyclical declared that "Divine inspiration in itself excludes all error" and attacked the rationalists and "higher critics." Leo XIII only admitted that some errors had entered through the use of scribes over the centuries. Further, theology and science explained different subjects. The writers of the Bible should be understood to be using figurative language were appropriate. Leo XIII was not willing to accept challenges to Catholic dogma. In 1897, the Congregation of the Index issued a decree forbidding Catholic authors to question the text of the "three heavenly witnesses" in John. Loisy lost his post and fell into destitution until eventually finding work later as a chaplain in a convent in Neuilly until 1899. Next, he received a post as a lecturer at the *École pratique des Hautes Études*. Undeterred and perhaps a bit stubborn by nature of his convictions, Loisy continued. Between the years of 1899 and 1907, Loisy wanted to reform the Church and he subtly promoted modernist ideas in his journal *L'Enseignement biblique*. Wishing to avoid punishment, he used pseudonyms for some of his articles. Yet, in the publication of his books, he would go a step too far. His principal books of this period were *L'Évangile et l'Église* (1902), *Autour d'un petit livre* (1903), *Le Quatrième Évangile* (1904), all of which defended and furthered his modernist position.

His book *L'Évangile et l'Église* (1902) became the most important book of the modernists. It refuted the work of Adolf von Harnack and his book *Das Wesen des*

Christentum, a defense of Protestantism that saw "the essence of Christianity" in individualism. In defense of Catholicism, Loisy argued that the ways to interpret the Bible constituted a living force and that interpretations could change, but that the Church played a central role in safeguarding the Christian population. The doctrine of Christianity was not absolute and abstract such that it could be applicable in all periods and for all people of the world, but it carried a living faith that engaged in the milieu and historical time where it lived and persisted.²³⁹ Since faith was a living phenomenon, it needed a Church to interpret its texts and lead its adepts. The Gospels demanded a master to propagate it and a clear doctrine to express itself. This resulted in Loisy's often cited conclusion that "Jesus came proclaiming the Kingdom, and what resulted was the Church."²⁴⁰ Further, Loisy wanted to teach the Church to understand itself historically. It would thus recognize the importance of progress and a spirituality that shifted with a changing comprehension of reality. The book was deeply controversial because it suggested that Catholicism had made errors and needed to change. Church authorities told him to recant the conclusions of his books. For the left modernists, this was their high point. Loisy was challenging the power of traditional Catholicism and he was seen as a champion of progressive, modern methods of research and a more sophisticated spirituality.²⁴¹

²³⁹ Émile Poulat, *Histoire, dogme et critique dans la crise moderniste...*, 3e éd. (Paris: A. Michel, 1996), 66.

²⁴⁰ Alfred Loisy, *L'évangile et l'église* (Paris: Picard, 1902), 111.

²⁴¹ Phillips, *The Church in France 1848-1907*, 301-306.

Unwilling to retract his ideas, Loisy was excommunicated in 1908, which motivated the departure of other priests. After Loisy's excommunication, he became professor of religions at the College of France in 1909, remaining there until his retirement in 1930.²⁴² When and how Loisy lost his faith is debated; however, he steered further and further from Christianity.

Another important, and shocking, left modernist was Joseph Turmel (1859-1943). He was an enigmatic personality whose place among the left modernists is questionable. Unlike the others, it can be argued he does not merit the label of left modernist because in 1866 he lost his faith very early on in his education from studying the history of the Bible. Nevertheless, he decided to remain within the Church and stayed there nearly his entire life, and he published in Loisy's journal and continuously promoted a historical understanding of dogmas and the books of the Bible that coincided with the left modernist project. However, secretly Turmel wanted to undermine and overthrow the accepted truths of Christianity. Consequently, he stayed in the Church and spent his life undercutting and refuting its traditions under false names. Turmel was ordained a priest in 1882 at Rennes and became a professor of dogmatic theology at the Grand Seminar of Rennes. Although without faith, he remained in the Church for the love of his mother and fear of financial misery. However, he decided to tell the truth of what he found in his research and to expose the Catholic dogmas as false. He contributed regularly in the *Revue d'histoire et de*

²⁴² François Boirel, *Grandes figures Catholiques du XXe siècle: l'exception catholique française, 1870-1965* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1995), 651.

littérature religieuse led by Loisy, as well as the *Annales de philosophie chrétienne*, to the *Revue catholique des Églises*, and to the *Revue du clergé français*. Due to his controversial ideas, he was ordered in 1901 by the Sacrée Congrégation de l'Index to submit his works to the ecclesiastic censure. He did as was asked and promised to abide by the authorities. However, he was unwilling to stop, and he began secretly publishing under the pseudonyms Antoine Dupin and Guillaume Herzog in 1906. In 1908, Turmel was accused again of being the authors of forbidden texts by the Church (which was true), but he escaped all punishment by denying authorship. Having narrowly saved his place in the clergy, he continued to write under new names. This game of deception ended after the discovery of a letter in the office of a friend, Paul Lejay, who had recently died, clearly revealing that Turmel and Herzog was the same person. In 1930, Turmel was demasked; he repented and recanted his errors (which did not really mean anything to him), but the Vatican excommunicated him nonetheless. Over his entire career, Turmel wrote a great number of articles and works: 88 articles and 6 published works under his name and 66 articles and 5 books under different pseudonyms!²⁴³

If Loisy was the theologian, Turmel the critic of dogmas, then Albert Houtin was the historian and propagandists of the left modernists. Ordained a priest in 1891, he taught as a professor of languages and then of history at Mongazon. His books analyzed local religious history. His work, *La controverse de l'apostolicité de l'Église*

²⁴³ Hilaire and Mayeur, *Dictionnaire du monde religieux dans la France contemporaine*; H Baudru, "Une vie d'hircocef: Joseph Turmel (1859-1943)," *Annales de Bretagne et des pays de l'Ouest*. 114, no. 1 (2007): 185–98.

de France au XIXe siècle (1900) shed considerable doubt on the legends of origin of the French Episcopal seats. To the defenders of the traditional story, he unforgivingly denied the existence of the local Saint René Angevin in his next book *Les origines de l'Eglise d'Angers. La légende de Saint René* (1901). Having exposed his secular inclination, Houtin had alarmed the archbishop who sent him to Paris as a policing action: Houtin was effectively demoted to "prêtre habitué" at the Saint-Sulpice parish. When he published his book *La question biblique au XXe siècle* (1902), he again displayed his secular beliefs. In response, the Vatican put his book on the Index on December 4th, 1903. After this, it was no longer possible for him to find a position in Paris, so he returned to live with his parents and wrote works of contemporary history, becoming the unofficial chronicler of the modernist crisis. He published one after another, *L'américanisme* (1904), *La question biblique au XXe siècle* (1906), *La crise du clergé* (1907), *Évêques et diocèse* (1907), et *Histoire du modernisme catholique* (1913). At first convinced by Loisy to remain in the Church, he stayed officially within the clergy until 1912, but his faith had become increasingly estranged from Christianity until there was little to nothing left.²⁴⁴

Prosper Alfaric (1876-1955), the youngest of the left modernists, received a scholastic education at the Grand Seminar of Philosophy from 1892-1894, where he studied with Fulcrand Vigouroux the biblical theologian. He finished his studies with three years of theology, in the area of dogmatics, strictly following the teachings of

²⁴⁴ Albert Houtin, *Une vie de prêtre: mon expérience, 1867-1912* (Paris: Rieder, 1926) ; Hilaire and Mayeur, *Dictionnaire du monde religieux dans la France contemporaine*.

Thomas Aquinas. Next, he took philosophy courses at L'Institut catholique de Paris and was ordained a priest in 1899 at the Grand Seminar in Bayeux. He then became a professor at the École supérieure de théologie by Dourgne (Tarn) and then later taught at the Grand Seminar of Bordeaux. He dedicated a great deal of his life to the Church, but he was endowed with a curious mind and read widely. The ideas of the modernists had strongly attracted him, and when they were condemned, his unease Catholicism grew as his faith began to unravel, leaving him in a state of spiritual skepticism. This helped lead to his complete rupture with the Church in 1909 and 1910, prompting him to write a memoir to document his participation in what he saw as a significant cultural event in France.²⁴⁵



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²⁴⁵ Robert Taussat, *Hommes et femmes célèbres de l'Aveyron* (Paris: Editions Bonneton, 1996).

²⁴⁶ Wikimedia Commons contributors, "File:Alfred Loisy.jpg," *Wikimedia Commons, the free media*

Alfred Loisy



²⁴⁷

Joseph Turmel

The Deconversion of the Left Modernists

Implicit Causes

Growing up in the Church: education and the domination of the Mother

Le grand défaut de l'éducation ecclésiastique est de cultiver la mémoire aux dépens de l'intelligence, d'exalter l'autorité aux dépens de la raison, l'obéissance aux dépens du sentiment de la responsabilité. On y considère la discipline l'apparente conformité au règlement comme plus importante que le développement du caractère et l'acquisition de la science. La routine et le préjugé sont inculqués sous le beau nom de

repository, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Alfred Loisy.jpg&oldid=156402907](https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Alfred_Loisy.jpg&oldid=156402907) (accessed August 3, 2018).

²⁴⁷ Wikipedia contributors, "MediaWiki:Cite text," *Wikipedia*, http://br.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=MediaWiki:Cite_text&oldid= (accessed C'hwevrer 22, 2006).

tradition. Au lieu de préparer des citoyens pour la vie moderne, on forme des sujets à l'impérialisme romain.
(Houtin, *Une vie de prêtre*, 31-32)

So what do the left modernists say about why they left the Church? They provide both explicit and implicit reasons in their deconversion narratives. Their *explicit* justifications include the lack of religious experience, the study of history, the encounter with secular literature, and moral dissonance with Catholicism. Their *implicit* justifications include their rejection of an infantilizing and feminine spiritual tutelage, the Church as a moribund and archaic institution, the backwardness of their education, and then their confrontation with uncompromising hierarchy. The tales of their youth within the Church can be considered as anticlerical works, with often very little positive to say about their education or parental/Church tutelage. The condemnation of Catholic institutions permitted them to justify their criticism and their exhortations for reform and then their rupture.

A part of their story is the awareness of the domination of their families and Catholicism over their lives. They complain that docility was bred into them from love and obedience to their families (and above all their mothers!) that the Church supplanted. Almost all were influenced by the faith of their mothers, whose parenting they felt, was an infantilizing force. And of course the Church itself, a surrogate family, was no different: it taught them the virtues of docility, pliancy, and obedience. *As such, one of the subtexts to their deconversions was their desire to break with a suffocating hierarchical structure to become assertive and intellectually independent adults.*

Marcel Hébert was born in 1851 and came from Bar-le-Duc in the north-east of France. He was raised by the pious women in his family and especially fervent clergy, who held the righteous conviction that “the Church was True and Good: they thus shaped his mind and his heart.”²⁴⁸

Alfred Loisy escaped the domination of his mother, but his Catholic mentors filled the role of developing his character. He was born in 1857 at Ambrières. His father was not pious, but his mother was fervent; however, Loisy was led towards the Church by his studies and by a Catholic instructor who encouraged him to enter the clergy or Church administration, which was a common situation for good students within the countryside. Reflecting on this period in his life, Loisy said that "until then [he] was not very pious...[he] believed with simplicity..." For example, he recounted that one day in his youth, struck by confusion, he cried out loud to himself "God is not good," a sign of things to come.²⁴⁹

Joseph Turmel was born in Rennes and was raised by illiterate parents. His father sold firewood while his mother sold galettes. They were devout Catholic practitioners. Surrounded by the faith of his parents, and with the aid of the abbé Gendron, Turmel studied in the Seminars and encountered other ordinary boys from the countryside. His memoir testifies to the enormous importance of his mother upon his faith. She weighed so heavily upon his conscience, in fact, that he later pondered suicide rather than tell her he had become an unbeliever.

²⁴⁸ Albert Houtin, *Un prêtre symboliste, Marcel Hébert (1851-1916) avec un portrait* (Saint-Amand-Montrond (Cher) Paris: Impr. Bussière F. Rieder et Cie, éditeurs, 7, place Saint-Sulpice, 1925), 14.

²⁴⁹ Loisy, *Choses passées*, 9.

Albert Houtin was born in 1867 at Sartre. His father, a deist, with little influence on his son's faith, was a baker and sold his goods at Luche. It was his grandmother and mother who nurtured Houtin in his faith. He critiques them severely in his memoir, describing with much disdain their beliefs. His grandmother was especially superstitious, fearing the devil until the end of her life. Between the two of them, the young Houtin inhabited a world dominated by the Catholic faith in its every aspect, for example, when Houtin contracted an eye ailment, his mother had him wash it in the holy waters at Saint-Apolline. This was the old world beyond the reach of scientific advances. Most importantly for Houtin, the priestly vocation was an opportunity to avoid the world of manual work and to enter into an intellectual and spiritual culture that he held in the highest esteem. Before he left for the seminary, his local teacher taught him Latin in order to prepare him. The teacher had an "antique" faith says Houtin, believing ardently in the miracles of the Bible. He taught Houtin to be a good royalist and about the righteousness of the divine right of the Bourbon kings.²⁵⁰

Prosper Alfaric was born at Livinhac-le-Haut in 1876. He was aided by the piety of his mother and his father. His father resigned himself to the idea that life was only momentary and all injustices would be recompensed in the next. His first instructors were 'brothers' whose goal was to encourage children to continue their studies and guarantee their progress. He had a profound respect for priests, whom he considered to be the guardians of a superior moral order. The family environment fortified Alfaric's

²⁵⁰ Houtin, *Une vie de prêtre*, 10-18.

faith; consequently, his early years were filled with questions about his soul and its purity. In his formative years, Alfaric prepared himself for the life of a priest with hopes of becoming a seminar Professor. In his biography, he wonders how many people were attracted towards the priesthood because of the better quality of life, both intellectual and material, the profession afforded. The Church, like a university of law, was an institution permitting social ascension among the poor. Alfaric saw that many of the peasants were profoundly pious, albeit mixed with the cares of the world.²⁵¹

The first implicit factor in the deconversion was that their families were old fashioned and pious. The second implicit critique of their early years according to their testimonies was that the Church had deteriorated in the nineteenth century and sought to make up its losses by recruiting from the poor and credulous. The parents of priests in the nineteenth century were for the most part artisans, small business owners, or small farmers. For example, in the diocese of Rennes, 80% of priests came from a line of peasants.²⁵² Houtin suggested that Catholicism suffered because of the cultural environment created by insufficient priests. He noted that in 24 Catholic departments 15 to 30 priests were lacking. The vocation of priests had been in slow decline. In 1888, he counted 2,169 vacant daughter churches and 1,645 ordinations.²⁵³ The historian Zeldin cites that there were 56,000 priests in 1870, but only 42,486 in 1950.²⁵⁴ Thus,

²⁵¹ Prosper Alfaric, *De la foi à la raison: scènes vécues* (Paris: Publications de l'Union rationaliste, 1955), 25-33.

²⁵² Pierre Pierrard, *Vie quotidienne du prêtre français au XIXe siècle: 1801-1905*. (Paris: Hachette, 1986), 81.

²⁵³ Albert Houtin, *La Crise du clergé, 2e édition* (Paris: E. Nourry, 1908), 140.

²⁵⁴ Theodore Zeldin, *Historie des passions françaises 1848-1945: 5. Anxiété et hypocrisie* (Oxford: Recherches., 1973), 272.

though there were more people, there were fewer priests. This process continues today in 2017 when many priests are old, and the new priests have to be recruited from outside of France in former colonies.

According to Houtin, the members of the clergy who had taken the priesthood came from the small farmers of simple faith from the countryside. Houtin saw this as a sign of decline: in the urban centers the wealthy and upper middle classes no longer led their children towards the Church dioceses, so the poor rural boys began to take their place. Plus, to make up for the lack of priests, their quality had to be lowered to admit more. Some of the regions were called the "bad dioceses."²⁵⁵ The result, according to Houtin, was that more and more students of the seminars came from poor families, sometimes without a profound or complex faith, who often just wanted to escape the smallness of their lives. He says the situation was quite grave: "the aristocracy of intelligence, of birth, and of money had given fewer and fewer of their children to an institution that appeared relatively ruined. It appeared without a future because of the pretensions of its immutability and insolent infallibility that had the effect of petrifying any vital progress in the past. The abstention of these classes was irremediable..."²⁵⁶

Albert Houtin documented the problem of insufficient, qualified candidates for the priesthood in his book *La crise du clergé* (1908). According to Houtin's work, the crisis was caused by the immobility and the obscuritanism of the Church. The importance, the power, and the culture of Catholicism were in decline. With the

²⁵⁵ Houtin, *La crise du clergé*, 147.

²⁵⁶ Houtin, *La crise du clergé*, 149.

persuasive power of the scientific method behind most of his critique, he saw the displacement of religion towards secular forms of knowledge. The Church remained mired in obsolete methods of the past. The clergy, believed Houtin, were docile and silent about the insecurities of their faith; in fact, he claims Christian belief in the nineteenth century had been gravely weakened. Houtin repeatedly claims that members of the church hid their genuine doubts due to the paralysis caused by their docility and to safeguard their livelihoods. In sum, Catholicism had lost its vitality.

Third, one discovers in the testimonies of the left modernists a harsh critique of the state of education. Catholics placed the financially poor peasant in the Small and Grand Seminaries where they learned only the limited methods of their teachers, which did not lead them to have a doctorate as was done in the secular schools. Rather, says Houtin, to maintain their fidelity to the Church, they discouraged the students from studying for the baccalaureate (French high schools). Looking at it from the inside, Houtin remarks that it had become antiquated in a century full of scientific discoveries: the education system resembled the conception of the seventeenth century. The Church's attitude towards new authors particularly damaged its image. Many new authors were seen as false and vicious.²⁵⁷ Due to the cloistered education, the children of the lower classes who became members of the clergy would later be unprepared or unwilling to deal with the ideas of the materialists and anticlericals. Their education, the result of dogmas, lacked nuance and sophistication, rendering their faith that much harder to maintain. The Church sheltered its students from this confrontation, and when

²⁵⁷ Houtin, *La crise du clergé*, 11-18.

it was their turn to teach in the seminaries, their hands were tied. But more than this, when they were confronted with new ideas, which they undoubtedly would be, they were not prepared with sufficient arguments and training. Instead of resisting the new ideas, doubt would invade them.

Alfred Loisy lived and studied for five years at the Grand Seminary of Châlons-sur-Marne, among 50 other students from mostly poor rural families. He was shocked sometimes at their vulgarity.²⁵⁸ Houtin studied at the Grand Seminary of Angers. Very critical of his experience, he affirmed that the good students did not have free access to the books of the library. Only the old, approved books were freely at their disposal. The teachers behaved as if they believed that science was either not useful or dangerous. Moreover, they hid the conflict between traditional theology and modern discoveries; certain chapters of the Bible needed careful consideration, and thus the students had to obtain permission to read them.²⁵⁹ It was only when Houtin had joined a monastery during a hiatus in his studies that he for the first time read the entire Bible. In the seminary, when he was troubled by a problem in the Bible, they taught him to leave these difficulties to the Church, which to Houtin was the effective suppression of his faculties of reason. According to Houtin, they deferred to faith to resolve the challenges posed by the Holy Scriptures.

The Grand Seminaries initiated the young men to adult ideas. Loisy, who did not describe himself as profoundly religious, studied to inspire his faith; however, he

²⁵⁸ Albert Houtin, Emile Poulat, and Félix Sartiaux, *Alfred Loisy; sa vie, son œuvre*. (Paris: Éditions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1960)., 15.

²⁵⁹ Houtin, *Une vie de prêtre*, 50.

considered the time he passed in the Grand Seminary as lost years for his intellectual development. Notwithstanding, he encountered Liberal Catholicism. For instance, he cited *Lacordaire et sa vie* by P. Chocarne. Lacordaire, who played a major role for Loisy, presented to him the work of Abbé Ludot and other studies embodying liberal values. "The liberalism of these gentlemen was that of Lacordaire, of Montalembert, of the Duke of Broglie."²⁶⁰ Considering that Loisy had had a crisis in his Catholic belief already at this period of his studies, these liberal studies could have been of important significance. But his attitude towards their teaching was rather negative. Loisy felt as Houtin had, who declared "At heart, the regime of the seminary is a deception..."²⁶¹

The left modernists believed this lack of sincerity of the Church in confronting modern issues was at the center of the religious crisis of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, increasing the loss of the traditional faith in France. Not acting to correct its errors, the Church greatly damaged its reputation. The education of priests was frozen in the past. The image portrayed in the testimonies of the left modernists is of children formed in the Small Seminaries bereft of any taste of the pleasures of the world. For instance, the children conducted their prayers many times throughout the day: before and after each lesson and when attending their daily mass. It was not until 1938 that Abby R. Ducasse made an effort to modernize the seminaries. Alfaric, who had participated in the seminaries in the 1880s, said that the seminaries dominated their lives. The rules permitted the students to leave one time per week, and the authorities

²⁶⁰ Houtin and Sartiaux, *Alfred Loisy; sa vie, son œuvre*, 16.

²⁶¹ Houtin, *Une vie de prêtre*, 50.

told them to avoid any books of bad influence. The professors of the Small Seminaries tried to inculcate the "priestly spirit." The seminaries did teach some of the sciences, notably mathematics and physics because not all of the students were going to go to the Grand Seminars. As for the students, according to Alfaric, they better appreciated the courses of history. The professors of the Small Seminaries convinced the students that they studied the masters of literature, but in reality, they knew very little of authors such as Voltaire or of the Enlightenment. Their literature courses did not teach criticism but the principles of composition and style. They examined the problems of the seventeenth or eighteenth century and the Restoration up to 1830. "We live in the past," said Alfaric.²⁶²

Theodore Zeldin's work reinforces what Alfaric and Houtin say about the Catholic schools. At the beginning of the century, 75% of the eighty-four Grand Seminaries did not teach science or mathematics and promoted very few critical studies of the Bible. The method of the middle ages remained the ideal. The manuals of theology had been written during the Second Empire and remained the same until 1940. *They taught in Latin, and they did not study original texts or modern philosophy.*²⁶³ If possible, the Catholic students continued their education at the Grand Seminaries, where the students had pensions. At the Seminaries life was harsh: they were discouraged even to speak with their friends outside of school. The system valorized discipline and conformity to develop character over the acquisition of knowledge.

²⁶² Alfaric, *De la foi à la raison*, 40-48.

²⁶³ Zeldin, *Historie des passions françaises 1848-1945: 5. Anxiété et hypocrisie*, 147-148.

Memory was cultivated at the sacrifice of reason, obedience to that of responsibility. The Grand Seminaries, as the small, hid the conflicts between theology and science. Even certain parts of the Bible were considered too risky and were forbidden.²⁶⁴

At the end of the nineteenth century, scientists had rewritten the history of the planet, of its fauna, of its flora. The study of evolution had made significant and controversial discoveries. Nonetheless, Catholicism had not substantially changed its teachings. To its great dismay and embarrassment, the Church confronted the fact that the Earth was not six thousand years old. The Church desperately needed to reconcile its teachings with modern science to prepare the religious mind to confront future crises appropriately.

Nineteenth-century Catholicism chose to defy modern science and especially modern philosophy by reemphasizing Saint Thomas. Pope Leo XIII announced in the *Encyclique Aeternie Patries* in 1879 that the study and teaching of philosophy and theology of Thomas Aquinas would be imposed in all the Great Seminaries. Saint Thomas would be the response to attaining the equilibrium between faith and reason. The Holy See felt that the arguments of modern philosophy led towards fideism and skepticism and thus neglected the rational foundation of the faith. Thomasism was thought to be a philosophy useful to clarify the connection between faith and reason. Following Thomas, the sphere of science was considered autonomous and completely reliable, but for the highest truth, reason should depend on revelation. *Apoloigists were*

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

told to thus use philosophy and rational argument to demonstrate the existence of God and the possibility of Christianity.

Loisy had turned towards Saint Thomas in hopes of reassuring his troubled conscience. He said that "the speculations of Saint Thomas on the Trinity, the mystery of God's unique nature in three persons, where it is all deduced from two definitions, that of nature and that of personality, concluded in a manner intentionally arbitrary in order to adapt it to traditional dogma, gave me the impression of a vast, empty argument that left me wanting."²⁶⁵ Far from resolving his doubts, his research made him realize the numerous labyrinthine arguments constructed for the defense of Christianity.

Léon XIII wanted science, especially the studies of history, to support the Church in testifying to the historical truth of the Christian faith, its miracles, its prophecies, its growth, and its saintliness since its birth. History would be a way to protect the faith by careful analysis and argument to demonstrate the prejudices of anticlerical critiques. In fact, Catholic science and history depended on a circular argument. At the heart of its convictions, the Church dictated philosophical conclusions and accounts that would then be used to prove the truth of Catholic teachings. It assumed the truth of faith before having proved it. Reason had to depend on revelation.²⁶⁶ The left modernists did not accept this logic.

The stories given by Houtin, Alfarcic, and Loisy do not tell the whole story of course. It was in higher education that the clergy tried to improve their position. In

²⁶⁵ Loisy, *Choses passées*, 43.

²⁶⁶ Hill, *The Politics of Modernism*, 40-44.

1808, by decree of the Empire, all education was centralized under the jurisdiction of the Université de France. Traditionally, primary education was handed over to the Churches, and this would not be seriously challenged until 1880. The Université remained the centralized administrative tool of French education, and its domination swung back and forth depending on the regime; thus, during the Bourbon Restoration, the Church had gained the upper hand only to be put back on the defensive with Louis Phillipe's regime. However, in 1833-1834, the state authorized the creation of Catholic primary and secondary schools (that existed alongside the state lycées) while guarding its monopoly of higher education. Catholic universities by law were not granted and thus did not exist; in response, Catholics tried to gain the right to provide university degrees. Between 1875 and 1880, during the conservative period of the Third Republic, the government authorized the liberty of teaching that permitted Catholic universities. But with the fall of the Right in the elections, the Left passed a law that forbade the Catholic schools from taking the name "university." They thus took the name "*Instituts catholiques*." To resist the expansion of Catholic higher learning, Republicans created secular, exclusive state exams for university degrees to limit Catholic higher education. The Catholics nonetheless tried to compete with their *Instituts*. They had some success and became a center of Catholic higher learning. As noted above, Alfred Loisy and Duchesne met one another in the Institut catholique in Paris.²⁶⁷

The *Instituts catholiques* were not allowed the freedom of inquiry by the Catholic administration, which some teachers did not appreciate. To maintain their

²⁶⁷Hill, *The Politics of Modernism*, 48-49.

performance and competitiveness, some of the members of the clergy wanted to reform the curriculum, but they were unable to gain much ground. For example, in 1863 Döllinger, a German priest from Munich, criticized Catholicism for having insufficient knowledge of modern science and declared the freedom of research for scholars. In 1871 he was excommunicated. The members of the new universities had to be cautious.

In sum, the attempt of Catholic reform at the end of the nineteenth century acknowledged the need to address the challenges coming out of the secular universities. Nonetheless, the stories told by Alfarcic, Loisy, and Houtin demonstrate how far behind the Catholic Church was in updating and reforming itself. Houtin's central argument was that Catholicism had become a lethargic, backward, and outdated cultural institution that attracted mediocrity, conformity, and produced men unsuited to confronting modernity. For some such as Turmel, their loyalty and closeness to their mothers and grandmothers tied them to the Church. To become autonomous adults, they had to pursue a hard, disenchanting reality and to break their tutelage and all their training and upbringing that taught submission and docility. To be intellectually mature they needed to study the arguments and conclusions of contemporary knowledge, which the Church did not permit, stunting their growth. To reach intellectual maturity, it seemed they had to be assertive adults and break with authority so they could see the forbidden knowledge hidden behind the ecclesiastical curtain. The left modernists saw Catholicism as an archaic institution unwilling to confront the problems of contemporary knowledge and practiced by mothers and their doting peasant sons.

Implicit Causes: Authority

The struggle for the liberty of thought was, of course, a struggle with Catholic authority. The Church is constructed from its Councils, the decrees of the Pope, and its administration. The encyclicals and the Index set the limits and the debates among the members of the clergy. The authority of this hierarchy weighed heavily on the left modernist. Hébert, Turmel, Loisy, and Houtin were pushed outside the Church or cornered into an undignified position. *According to the theory of "power dependency," the person of power maintains first his or her position by a form of precious compensation for the dependent; two, the compensation is difficult to find elsewhere.*²⁶⁸ All the priests of the nineteenth century could be considered in this situation. They studied all their lives within Catholic institutions. Almost all their compensation depended on their conformity with the authorities. Trained to be priests, they did not have the competence for anything else. As for their relationship with a charismatic leader, with the members of the clergy, it was not one leader but rather the Catholic institution. *The deconversion of the left modernists occurred partly because of a struggle with power that led towards rebellion.* This struggle with power allowed the left modernists to open up to new ideas. What partly held their Catholic system of beliefs together was the strength of this power relationship.

²⁶⁸ Janet Jacobs, "Deconversion from Religious Movements: An Analysis of Charismatic Bonding and Spiritual Commitment," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 26, no. 3 (1987): 294–308.

First, during the progress of their spiritual development, they explored ideas as part of their avenue towards recognition since they were good students. Next, when they encountered a problem, a theological crisis, they tried to resolve it for the esteem of their peers with contemporary academic tools, so they published new ideas that ended up being particularly heterodox. Moved by their desire to continue without censorship, they pushed the frontiers outwards that forced the guardians of orthodoxy to act. Rejected by those upon whom they depended on, they were driven to reject the structure that no longer was able to accommodate them. The reaction of the Church confirmed their notion of Catholicism as an archaic, antimodern institution. The Holy See, needing to protect the faith of the masses, meanwhile wanted all disputes to be settled behind closed doors. Those debating critical issues outside of this private backstage were considered rogue priests. To the Vatican, being members of the clergy, the left modernists should have kept the problems of the Church backstage, relegated to a small, experienced community. Hébert, Loisy, Houtin, and Turmel continued to do research that was unfaithful to orthodox values; therefore, they broke the contract. Worse, they each circumvented the Catholic censure. They betrayed the Church in exposing its problems to the public. Not acting according to the decorum of unity, they had to be punished as an example for others. Authority used deviants to show the limits of acceptable behaviors.

The theory of power dependency resembles the experience of the left modernists. They partially obeyed the Catholic rules in their work with the goal of aiding Catholicism, hoping that the Vatican would offer them recognition and reward.

None of them received major compensation for their work. They received rather a number of grave censures. Their esteem and recognition came from the margins outside the center of their power relationship. However, they wrote controversial ideas during a period when they would be well received by a large community in disagreement with the Vatican, both among the secular and the rungs of the clergy. In this sense, they were perhaps moved by a changing power dependency—one that compensated them in status and renown, but not a livelihood. *The ideas of the left modernists had an audience, but their social rewards were outside. The social capital gained from speaking, their fame and recognition, came partly from the very excitement of disobeying authority.*

The first example is that of Hébert, a dissident who had to be punished for his transgressions. His book *Souvenirs d'Assise* demonstrated heretical, radical ideas. In 1901, the cardinal declared that his book contained three heresies about God, the Resurrection and Hell.²⁶⁹ In addition, Hébert was accused of having used heretical historical works (these were, in reality, the works of Turmel!) For this, Hébert was banned from giving mass. His response was a defense of freethought and the publication of the "Dernier Idole" that proclaimed that Jesus was no more than a myth and a symbol. Clearly, the condemnation pushed him towards a more radical position. Further, being exposed, he no longer needed to hide himself and ceased to be officially Catholic.

Loisy, as the second example, especially fits the model of power dependency. Houtin accused Loisy of being overly ambitious, asserting that Loisy's personal quest

²⁶⁹ Houtin, *Un prêtre symboliste*, 144-145.

for power put him into an ambivalent position not only with his professional ethics, but his passion for greatness.²⁷⁰ Loisy had at first maintained hopes of reform, but he continuously ran into obstacles. The first incident for Loisy was the brutal rejection of his doctorate. The emotional fallout that followed exposed the relationship between his exegetical work and his faith. He said that "For several months, I did not have a single religious emotion."²⁷¹ *The force of his faith was linked directly to his relationship with power.* He acknowledged as critical the mission for the Church: order, virtue, family and the peace of society. He believed that Catholicism played a key role for humanity, but he admitted that Catholic dogmas were out of date with the needs of the present time. He would continue to serve the Church, but he would do it for the morally superior reasons of Catholicism and not because of his piety. His next crisis with authority occurred when Loisy wrote a heretical article. In his journal *l'Enseignement biblique*, he explains the errors of the Bible: it was written by men and for men, and they wrote it with the circumscribed knowledge of their period.

Because of this article Loisy lost his position at the Institut catholique. Loisy, for his part, felt betrayed by Hulst, who was his mentor and had told him that his article was acceptable. Loisy's rejection caused him to in turn reject the Church. In Loisy's memoir, he especially blames Cardinal Richard, who condemned Loisy. To Loisy, Richard badly understood the questions of the Bible and Loisy considered him to be the essence of the problem. Loisy concluded that Richard had totally submitted his

²⁷⁰ Houtin, Poulat, and Sartiaux, *Alfred Loisy; sa vie, son œuvre*, 127-138.

²⁷¹ Loisy, *Choses passées*, 76.

intelligence to the mystery of God, such that his faith could not be shaken by reason.²⁷² On the other side, according to Richard, Loisy had been seduced by science. That men such as Richard or Hulst maintained their faith confounded Loisy, who understood faith as a lack of critique; he believed they could not see the light of reason because their intelligence was locked away in an opaque box of mysticism.

Loisy's level of piety and faith appear directly connected to his approval or rejection. Loisy explicitly noted his loss of Catholic faith in 1904, several days after the Pope condemned his book *L'Évangile et l'Église*. While Pope Leo XII was living, the book was not put on the Index and Loisy remained Catholic. After the death of Leo XIII, the circumstances changed, and the Holy Office added it to the list. After that, Loisy wrote in his journal the lines that signaled his loss of faith, just as this lack of recognition had done in 1895. Before, Loisy gave the impression of being radical, but within the Catholic fold. Now he was radical and suddenly hardly Christian. For the Vatican, it was in the midst of struggling with what seemed like waves of anticlerical attacks from all sides. The situation of Catholicism in France had been aggravated because of the modernists, the Dreyfus Affair, and the politics leading up to the separation of the Church and the State in 1905. Loisy was forced to renounce his work against his conscience and notably against the fame and recognition he had achieved. The retraction was succinct and half-hearted. He said in his memoir that "It was little but still too much."²⁷³ The resistance that he mounted against the authorities closed the

²⁷² Ibid., 149.

²⁷³ Loisy, *Choses passées*, 252.

door of Catholicism for him. In the subsequent retraction on January 5, 1904, he refused to reject his book with the "right of his conscience."²⁷⁴ The Church demanded obedience.

The power upon which he depended did not compensate him, so he lost his motivation to defend the Church. And just like that Loisy said in 1904 that he no longer believed in the resurrection of Jesus, the Trinity, or God the Father! In a letter written by Loisy, June 7, 1904, Loisy said "If I am anything in terms of being religious it is rather pantheist-positivist-humanist than Christian."²⁷⁵ The Church became a false and burdensome system. He had the sentiment that the Catholic system was a tyranny against God. He admitted at this point his internal rebellion against Catholic power. He admits in his journal May 10, 1904, that at this moment he "remained in the Church for the reasons of opportunity and not of the faith."²⁷⁶ However, this opportunity disappeared after he was excommunicated in 1908 for his rejection of the encyclical *Pascendi* in 1907. Free from the pressures of conformity, he quickly drifted away from Christian orthodoxy and into a freebeliever who rejected the interventionist God found in the Bible.

The power struggles of the notable left modernists such as Loisy had a ripple effect. Alfarcic lost his faith slowly and with a number of small steps that culminated in his departure from Catholicism. He lived vicariously through the other left modernists—their struggles came to represent his own. Thus, when the Church

²⁷⁴ Loisy, *Choses passées*, 277.

²⁷⁵ Houtin, Poulat, and Sartiaux, *Alfred Loisy; sa vie, son œuvre*, 129.

²⁷⁶ Houtin, *Une vie de prêtre*, 128.

suppressed the work of Loisy, it caused a chain reaction. One of the significant moments was the excommunication of Loisy in 1908, who had greatly impacted him through his writings and leadership. According to Alfaric, Loisy behaved in a conciliatory and moderate manner. For the members of the clergy like himself, the ideas of Loisy rang loud across the French Church. Alfaric said that in the developed and well-educated countries like France, Loisy's ideas were not overly radical. Further, in these countries, Catholics and the clergy could quite often have a different vision than the Pope.²⁷⁷ The excommunication of Loisy had aggravated this distance and led Alfaric towards his rupture with the Pope that he says liberated his thoughts and gave him more doubts. Being younger than the others, Alfaric recounted the trials of Turmel and Houtin and the expulsions of Hébert and Loisy as a significant moment in his biography that led directly to his leaving the clergy.²⁷⁸ The struggles of the other modernists critically disturbed the tranquility of his confidence. When the links of the power relationship were broken between the clergy and Church authorities, it also created ripples that broke the links of others farther off.

In their testimonies, left modernists frequently describe the adverse effects of authority. Hypothetically, there is a tacit understanding in power relationships where the inferior submits and follows the superior for their help, guidance, and assistance. The superior benefits from their affirmed higher social status and socio/economic position and the inferior benefits by the progression of their pursuits. This relationship

²⁷⁷ Alfaric, *De la foi à la raison*, 190-192.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 192.

between the superior and dependent requires that the superior support the dependent through scarce but essential affirmations. The inability of finding remuneration for their work pushed the left modernists further and further from Catholicism. In France, after their ecclesiastic studies, life outside the Church would be difficult, so Loisy, Turmel, and Houtin tried to remain under its supporting roof (Houtin with regret). Their dissent was ultimately justified by aligning with secular values found in the social scientific method. Turmel and Loisy considered themselves martyrs of the truth. They called on a kind of secular mysticism of "truth" and "sincerity" as their new avenue of finding recognition and reward—believing in the abstract compensation of another value system. Secular institutions and values co-opted them. It was not "God" but "knowledge." Science and the secular world played an important and decisive role in providing them another kind of reward. Their search for the "truth," that the Church tried to stop, linked them to a secular, spiritual quest greater than Catholicism that now appeared partial and regional.

Explicit causes

The autobiographies of the left modernists give explicit reasons for their rejection of Christianity. The most obvious factor in their narratives is that they

reasoned their way through the many claims of Christianity to see the light of truth. Yet beyond this straightforward justification, they also provide an assortment of other reasons that when added up overwhelmed their faith. They explicitly noted that they never experienced a miracle or had a religious experience that verified the truth of Christianity. Second, rational investigation showed the weaknesses of Christianity, not its strengths. Third, Catholicism morally offended them.

The lack of religious experience

One does not find among the left modernists a profound spirituality. The conspicuous lack of a convincing spiritual experience is an important explicit argument that Houtin makes in his books and articles. Instead of growing spirituality, the left modernists who started with real piety during their youth, experienced an ever-declining piety that desperately needed support. They confirmed instead the silence of a materialist reality devoid of both an interventionist God and an interactive spiritual realm. Not one of them recounts a spiritual experience that compelled them to adhere to Catholic dogma. They experienced rather a process of disenchantment that slowly eliminated the structures of support for their faith.

In a passage that unveils as much the crisis of Houtin as other Catholic priests, he describes several typologies of priests in the Church: the timorous, the ambitious, and the sincere. Houtin used the description of the three types to exemplify the crisis of the clergy. Of these types, the sincere priest suffering from doubt is desperately

seeking a sign from God and in his sincerity is the most noble. It is he who wishes more than all the others for a transformative and faith affirming miracle.

Houtin provides a short description of the typical priest's despair. He says initially, the sincere priest was more active than passive, full of curiosity to know the foundation of his beliefs and to teach their religion as honestly and purely as possible. They submitted to the teachings in the seminaries with passion and a love of the truth. They adopted the priesthood with more enthusiasm than the other students. When they confessed their faith with confidence, they did it with a certainty in the truth. They believed in God because it was easy to know God, and it was equally easy to serve God with conviction. They believed in the history of Christianity, the prophets, the miracles, and the testimonies of the martyrs. But they were forced by the Church to accept incomprehensible dogmas. To satisfy the dignity of their faith in God, they began to study the foundations of revelation searchingly and to take up the challenges of the rationalist critique against the Church. They realized then that there were a series of critical problems within the Christian faith and saw the necessity to reform the Church's teachings. For example, their studies showed them that the miracles of ecclesiastic history were divided in two parts: those that have insufficient testimony to support the claims, and those that are well documented that could be explained by the laws of nature. After they studied the history and testimony of the martyrs, the propagation of Christianity no longer appeared like a miracle. It had become inadmissible. Their faith was given a severe trial. They were told that doubt was a crime and to reject the dogmas was yet another; thus, they were struck by the fear of entirely losing their faith. It is at

this point they ardently wished for a sign from God to reassure them--to obtain a solid proof. "They fell into prayer and asked God for a miracle."²⁷⁹ While they waited for a miracle to validate their life, the silence deepened their skepticism, making the world seem devoid of God. When they needed a miracle from God, they did not receive one, and their rational inquiry did not permit them to believe in them any longer either.²⁸⁰

Like Houtin, Alfaric and Turmel also mention the lack of religious experience to confirm their faith. Towards 1909, when Alfaric was at the end of his time within the clergy, he confessed his growing doubts to others. The Archbishop, with whom Alfaric shared his inquiry, admitted that he too had doubts. The Archbishop confided in Alfaric that he had waited for a miracle after his mother died. He had hoped for a sign that she had passed onto another life and that another reality existed. But he received nothing of the kind.²⁸¹ Thus rather than being confirmed in his faith, Alfaric saw that his superior lived in despair and doubt just as himself.

Turmel had been an enthusiastic Christian when he had started his studies, and his biography suggests his experience was similar to what Houtin described. Turmel says it was his ardent faith that led him to want to defend Christianity. His faith was never confirmed by religious experience. Instead, Turmel's religious enthusiasm is described as a social responsibility. For example, he said, "I was animated by an ardent love for the Church and for my mother..."²⁸² It was the "Church" and the faith of his

²⁷⁹ Houtin, *La crise du clergé*, 49-52.

²⁸⁰ Houtin, *La crise du clergé*, 49-52.

²⁸¹ Alfaric, *De la foi à la raison*, 271.

²⁸² Turmel, *Comment j'ai donné congé aux dogmes*, 29.

mother that filled him because as he matured, he did not depend on any religious feelings or experiences.

What is notable in the testimonies of the left modernists was how religious experience had simply not happened and had become impossible for them. In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor called this phenomenon the “buffered self,” a way of being in the world as a modern person that excluded religious experience. The modern condition is closed to religious experience and spiritual possibility by the nature of its assumptions. The pre-modern self was porous and open to interpreting the events around itself as spiritual forces and events. In becoming modern, the religious self was blocked and buffeted by the explanations of science that explained a mechanical/biological existence. The laws of nature needed to be broken before the left modernists could have a religious experience again.

Intellectual doubt

« Tous les prophéties messianiques...reposaient sur des erreurs de l’imagination, sur le néant. » Turmel, *Comment j’ai donné congé aux dogmes*, 1935, 22.

The Books and Thinkers

The second explicit reason, and the factor most evident in the autobiographies of the modernists, is the importance of their intellectual doubts that distanced them slowly and surely from their belief in Christianity. These doubts led them towards

unbelief and heretical ideas. The intellectual factors are the most explicit causes for the left modernists deconversion and it is how they wished their deconversion to be remembered.

In studying their loss of faith, one of the principal questions to ask is what books did they read? What philosophers or thinkers did they say were important? Philosophy, history, and literature had opened up the horizons of the left modernists who were seduced and taken in by the discourse of reason, method, and science. They wanted their ancient faith to be supported by modern methods and valid proofs to convince themselves and the world that the message of Catholicism was the true and correct one. However, they found that defending their faith became increasingly difficult. Modern literature provided an explosion of skeptical, irreligious, and secular arguments.

As noted above, one of the major factors of the crisis for the left modernists was often that they started their education with a limited horizon because Catholicism tried to protect its students from "dangerous" books and ideas. For example, during his second year at Rennes, Turmel obtained access to the library. He found a secret world that had been hidden from him his entire life up to that point. One such book *La Lumière intellectuelle* inspired him to think about the proper place of God in ordinary, everyday life. It led him to believe that ideas were not given by God through divine inspiration but by the creativity of the human mind. After this book, Turmel held that "our ideas come from the earth and not from heaven."²⁸³ Confronted by doubts, Turmel wanted to

²⁸³ Turmel, *Comment j'ai donné congé aux dogmes*, 20-21.

defend the Church against the innumerable attacks. To defend the Church effectively, he had to read the original, unadulterated texts of his adversaries. Thus, Turmel asked for access to the books on the Index, so that he could read the books of the radicals and the Enlightenment thinkers. The result was a veritable intellectual shock. For example, the works of Léger Deschamps, a precursor of Hegel and greatly influenced by Spinoza, collided with the belief of Turmel, in particular, the claims of a universal God. It caused him to see Christianity with new eyes and from a new vantage point. The Old and New Testament tell the history of a god who led humanity. So why did the Jews follow an exclusive god while the Christians follow a universal one, asked Turmel?²⁸⁴ Subsequently, his loss of faith was firmly linked to the mutual incomprehension and irreconcilable testimonies of Jews and Christians.

Hébert's encounter with unfiltered secular literature led to a similar crisis. It was his professor of moral theology and director of studies, John Hogan, who introduced Hébert to psychology and history. Under the influence of Hogan, Hébert also read the books of Western literature like Plato, Plutarch, and Victor Hugo.²⁸⁵ Later, as a professor at the school Fénelon, he read about transformism, a compromise with evolutionary theory. Hébert mentions both Catholic and secular influences: he also later discovered the writing of Louis Duchesne, the ally of d'Hulst at the Institut Catholique, in the *Bulletin critique*, where he learned about the discrepancies of the first chapters

²⁸⁴ Turmel, *Comment j'ai donné congé aux dogmes*, 20-29.

²⁸⁵ Houtin, *Un prêtre symboliste*, 32.

of the Bible.²⁸⁶ He credits these works for allowing him to see different arguments, but what is surprising is that as an educated Catholic man, he had not yet encountered them.

According to the historian Vidler, who wrote in the 1920s (thus much closer to the time of the actual time), Kant held one of the highest places; the author states that the revolution in metaphysics by Kant remained important for both the religious and the secular points of view. Kant's ideas had broken with the immutable structure of scholasticism that had been maintained since the Council of Trent. Kant had "brought down the long-tottering edifice of the established order, and had made a new start possible by clearing the ground once for all of an inveterate growth of old pretensions to transcend the common lot of man."²⁸⁷ Vidler says the critique of reason and the rejection of the ability to demonstrate the existence of God sapped the claims of theology. The left modernist Hébert asserted that the university in France was significantly impregnated with Kant. Hébert, himself, became a Kantian. He concluded that Kant had given "a powerful impetus" to philosophy and theology impossible to ignore, such that he tried himself to reconcile Kant and Thomas Aquinas.²⁸⁸ For Hébert, Kant revealed the problem of certitude and knowledge itself. Such thoughts lead towards fideism or a pragmatic belief in God. With Kant, God appeared as a creator and the moral order of the universe without a Church, the supernatural, or miracles. Further, Kant rejected the traditional proofs of God's existence. However, to Kant, the belief in God conserved the structure of morality in providing the ultimate punishment

²⁸⁶ Houtin, *Un prêtre symboliste*, 88.

²⁸⁷ Vidler, *The Modernist Movement in the Roman Church*, 17.

²⁸⁸ Houtin, *Un prêtre symboliste*, 54.

and reward for injustice in the world, and it was through his belief in morality that he preserved his belief in God. Kant's conclusions about the limits and failings of reason led towards a new apologetics in Christianity.²⁸⁹

A text of Herbert Spencer made a striking impression on Alfaric. The English philosopher Spencer was one of the most prominent thinkers of the age, and his thought ranged across biology, sociology, philosophy, and history. He is most remembered for coining the phrase "survival of the fittest" when considering the competition of civilizations (which has had significant and unfortunate consequences ever since). Spencer described a very problematic vision between science, religion, and knowledge in his ambitious work *First Principles*; this gave Alfaric a "decisive jolt" that pushed Alfaric to reflect. Spencer concluded that Christian theology leaned towards "the mysteries" and that one never obtained "the absolute" in this circumscribed field. "The unknowable," and the "knowable" remained problematic, and according to Spencer, irresolvable. With the biological theory of evolution by Darwin and the social theory of Spencer, Alfaric envisioned a world caught in flux, where all was in the process of changing. He thus wondered: how to reconcile the doctrine of Herbert Spencer, that of August Comte, or even only of Kant with a Catholic Church supported by the unchanging book of Genesis that was limited to the revelations received from God on Mount Sinai by Moses?²⁹⁰ Christianity appeared static and unadaptable.

²⁸⁹ Alfaric, *De la foi à la raison*, 134.

²⁹⁰ Alfaric, *De la foi à la raison*, 137

For members of the clergy like Alfarcic and Hébert who had studied philosophy with care, philosophy complicated a simple faith. The great masters of Catholicism were Saint Augustin, John Scotus Eriugena, Peter Abelard, and Saint Thomas. But modern philosophy, of which one could say began with René Descartes, continued with other authors such as Malebranche, Leibnitz, Kant, Bacon, Locke, Thomas Reid, et Cousin. The pious efforts of Descartes and Francis Bacon had elevated reason as the most important criterion. Descartes had developed an entirely mechanistic vision of the world, following the laws of movement. He became controversial for having put reason before God and Revelation; this is the rationalist tradition. Rationalism caused Thomas Hobbes to deny that Moses was the sole author of the Pentateuch while Spinoza considered the Bible as a book just like any other, elaborated without the hand of God. The Catholics Peyrere and Richard Simon agreed with Hobbes.²⁹¹ After having read the above philosophers, Alfarcic said they "dissolve the great principles of Christian spirituality finally into strange combinations, where the mind insufficiently subtle is at pains to recognize itself."²⁹² For the individuals like Alfarcic and Hébert, philosophy provided a weak, uncertain foundation for faith. The spiritual position of the left modernists between faith, doubt, and the uncertainty of knowledge, appeared to them to be a process without end that produces more and more argument in the seemingly unreachable goal of finding a stable foundation.

²⁹¹ Alfarcic, *De la foi à la raison*, 59; S. L Greenslade, *The Cambridge History of the Bible; the West, from the Reformation to the Present Day*. (Cambridge [England: University Press, 1963), 238-243.

²⁹² Alfarcic, *De la foi à la raison*, 59.

The sibling of philosophy is of course theology. But the left modernists did not appear to respect or admire theologians. They were the great deceivers who wanted to prove one thing with passion and zeal. For Houtin, reading theology convinced him that theologians were fighting a losing battle. For example, when he read *On the Inspiration of Scripture* (1884) by John Henry Newman, Houtin concluded that Newman's criticism of miracles was "a manual of skepticism."²⁹³ Newman was often read by the left modernists because he tried to reconcile the miracles of the Church and the claims of tradition with the demands of reason. He was a former Anglican who had converted to Catholicism, something almost unheard of in Britain. His fame and wide respect (if not notoriety in England) and importance only grew when Leo XIII elected him as a cardinal. Newman believed that Christianity had indeed been given a mission within a Church and that Catholicism was the legitimate institution. *On the Inspiration of Scripture* constituted an important step for Houtin for clarifying the problems, but not as Newman intended. Houtin found the arguments of Newman entirely insufficient for him, and far from helping him, they destroyed his confidence in the great miracles of Christian antiquity. The defense of Christianity by Newman resembled an "insinuating sophism," i.e., an argument with intelligence and imagination that invented an imperfect defense. Newman had destroyed his confidence in the miracles of Christianity such that the Old Testament had become immaterial.²⁹⁴

²⁹³ Houtin, *Une vie de prêtre*, 167-168.

²⁹⁴ Houtin, *Une vie de prêtre*, 167-168.

Ultimately, philosophy left Alfaric unsatisfied. To him, the philosophers tried to prove what they already wished to believe with a mixed skepticism and an obscure logic.²⁹⁵ Turmel thought that the philosophers could always invent a solution to the problem of faith because philosophy did not rest on a scientific, empirical foundation as he believed history did.²⁹⁶ Alfaric and Turmel gave more importance to empirical science, especially history because they saw it as founded on verifiable data/facts that served to limit possible interpretations. The historical method was attractive for the left modernists because it seemed like a way out of the dilemma they saw in philosophy and theology that searched to prove what the partisans already believed.

According to Gugelot, one of most read books by converted Catholics was the work of Ernest Renan, the heretic par excellence who used the methods of historical inquiry. His book the *Vie de Jésus* influenced several generations. It was central in the memories of those who converted to Catholicism, who presented it as powerful, seductive rationalism. Further, Gugelot's sources say that nearly everyone had read the *Vie de Jésus*. The high level of animosity against Renan corresponded to his importance. To Catholics, he was a man who played a key role in the dechristianization and the demoralization of France. More, he proposed replacing the Church by a society of specialists and scientists in his work *L'Avenir de la science*, a book that was emblematic of the period for expressing a zealous enthusiasm for science.²⁹⁷ Gugelot

²⁹⁵ Alfaric, *De la foi à la raison*, 61.

²⁹⁶ Turmel, *Comment j'ai donné congé aux dogmes*, 21.

²⁹⁷ Frédéric Gugelot, *La conversion des intellectuels au catholicisme en France, 1885-1935* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 1998), 91-97.

cites a converted Catholic from the article "Un groupe" by d'André Beaunier in the *Revue des deux mondes*, September 1, 1913, who said:

In 1890, when the men of my age had reached their twentieth year, we had strongly suffered from the influence of a book that dated from 1848 and that had recently appeared, *l'Avenir de la science*, by Ernest Renan. So taken, that we believed... science was going, all alone, to govern our mind and be the guide to our existence.²⁹⁸

For both conversion and deconversions to and from Catholicism, Renan represented an important cultural marker. For those fortifying their belief, he constituted a model to reject, but for those who were more estranged from the faith, he represented someone who opened new doors and possibilities. To the skeptical, he represented the general disillusionment with Christianity and a more ambiguous, unclear universe. Alfarcic observed that Renan had made accessible to the public questions about the origin, the nature, and the real value of the New Testament in his work *Histoire des Origines du Christianisme* (1863-1881).²⁹⁹ The biography of Renan, *Souvenirs de la jeunesse*, was particularly moving for Alfarcic. To Loisy, Ernest Renan played a pivotal role in his education and his entrance into biblical critique. Loisy took Renan's course at the Collège de France, where he had been initiated into textual criticism of the Old Testament in particular. Loisy described how Renan taught his classes: in the process of slow, methodical reading, Renan took a verse of the Bible, read it, translated it, read the same version in Greek from the Septuagint for

²⁹⁸ André Beaunier, *Revue des deux mondes*, Septembre 1, 1913, 97.

²⁹⁹ Alfarcic, *De la foi à la raison*, 79.

comparisons, and finally cited the conjectures of several scholars and modern critiques to weigh each word.³⁰⁰

Renan stands as the symbol of the historical study of the Bible. For the left modernists, historical studies of the Bible are especially important for their deconversion. For when they studied history, they were touching upon both knowledge and method that gave them a wedge to crack open and question the whole panoply of Christian doctrine. For Hébert it was the studies of Duchesne that exposed the contradictions and the evangelical stories of the resurrection of Jesus.³⁰¹ According to Turmel, the exegeses of the Bible had been at the heart of his unbelief. His studies of Hebrew and German helped his biblical studies. He cites a study by Gesenius on Isaiah. Gesenius provided a striking example of errors found in the Bible. Seeing the problems, Turmel could see that unbelievers were not simply led by their disgust of the supernatural or their pride, but also their reason.³⁰² For Houtin, his work on the regional history around the origins of the Church of Angers, that had supposedly been founded by Saint René, revealed the falsehood about the origins of the French dioceses. His research led him to conclude that the Bollandists had founded it, who were a group of scholars in the eighteenth century. But his work, far from being received with appreciation, had been rejected, says Houtin, because the traditional origin story was too important for the revenue of several religious societies.³⁰³ His research into Saint

³⁰⁰ Loisy, *Choses passées*, 64.

³⁰¹ Houtin, *Un prêtre symboliste*, 128.

³⁰² Turmel, *Comment j'ai donné congé aux dogmes*, 22.

³⁰³ Houtin, *Une vie de prêtre*, 182-193.

René and the corruption in maintaining the legend became a symbol of his incredulity in his autobiography. Everything had become suspect after that, such that Houtin became morally outraged until the deception of the Church pushed him to the point of rupture.

Loisy, Turmel, Houtin, and Alfarcic followed the path of Ernest Renan and the method of history. Their faith in Christianity had depended on the miracle of the Bible as the word of God. Turmel said that during his education he had understood the Bible as divine in all its parts. The Bible represented the first proof of miracles. Thus, they had a very high expectation: it should possess impressive information beyond the realms of normal human knowledge. They wanted more than a history of life after death. The Bible should describe correctly how the universe functions or the reality of the past and future without error. It should contain a superhuman knowledge, and the characteristics appropriate to convince others of the truth of the Christian message. It should be a boon and aid to humanity for all times and ages.

This veneration of the Bible led to intellectual dissonance the more they learned about historical critique. Turmel explained that he "did not foresee the formidable trial that awaited him." He adds: "All the commentators that I had read at the seminary considered the Bible as a book dictated by heaven, and by consequence, sacred."³⁰⁴ The errors that he discovered led him to see the Bible as the product of men and not of God. Turmel made a list of errors that had considerably shaken his faith: the book of Daniel is an open fraud that claims to describe the events of 538, but in reality it describes 168;

³⁰⁴ Turmel, *Comment j'ai donné congé aux dogmes*, 22.

Deuteronomy is supposed to be from the time of Moses, but it in fact was elaborated in 622; there are different dates on the story of Jesus, etc.³⁰⁵ The errors of the Bible were at the heart of the incredulity of Hébert also. The study of philosophy had weakened his faith, but the study of history struck the final blow. The historical teaching of Duchesne had fashioned the mind of Hébert such that he began to see the foundation of Christianity as an illusion. Duchesne, himself, recognized a difference between the moral teachings and the dogmas.³⁰⁶ He had shown Hébert the contradiction of the testimonies about the resurrection, but the conclusions of Hébert went much further than those of Duchesne. Hébert deduced that the dogma of the resurrection was only an inconsistent legend.

Loisy was also a student who was touched by Duchesne. In his biography *Alfred Loisy* by Houtin and Sartiaux, Houtin states that Loisy had read the New Testament of Tischendorf, a student of Duchesne, who had made a strong impression:

The close reading that I made of the Gospels ruined, at the first strike, the opinion that I had held of the Scriptures. Faith told me that these writings were entirely divine: reason showed me that they were entirely human, nowhere exempt from contradictions, containing evident traces and personal tendencies of the authors. The authenticity of Mathew and John appeared to me very suspect. I was stuck in this quandary. I did not have the time to search for a theory of inspiration that would reconcile faith and science.³⁰⁷

History came to support the doubt of Loisy. He realized that Catholicism, far from being the perfect grace from the hand of God, had changed numerous times during the

³⁰⁵ Turmel, *Comment j'ai donné congé aux dogmes*, 32-35.

³⁰⁶ Houtin, *Un prêtre symboliste*, 88-89.

³⁰⁷ Houtin, Poulat, and Sartiaux, *Alfred Loisy; sa vie, son œuvre*, 29.

course of the centuries. By consequence, he believed for a time in an evolutionist theory of Church development that came to represent the Catholic left modernists position until it.

History caused Houtin the same disillusion. He did historical research on the seminary of Angers and then on the life of the Benedictine Dom Couturier. To his frustration and surprise, he was told his works had an excess of truth and that it would have been better to keep silent about some issues. And this was perhaps the attitude others felt--better to protect their faith than to cause grief. Next, his books *l'Apostolicité des Églises de France au XIX siècle* (1900), *Les origines de L'Église d'Angers: La légende de Saint René* (1901) revealed the foundations of the apostolic origin of the French diocese. In fact, his research showed Bollandist founded the diocese in the eighth century contrary to local myth. As mentioned above, Houtin accused the local community of protecting the thesis of the apostolic origins because several pious groups acquired their revenue from the legends of these religious heroes.³⁰⁸ Houtin uncovered apparent frauds, but members of the clergy let it be understood that they preferred obscurity. The result of the research for Houtin, as for Turmel, was to make him profoundly suspicious. For Houtin and Turmel, the search for the truth had become a quest for fraud. This is what motivated them to collect counterfactual information about ecclesiastic history, false miracles, false prophecies, pious frauds, and devout impostures. Further, for Houtin and Alfaric, the support of the Church by the anti-Dreyfusards confirmed their rejection of the manipulation of the information by

³⁰⁸ Houtin, *Une vie de prêtre*, 180-209.

partisan thinkers.³⁰⁹ Houtin became skeptical and critical; he maintained his suspicious till his last moments. The historian Harvey Hill considered Houtin a flawed paranoid.³¹⁰ Whatever the case, he lost confidence in Catholicism and its miracles because of the layers of false stories he encountered.

According to Houtin in his books, *La Question biblique chez les catholiques de France au XIXe siècle* and *La Question biblique au XXe siècle*, the critique of the Bible by the method of history and science permitted a way to contest the certitude of Christian dogma and sap the integrity of the Catholic hierarchy during the nineteenth century. Houtin had made a list of the problems the modernists addressed: critics said that Moses did not write the first four books; parts of Isaiah that dealt with Babylon and its destruction had been written after the destruction of Babylon; the book of Daniel was not written in the seventh century before Jesus Christ and could only have been written after the year 164 BC; the book of Psalms had been written very late; the stories of Jonas, Esther, Judith, Tobie, and Job were not historical stories, but of the Roman religion.³¹¹

One response to the problem was to interpret the Bible as allegory. However, Houtin found it unconvincing, saying that allegories created "the greatest violence against the text: in their constant support of the Church and even by the authority of the inspired authors of the New Testament..."³¹² Fossils, the ideas of transformism (the

³⁰⁹ Houtin, *Une vie de prêtre*, 215; Alfarcic 104.

³¹⁰ Harvey Hill, Louis-Pierre Sardella, and C. J. T Talar, *By Those Who Knew Them French Modernists Left, Right, & Center* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 45.

³¹¹ Houtin, *La Question biblique XIX*, 161-162.

³¹² Houtin, *La Question biblique XIX*, 131.

slow change of the earth), the ideas of Darwin, and a universe in perpetual motion complicated the reception of the book of Genesis. In response, some theologians tried to reconcile such ideas with "periodism," which was the idea that each day in Genesis corresponded in fact to a much greater period of time during the creation of the universe.³¹³ In short, the Bible led to confused responses without convincing proof of its divine origin for doubters and non-Christians.

The left modernists eventually ceased to believe the Bible contained the written, infallible and universally true word of God. The propositions in the Bible had to be reinterpreted. They could no longer merely regard the Bible as a collection of propositions that communicated the wishes of God. Further, reinterpreting the stories cast the whole process into doubt and suspicion. They had wanted a clear, sound, and irrefutable proof of their faith.

The disillusion with the Bible was based on their empirical orientation. The historical facts were more important than Christian dogmas. The left modernists testified that they no longer wanted to believe in the elements of the Bible that their reason could no longer justify. Further, skeptical of what they were told to believe, they did not want to assume the truth of the Bible before having examined it. *This was a devastating change to the formulation of their faith in Christianity—they withheld their belief until they could investigate and verify Christian claims.* The Church looked for truth by first assuming faith and revelation to be true and then proceeded to create/pick selectively historical and philosophical arguments that justified their position and

³¹³ Minois, *L'Église et la science*, 222.

treated them as proofs of the truth of Catholicism. The left modernists were not willing to play a game that assumed their faith was true and to then search to justify it by intelligent and sophisticated argument. According to Alfaric, the attitude of the Church implied that one does not search for the truth: it was already completely found.³¹⁴

The left modernists faced a theological impasse and responded in different manners. They could at first accept imperfection and stay in the bosom of the Church, refusing to recognize the importance of their rationalist convictions. Second, they could reject Catholicism, the path that each of the left modernists would later adopt. Third, they could maintain their faith and accept some degree of incoherence and a lack of comprehension. Loisy followed the third option at first in attempting to show the historical evolution of the Church and rejecting its allegations of absolute spiritual knowledge. Hébert reinterpreted the biblical dogmas: they were symbols of a more profound spiritual reality, but he rejected Christianity as the final stage of cultural and spiritual development.

Gavin Hymen argues that in his book *A Short History of Atheism* that theologians after the middle ages taught in the disciplines of philosophy and science that God was an object in the world. God could be studied and known. Further, modern theology considered God as an object that could be proven by logical arguments as a proposition. That God was beyond reason seemed to be a concession that the idea lacked substance. If reason could not show God to be true, why believe it? Since Descartes, philosophy has searched for clear and distinct ideas. God should have been

³¹⁴ Alfaric, *De la foi à la raison*, 101.

in the sphere of comprehension when using the methods of logic, of science, and of empiricism.³¹⁵

The historian Lester Kurtz in *The Politics of Heresy* considered the left modernist crisis as a problem of identity between two professions. The ambivalence between the two demands for their loyalty, that of being a priest and that of being a scholar, overturned their Catholicism. This ambivalence caused their oscillation between doubt and faith. Turmel, Loisy, and Houtin emphasized the problem between scientific research and the will of the Church. Loisy had found a way to conciliate doubt and Catholicism.³¹⁶ The theory of Loisy in *L'Évangile et l'Église* was to reject absolute dogmas. In place of a static spirituality, he believed that Catholicism should reform itself to meet the needs of the present time. The comprehension of the truth changed; thus, the dogmas should change. Given the intransigence of the Church, Kurtz argues they could not be both priest and historian.

*When the left modernists adopted the historical method over that of Catholic faith, they had ceased to be truly Christian but rather historians. When they wrote against the Church, it was a heroic act against the censure—reinforcing their commitment to history versus Christianity. For example, Houtin defended the method of history after his book *La question biblique chez le catholique de France au XIX* had been condemned by the Pope. He said, "The first law of history is to not dare lie; the*

³¹⁵ Gavin Hyman, *A Short History of Atheism* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 53-62.

³¹⁶ Lester R Kurtz, *The Politics of Heresy: The Modernist Crisis in Roman Catholicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), see Chapter 4.

second, to not fear to tell the truth; the historian must remove himself from suspicion, flattery, or animosity.”³¹⁷

Alfaric affirmed the importance of secular and irreligious studies in his memoir: "It is by personal experience that I learned how, in the twentieth century, under the growing hold of the scientific spirit, that study and reflection can dilute the ancestral faith and lead the most pious souls to total unbelief.”³¹⁸

The moral crisis

The third explicit factor in deconversion of the left modernists is the moral tension they felt between themselves and the Church. There are several moral dilemmas that weighed on the left modernists: first the belief that the Church was morally compromised and moribund; second, the desire to be honest with themselves, or sincere; three to tell others what they believed to be true. For the left modernists, morality played a decisive role in the transformation of their spirituality. The moral problems do not speak directly of the truth of the faith, but the moral questions used by the left modernists weakened their loyalty and their social ties to the Church.

Loisy, Turmel, and Houtin accused Catholic institutions of purposefully hiding theological difficulties from them. They felt the members of the church were not intellectually honest. Loisy recounted that when he tried to tackle the errors in Bible, he spoke with Cardinal Meignan to obtain his counsel. The priest told Loisy that the

³¹⁷ Houtin, *La question biblique chez le catholique de France au XIX*, 246.

³¹⁸ Alfaric, *De la foi à la raison*, 132.

members of the clergy were lawyers of the tradition and that they must defend it for the importance of the tradition itself. The possibility that a part of their tradition was false posed a secondary problem.³¹⁹ The image painted by Turmel is harsher. To him, the nineteenth and early twentieth century was a time period, like that of Galileo's, where the foundation of the Church was weakened and new ideas appeared dangerous. The Church acted hypocritically because it hid all of its problems from the exterior world while those within were all aware of the issues. The clergy hid what they thought to save their jobs and ecclesiastical careers. Obedience at least gave them financial security. The left modernists saw the Church as an institution of knowledge, led by a central authority, that had created a culture of dishonest conformity.³²⁰ To the left modernists, orthodox Catholic exegesis was entirely charlatanism.

At the end of his biography, Turmel condemned the authority of the Church. He remarked that its power was a mask that hid all its errors. Dogma was more important than the search for the truth. The study of history led him to conclude that religion changed and that dogmas changed with time as well. He accused the Church of hiding its history. During his condemnation, Turmel declared that the trial process of his excommunication never inquired into the actual truth of what his research claimed or the facts he mentioned in his criticism: the Holy See wanted obedience, then his expulsion. The Church did not have a genuine debate or a just process to evaluate his ideas. The Vatican controlled the clergy by punishments so that force maintained

³¹⁹ Loisy, *Choses passées*, 116-123.

³²⁰ Turmel, *Comment j'ai donné congé aux dogmes*, 33.

dogmas and not the persuasion of evidence. Further, by the structure of authority and power, the discontented clergy was obliged to choose to either side with the authority of the Catholic hierarchy or go against all of Catholicism. For the left modernist, the culture of silence weighed heavily on their intellectual life.

One of the clear agendas of the left modernists' testimonies is to expose what the Church wanted to hide. Turmel believed the clergy spoke against their thoughts to conserve their work and position. He furnished the example of the exegete Lesêtre. When Turmel was reading his work, he noticed that Lesêtre alluded to the fact that Psalms had been written later than generally accepted, the traditional date of 536 BC. However, Lesêtre did not declare outright what must have been to him a glaring discrepancy in the Bible. Lesêtre's analysis showed that Psalms reflected the persecutions at Antioch in 168 BC. But Lesêtre, who saw the allusions to 168 BC, said nothing because he feared that the Holy See would pursue him for heresy.³²¹ The Church did not want to confront its secrets.

The second part of the moral crises was a crisis of sincerity. Because they won their livelihood through the Church, it was a very difficult and worrisome decision to leave. Thus, the decision to openly critique their benefactor and to be honest with themselves was laden with heavy consequences. Turmel, Loisy, and Houtin had difficulties accepting their separation from the Church. Turmel wanted to wage war against Catholicism and also avoid destitution. In contrast, Houtin and Loisy wanted to at first reform and revolutionize the way Christianity and the faith were understood to

³²¹ *Ibid.*, 32-36.

minimize the importance of dogma and static "truths." They wanted to reform Catholicism from the interior. The resistance that they encountered led them towards their rupture with the Church. But most priests were not ready to go to this extreme. In composing *La crise du clergé*, Houtin came to believe that many priests lived in a moral compromise. Loisy at first thought Catholicism worth defending, even if it was erroneous. As for Turmel, he decided to stay within the Church while he tried to undermine its integrity and dogmas with his writings, hidden by his many pseudonyms.

Faith that is maintained at the price of hypocrisy and isolation is not a virtue. When Houtin confessed his crisis to the director of his faith, his director told him to stop his studies. For Houtin, this was the basis for his moral crisis. He replied, "the cessation of studies, is it anything other than the abdication of human reason?"³²² When Loisy had to retract his ideas in 1904, Loisy defended his right of conscience. However, he decided to denounce his writing to avoid punishment, trying to walk a fine line. Loisy attempted to justify his deceit with the Church as an honest game, but really he became torn between the Church's need to change and keeping his post. The Vatican tolerated dissent as long as they recanted publicly. However, Loisy says in a letter to the Vatican January 11, 1904: "I did not abandon or retract my opinions as historian."³²³ He tried to make the distinction that as a member of the clergy, he would agree, but as a historian, he would not. Left in a paradoxical position, the Church pushed him to reject his professional ethical standards, leading Loisy to eventually disobey the

³²² Houtin, *Une vie de prêtre*, 53.

³²³ Loisy, *Choses passées*, 277.

authority of the Church. Loisy had to choose loyalty to the group and the Catholic cause or personal integrity as a historian and the cause of free inquiry.

When the left modernists spoke of their colleagues or with their confessor, they responded that they could not put into question the dogmas nor the gospel teachings because they had to maintain Catholic traditions.³²⁴ The system of condemnation and excommunication were an effective tool to force the priests to suppress their heterodoxy. Risking the anger of the Catholic institutions, the crisis of sincerity was about free thought and the desire to have an open and honest conversation.

The rupture with the Church according to Loisy, Houtin, and Alfaric was a moral act, according to their testimonies, justifying the "why" of their reason. At the end of the first volume of his memoir, Houtin cited Ximenes Doudan in support of his point of view. Doudan's phrase is taken from *Pensées et fragments*; for Houtin, this was a communion with another across time and space about maintaining one's faith as a moral rule as much as an intellectual problem:

It is not necessary to be a believer, as new fanatics insolently affirm all dogmatism, but one must be sincere; this is the greatest requirement of being moral. The doubts of honest men contain more moral truth than the profession of faith of those under the yoke of the current fashion.³²⁵

Other Considerations: disaffiliation, emotional trauma, and sex

The disaffiliation of the group

³²⁴ Loisy, *Choses passées*, 116; Houtin, *Une vie de prêtre*, 53; Turmel, *Comment j'ai donné congé aux dogmes*, 35-37.

³²⁵ Houtin, *Une vie de prêtre*, 437.

In deconversion studies, disaffiliation is sometimes a factor.³²⁶ The state of isolation breaks the links with the social world that supports and affirms their particular belief. Each person in this study, more or less, lost his faith in Christianity before leaving the Church. Being defined by their work, it was not easy to change their lives. Hébert unveiled his ideas with the publication of *Souvenir D'Assise* in 1899 that led to his departure in 1903. Turmel lost his faith in 1886 but lived in the Church until 1930. The faith of Loisy remains a matter of debate, but he stopped being Catholic in 1904 according to his autobiography. However, in the biography of Loisy by Houtin, Loisy ceases to be a believer in 1895 or 1896. The faith of Houtin and Alfaric slowly dissolved until it detached itself from Catholic authority. They adopted a kind of deism or fideism during their last years of being in the clergy. However, their break with Catholicism would have a significant effect on their spiritual development and growing unbelief, which will be discussed in full in Chapter 5.

Emotional suffering is another factor of deconversion found by religious studies scholars. Thus, one would expect to see somewhere the evidence of emotional trauma that encouraged them to discard Catholicism. The testimonies of the left modernists are stoic and devoid of much emotional content. The emotional crisis that is cited in their memoirs is listed as a result of their crisis and not a cause. Annie Besant (1847-1933),

³²⁶ The studies on deconversion: Janet Jacobs, "Deconversion from Religious Movements: An Analysis of Charismatic Bonding and Spiritual Commitment," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 26, no. 3 (1987): 294–308; Heinz Streib et al., *Deconversion: Qualitative and Quantitative Results from Cross-Cultural Research in Germany and the United States of America* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009); Heinz Streib and Barbara Keller, "The Variety of Deconversion Experiences: Contours of a Concept in Respect to Empirical Research," *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 26, no. 1 (2004): 181–200.

who lived a life parallel to the left modernists in England, provides a good example of emotional shock; she lost her faith after the death of her infant child. Anguish plunged her into a religious crisis.³²⁷ Such a case does not exist here among the left modernists. There is hardly any mention of the subject. However, their emotionless narratives are profoundly suspect. Houtin said in his memoir that he did not include details of the emotional pain that his loss of faith inflicted. Instead, he presented his deconversion as an intellectual journey. He only admits that his emancipation was extremely difficult.³²⁸ The other left modernists shared a testimony very similar.

Turmel provides a small exception. He described a particularly poignant moment when he as a young boy questioned the truth of Christianity. That it seemed false made him at once sad and angry.³²⁹ Otherwise, the emotional crisis of Turmel followed after his deconversion; his rupture is described as a result of intellectual factors. What he recounts is his emotional break with his close friends and family. For example, in 1887, Turmel made an irreligious comment with two students who were teaching Hebrew. They reported his comment to their director. The accusation made him deeply ashamed to such a point that he began to think about abandoning his vocation and the Church. He feared especially the encounter he would have with his mother and his director Gendron, whom he profoundly respected. The whole affair

³²⁷ Annie Besant, *Annie Besant an Autobiography* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1908).

³²⁸ Houtin, *Une vie de prêtre*, 317.

³²⁹ Turmel, *Comment j'ai donné congé aux dogmes*, 14-19.

caused him to contemplate and plan his suicide.³³⁰ This was a crisis of shame and alienation and not a spiritual struggle.

However, for Turmel emotional suffering had *aggravated* his unbelief. The internal confusion and anger constituted the reasons that he gave for continuing his vocation. He argued that since he had already sacrificed the best years of his life to the Church, he would not let the Church ruin his life a second time with excommunication and destitution. The Church would throw him on the streets if it knew the actual extent of his revolt. He saw himself choosing between the lies of Catholicism and his own, and in the end, he decided staying in the Church was morally excusable because it allowed him to do more work to expose the falsehood of Catholicism.³³¹ It was a pragmatic decision. His emotional troubles assured him that he was not a person without scruples and reaffirmed his unbelief. Having misled those around him for over forty years, Turmel morally compromised himself. His autobiography is a defense against his critics.

Alfaric, who lost his parents early suggests he had suffered, but nothing is to be heard about emotional turmoil and the Church. Compared to the others, in fact, he displayed a level of gratitude to the Church for its generosity and the help he had received for his brothers and sisters after his parents' death. He admitted rather that his rupture with Catholicism was less difficult because his parents were gone.³³²

³³⁰ Turmel, *Comment j'ai donné congé aux dogmes*, 55-68.

³³¹ Turmel, *Comment j'ai donné congé aux dogmes*, 111.

³³² Alfaric, *De la foi à la raison*, 246.

In the testimony of the left modernists, one finds only small clues of their psychological lives. For example, their silence on love and sex is equally suspect. Hébert confessed, when he was at the beginning of his career, to have been tormented by a young woman he had met. Strangely, his director of studies counseled him to read a novel of Balzac.³³³ The results of reading Balzac went unsaid. Loisy condemned the vocation for being celibate. He quickly follows this statement with a rejoinder: it was not the reason he left the Church, but he thought it caused the young to suffer a kind of "nervous depression, a fatigue..." It was "an abnormal life" too hard and painful. Married men were better adapted for a life among the people of the world.³³⁴ Nonetheless, Turmel and Loisy remained celibate all their lives. Being a shameful and disreputable reason to leave, it is no surprise that not one of them discusses it as a factor in their rupture.

In their testimonies, they put their intellectual journeys above any other factors. One is left to conjecture that their masculinity bottled-up their interior life and has robbed us of a deeper, more complex, more personal account of their deconversions.

Conclusion

In the seventeenth century, Richard Simon's work represented a serious study of the Bible using the historical method. He put reason and evidence before Catholic

³³³ Houtin, *Un prêtre symboliste*, 39-40.

³³⁴ Loisy, *Choses passées*, 40.

tradition to examine the Bible and concluded that the Bible was a difficult and flawed book that needed an authority to interpret it. While he made this argument to refute Protestantism, he had undermined the infallibility of the Bible and its claims of divine inspiration in all of its parts. Further scholarship in Germany would continue in this path and uncover more problems within the Biblical texts. De Wette argued that the Jewish priesthood was not created until late in the history of the Jewish religion, contrary to the statements found in the text. He concluded that the Pentateuch was unhistorical and represented the Jewish tradition at the late date of its writings, not the early years of the faith. Historical criticism proved a dissolvent to the integrity of the Bible that made some historians such as Strauss conclude that the texts were no more than myth and inspiration from a prerational people. Using historical criticism, Strauss argued that the historical Jesus could not be known. In France, Renan would follow in Strauss's footsteps; after reading German biblical criticism, Renan said of the Bible, "There is to be found in it fables, legends, and traces of a wholly human authorship."³³⁵

Educated Catholics were troubled by such deductions and some of the scholars sought to refute the irreligious claims, not by ignoring the social scientific method of research, but by offering new interpretations of the Bible and Christianity. Yet in doing so, the space for doubt and unbelief grew. As they confronted the problems in the structure and doctrine of Catholicism, their faith weakened. When the left modernists offered solutions to the problems of the Bible, they offered not traditional solutions but

³³⁵ Ernest Renan, « *Souvenirs d'enfance et de jeunesse*, » Calmann-Levy editor, *Œuvres Complètes de Ernest Renan, Tome II* (Paris: Corbeill-Essonnes, 1948), 866.

ideas that were condemned as heretical. Hébert argued that the old dogmas and stories of the Bible should be treated as symbolic, pointing to a larger truth behind the literal reading. Loisy argued that Catholic doctrine was not static, but dynamic—a claim that relativized the truth of Christianity.

The left modernists lost their faith slowly and overtime in their confrontation with the cultural institutions and practices of Catholicism, which were still premodern, and in their reading of the Bible, a text from antiquity.

The testimonies of the left modernists show that loss of faith was at once social and intellectual. It was social because the domination of their Catholic education, their families, and their teachers meant that breaking with Catholicism permitted them their first real independence—all of which took place in their intellectual and spiritual struggles. The sheltered education provided by their parents, their mentors, and their Catholic teachers had given them a limited understanding of modernity. Further, they were taught to be docile and submissive. They found their educations to be lacking such that modern questions needed to be addressed by going beyond the limits set by their superiors. Because Catholic education was so far behind, it prompted them to see the Church as an intransigent institution that was tottering with old age. Their break with the Church was, therefore, a heroic act of leaving the tutelage of their elders and rejecting a decaying, moribund institution that permitted them to become fully mature and independent persons (the modern liberal self).

The fact that the left modernists uncovered the problems and hidden secrets of the Church caused the left modernists to distrust their superiors. It was not ethical to

hide the truth from those who were attempting to seek it. The moral dissonance they encountered with the Church for not being sincere about its theological difficulties weakened the strength of their faith. Since their moral principles did not line up, the foundations for their intellectual convictions were irrevocably weakened, permitting new intellectual convictions. The internal censorship they encountered caused them to consider their own sincerity. It sparked a moral dilemma that pushed them to side more and more with the necessity of breaking with Catholic authority. Their break with Catholicism was a moral rupture of sincerity.

Behind their high-minded intentions and words, the left modernists were also navigating a social world where they found rewards and enticements outside of Catholicism. The social capital they could receive outside of Catholicism was hard to resist when faced with the choice of renouncing the hard work of their labors. There were social and intellectual incentives not to recant and to continue to publish and pursue historical criticism for the social recognition and status that came with popularly read and discussed books. The power dynamic of disciple and master within Catholicism had ceased to reward them sufficiently, and a new secular society offered better social recognition. Loisy was deeply reticent in recanting *L'Évangile et l'Église*—and indeed he would have to recant that which made him famous. Turmel must have published with glee his countless anticlerical articles of historical criticism. The social capital for the rebel is in the novel act of rebellion, and the left modernists exploited this by not stopping their pursuits but continuing it with ever greater concentration and effort, as discussed in Chapter 5.

In the explicit reasons they give for their abandonment of Catholicism, they explain the importance of ideas, of philosophy, and especially history. Turmel, Houtin, and Loisy used a narrative tool that portrayed them as an illuminator of the errors of others, shedding light where there had been darkness and subterfuge. For Turmel and Hébert, ideas sufficed to create an estrangement from their Christian faith. Modern science and philosophy stand clearly behind all their doubts and considerations.

Further, the left modernists had become moderns who were not susceptible to spiritual experience. Their ‘buffered selves’ as Charles Taylor would say, were impervious to mystical or spiritual experience by rationalism and scientific explanation. They needed the laws of physics to be broken before their eyes. Not having a miracle, their deconversion from Catholicism was an intellectual rupture. As social scientists, their doubts were theoretically supported; history demanded that facts and data come before conclusions. In their open-minded pursuits, they found that historical criticism demonstrated the many flaws in the Bible and the illegitimacy of the dogmas. In addition, they found philosophers and theologians to be dishonest because they sought to justify what they already believed. The professional requirements of their discipline had turned them into historians first and Christians second. Plus, they felt that the method of knowledge acquisition within history held more integrity than Christianity, and given a choice, they chose history and skepticism. In the process of doing their work, they had become historians and ceased to be priests.

But for Loisy, Houtin, and Alfarcic, the intransigence that confronted their ideas represented an important factor. The resistance of the Church nourished their

resentment. They sometimes compared the Church to a machine that systematically covered its problems, reduced to silence any detractors, and suppressed free examination. To remain within the machinery of the Church, members of the clergy followed predetermined paths. Catholicism practiced, according to the left modernists, "thought control." There was no middle ground and no place for them to intellectually explore the problems they confronted. Further, their view of the Church as dishonest served to justify their radical ideas and obliged them to find solutions outside the limits of its authority. They did not become atheists but continued to pursue and inquire into religious "truth." Their deconversions were not simply a loss, but a development of their spirituality, i.e., a progressive development and a voyage into unbelief.

Chapter 4. Freethought

Démontrer les superstitions grossières et annihilatrices dont les religions font leur principal appui; faire respecter pure et simple la religion ou morale de la nature; dégager cette morale des entraves auxquelles l'ambition et l'imagination l'ont soumise; abattre comme un tissu d'erreurs les dissidences qui s'élèvent dans le monde, entre les croyances religieuses, morales et politiques : voilà notre but. L'idolâtrie et la superstition : viola l'ennemi !! - Jules Claraz, *La Faillite de religion*, pg 6.

Freethinkers fought to make France free of Catholicism, which freethinkers firmly believed had entered into terminal decline. Allied with radical republicans the freethinkers fought and weakened Catholicism through the principle of laïcité, the removal of religion from the public sphere. Laïcité became the principle that would echo at the beginning of both the 20th and the 21st centuries with the separation of church and state in 1905 and the ban on the veil in public schools in 2004. In 2016, the place of religion remains a central dispute about French national identity. Before the triumph of laïcité, freethinkers were militant and combative—to be polite would have defeated their purpose of challenging people's religious beliefs. They needed to be direct and offensive to overcome and thwart complacency; thus, the anticlerical struggle was a fierce dispute, each side condemning the other of corrupting society. The political struggle to remove the Church from power between 1880 and 1914 caused the popularity of freethought to reach its apex. Its roots nourished itself in the soil of the liberal tradition, but it also represented an illiberal tradition—it aggressively sought to marginalize religious beliefs and religious practices as false

and backward. With a majority in the Assembly, before separating the church and the state, the radicals and socialists closed the unregistered schools and religious organizations in 1901. More directly, freethinkers mercilessly critiqued the Judeo-Christian tradition, but mostly Catholicism. They mocked and ridiculed the dogmas such as the Trinity, the Incarnation, the virginity of Mary, and transubstantiation.

This chapter will look at personal deconversion testimonies from freethinkers by examining their personal accounts and their writings. The analysis is, of course, handicapped by using their testimonies as factual sources when they might have lied or told their story in such a way to impress the reader. Everyone likes a good story. Each narrative is indulgent in the pride of being more enlightened and emancipated—they were the few who escaped the confines of Plato's allegorical cave of darkness. On the whole, the tone for the testimonies is confessional and there is a clear historical value in learning what we can from what they had to say. Their testimonies do not fit into a simple rubric or a single overarching cause. Instead, their deconversion was the accumulation of factors both great and small that prompted an eventual rupture. Some claimed that critique, reason, philosophy and science played the central role. Others claimed that the hypocrisy of Christianity caused them to morally reject it. Reason and rationality for some played a secondary role that reinforced their emotional or ethical discontent. As for science, one can say that science provided the ideological justification for rejecting Christianity although the actual rupture may have occurred for social and moral reasons. At the same time, many felt that Christianity had become incompatible and implausible in the face of

modern demands for knowledge and consistency. While intellectual ideas provided the justification of their rupture, underneath their rational deliberations, moral and social disagreements caused French men and women to search for a new intellectual alignment that Church failed to adopt.

My discussion of the deconversion of freethinkers is divided into five sections, each based on a significant common factor: the influence of the family on unbelief; the critique of the Bible; the moral and emotional rejection of Catholicism; the role of science in unbelief; and the arguments for unbelief from freethought propaganda.

I. Family

Freethinkers came predominantly from the urban working class. The incredibly rapid growth of urban areas overwhelmed the Church's ability to meet the demographic challenge precipitated by the fact that there simply were not enough churches and priests to reach the dense urban centers. The lack of the intimate connection with the new plight of the worker separated the Church from a great number of people. Further, the growing industrialization of France strained the relationship between the Church and the industrial proletariat. Overall, industrial workers were less Catholic than the rest of the population. So much so that many of the industrial areas became natural missionary areas within Catholic France, and the communities continued to be increasingly less Catholic throughout the century. Historians have measured this by religious participation. For example in Lille, at the

time of the Second Empire, only about 10 percent of the working class took Easter Communion. In Paris, different districts had varying levels of worship. The Parisian industrial hub of Belleville was by far the most dechristianized part of the capital and also a traditional center of the non-Christian population. It had the highest rate of civil births: 13 percent in 1866 and 58.3 percent in 1888. After 1870, the Paris Commune accelerated the trend towards secular births, mostly because the Church condemned the communards, significantly alienating the Belleville population.³³⁶ Such stats suggest that many people were unchurched and outraged by the Church's opposition to the republican movement supported by the working class. Many French men and women were still perhaps nominally Catholic, falling into a category of indifference or nonpracticing. However, that so many non-practicing Catholics came out of the working class showed a clear disconnection between the social issues of the working class and Catholic values.

While the lack of working-class participation suggests neglect rather than rejection, many people did begin to reject Catholicism, which could be a life-changing event. The *évadés* attracted the most attention. When former priests left the Church, such as Marcel Hébert, Albert Loisy, and Joseph Turmel, it caused a minor sensation. Excommunication further sensationalized their exit. *Évadés* aside, among nonbelievers, those who left their family's faith held a more significant place than those who never had to break free of the control of their peers and elders. To those

³³⁶ Gibson, Ralph. *A Social History of French Catholicism, 1789-1914*. London; New York: Routledge, 1989. 214-216.

within unbelief, they had the same characteristic found in conversions to other creeds or religions, i.e., they had the mark of being "saved" or having seen the light.

Accordingly, their testimonies served several functions. First, freethought deconversion narratives affirmed the truth of unbelief and the folly of Christianity from those with first-hand experience. Second, it provided further confidence in the growth of the movement and the sense that religion was in decline—that victory was just around the corner. There was an intense optimism that the fog of Christianity would melt away before the oncoming light of universal reason. Many freethinkers declared that the number of members did not make the principal creeds of their sect true; however, they did not have to stand alone and used this to undermine the confidence in the inevitable triumph of Christianity. Last, the organizational zeal of freethought in early twentieth-century France provided a sense of belonging and purpose. Each adherent to freethought affirmed the progression of history and felt himself to be on the cutting edge of progress. Consequently, stories about losing one's childhood faith were emotional arguments to convince others of their unbelief. Each freethinker legitimized the other and normalized the space of unbelief. Their testimonies served as strategies to convert others to freethought.

Freethought groups spread their message by the power of their testimony, just as devout Christians do when they share their faith with others. For example, two journals asked the question, "How and why does one become a freethinker?" that must have seemed to the editors as a good way to attract more converts to the cause who were still sitting on the fence. The Journal *Coenobium* provided the first survey

in 1912 and the other by *La Calotte*, was conducted a little after the First World War. The *Coenobium* survey, taken before the War under the title "Almanacco del *Coenobium pel* [sic]1912" in Switzerland, detailed the responses of 176 people, of which the French journal *La Calotte* republished 18 testimonies. Also, the freethinking journal co-founded by Andre Lorulot, *La Calotte*, collected over a hundred responses to the same question after the war. The testimonies are a collection of short responses as to why converted freethinkers left the Christian faith from which this chapter is partly based. This chapter will take into consideration only the responses published by *La Calotte*, which therefore includes the 18 testimonies of the Swiss-French speakers. In 1939, *L’Idée libre* published the results in a book called “Pourquoi nous sommes libres penseurs.”

The testimonies show that those who were the least troubled and bothered by their unbelief were born into freethought families. Indeed, this was the most straightforward and easiest path into unbelief. Here there was little to lose, and paradoxically, those born in freethought did not think themselves indoctrinated. In some cases this was undoubtedly true—they lived without considering religion. Rather they were born free of religious faith in Christianity. Of those who responded to the surveys, fourteen said they came from parents who were freethinkers or nonreligious. Thus most of the people who responded were not born into freethinking families. This suggests either that the numbers of freethinkers were growing because more people were born in Catholic families than in freethought families, or perhaps, that those who were born Catholic were much more passionate about their newly

acquired identity and were willing to fill out a survey. Those who were indifferent to their religious belief probably feel the same about surveys after all.

The authority of the mother and father were crucial for creating respect for their religious tradition. Within the family, the religiosity of the mother or grandmother was noted in numerous testimonies. J. Henry said that his grandmother "was the most pious woman in Nancy."³³⁷ Jean Laurien said he was pushed to believe and pray by a "good and brave mother."³³⁸ Ernest Mourancho said he converted his father to freethought to the "great despair of [his] mother."³³⁹ However, according to the testimony of M. Pourchet, religiosity was in decline in Post-War France. Speaking after the advent of secular education in 1880, he believed that instruction and education encouraged the decline of Catholicism. His proof was the significant difference between the religiosity of his grandparents and the later generations.³⁴⁰

Overcoming religious faith frequently meant overcoming the influence of the mother. Roger Martin du Gard novelized what was a typically French experience of the time in his book, *Jean Barois*, published in 1913. For example, the father of the protagonist Dr. Barois tells his son that "Women are different beings" to prepare him for his future trials. The protagonist Barois became a radical republican and freethinker who dedicated his life to refuting Catholicism. In the process, Barois lost

³³⁷ *Idée libre* (Herblay Seine et Oise), *Pourquoi nous sommes libres penseurs*. ((Herblay): Aux Editions de l'Idée libre, 1939), 29.

³³⁸ *Ibid*, 68-69.

³³⁹ *Ibid*. 35.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 40.

his relationship with his wife and his child because of religion. While love brought him back together with his wife and daughter at the end of his life, his daughter had decided to become a nun to his great disappointment and desolation. In his novel, Martin du Gard expressed a common sentiment. Women were preserving the faith within the family structure while men fought against the encroachment of religion in society and the family mostly alone. True to form, the societies of free thinkers were dominated by men. Nearly 92% who registered in freethought associations were men. The lack of women within the freethought organizations demonstrated how religion had become significantly gendered by the nineteenth century. Women had become the caretakers of religion and would help maintain its cultural influence and power. According to Callum Brown, in his book *The Death of Christian Britain*, the most important moment of the decline of religious belief took place in the 1960s and 1970s during the cultural revolution--the moment women stopped going to church. This trend would hold in France as well. France would not become a post-Christian nation until women stopped going to church, which would have to wait until the feminist movement. The survey respondents examined here reflect the gendered division of unbelief: of those who responded to the surveys, only five are clearly women.

Accordingly the single most important factor in producing a rupture with Christianity in Third Republic France was to be born a man and not a woman. The secularization of France first occurred among the men. Whereas church attendance was declining in general in nineteenth-century Europe, men left at a much faster rate than women. In some rural parishes by the middle of the century communion would

be taken in a hall full of women yet without a single man. 1898 was the first year that numbers are available to compare the attendance records between men and women, and the figures clearly demonstrate the lack of men. The number of such parishes increased in the later years of the century, with its high point in the first decade of the twentieth century.³⁴¹ The lack of attendance by men started in the rural areas around Paris and spread outward. In Chartres, only two percent of men compared to fourteen percent of women in the diocese received communion during Easter.³⁴² Notably, where religion retained its hold, the differences in proportion between the sexes in attending communions was less pronounced.³⁴³

Understanding why women were on the whole more religious than men is a question that involves gender and inequality. The historian Bonnie G. Smith's study of women of the leisure class in the department of the Nord in nineteenth century-France sheds some light on the gender difference among unbelievers. Smith says that the women of the Nord were "domestic, fashionable, and faithful."³⁴⁴ Smith argues that religion appealed to their role as managers of the household and provided meaning to their suffering and inequality. Smith also curiously argues that menstruation, blood, and childbirth caused them to have a different connection with nature that was less abstract and mathematical. Rather, these women held to a pre-Copernican, pre-rationalist version of the world that "predisposed them to a religious

³⁴¹ Gibson, *A Social History of French Catholicism, 1789-1914*, 131.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, 174.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, 181.

³⁴⁴ Bonnie G Smith, *Ladies of the Leisure Class: The Bourgeoises of Northern France in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 93.

worldview.” Further, Catholic ritual provided meaning and purpose to their secondary social status. First, Christianity appealed to women because of women’s position of unequal status aligned with Christ, who is depicted as physically weak and suffering from the evils of men. Women’s reproduction status aligned with the meek and powerless. Women of the Nord often said in their letters that their suffering brought them closer to Christ. Their suffering was a “test of God” and it gave meaning to their inferior social position. This was a Christianity that addressed the injustice of their life and explained it in terms of how to see themselves within a larger spiritual order. For example, Mother Mary played an important role and served as an attractive conduit to God in the Catholic pantheon of Saints. Mother Mary provided an image of the burdened, reproductive woman. The women of the Nord also selected those elements of Catholicism that emphasized trial and fragility as seen in the popularity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus organization. This organization put women in touch with the bleeding, suffering heart of the Savior. The names of their children favored martyrs or women who had difficult lives such as Cecile, Therese, and Genevieve.³⁴⁵

Most significantly, women were excluded from everything except the Church and the home, and therefore religion provided a social world within which women were allowed to participate. *It was women’s social role and purpose in the Church that maintained their religious belief.* Interestingly, Durkheim’s thesis of religion being ultimately about the social is supported by the strong adherence of religion by

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 93-122.

women. Believing brought them social capital and reward. Here they had power, community, and social importance. Institutionally, Catholicism provided a place for ambition and active participation in society as well as meaningfully integrating women into society. Some women joined convents, which provided an alternative to domestic home life. They had real positions of power, running schools, hospitals, and performed public services that brought them social status and recognition.

Catholicism gave them an acceptable political role as well. When women were confronted with the anticlerical politics of the Third Republic, they took this as a call to arms to resist the atheistic and materialist threat. In Paris, women organized the Patriotic League of Frenchwomen and assailed godlessness and socialism and hoped to promote a reconversion back to full religious practice and prayer. The League spread to the north, headed by Mme Valdelievre, where it flourished with 150 groups consisting of 35, 775 members (more than Social Catholicism claimed at this point). Each member prayed for the welfare of France as a Catholic country and the zealous proselytized. The women who organized against universal suffrage provide a striking example of the reactionary role Catholic women played in French politics. In 1896, the League of Prayer in the Nord organized a subsidiary campaign to resist providing women the vote. Mme Feron-Vrau, the leader of the League of Prayer, said women were meant to pray while men were to act in the temporal world.³⁴⁶

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 115-122

For men, being in the temporal world drew their attention to other affairs that caused their urgency and relevance of Catholicism to weaken, if not entirely fall away. The nineteenth century provided an unprecedented amount of religious freedom, and many men took this freedom to leave the Church or even entirely abandon their religious belief. Politically radical men became anticlerical. *The radical political activity of men and the resistance of the Church suggests that political and moral values provided the crucial factor for why men were breaking with the Church more than women.* Men's engagement caused them to confront the inertia and conservative traditions of Catholicism. Politics drove a wedge between their loyalty to the Church and their liberal political values. Many professionals and owners of small and medium-sized businesses remained republican and anticlerical during the Second Empire and the Third Republic. Men discussed politics at work, in the cafes, and at the Masonic Lodges. The home was rarely the space for political discussions.³⁴⁷ Further, the Industrial Revolution changed the social and demographic makeup of France, creating class consciousness among male workers that often manifested itself in hostility to Catholicism and the clergy. The urban working class wanted support and recognition of their calls for social change, welfare, and greater equality.³⁴⁸ Other historians have argued that because church attendance remained highest in pre-industrial sections of society, perhaps the process of working with machines changed the attitude of men. Industry promoted a rational and mechanistic

³⁴⁷ Hugh McLeod, *Secularisation in Western Europe, 1848-1914* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 129.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 131.

outlook that contrasted with supernatural religion. Sociologists have noted that those most involved in the Church were the least involved in the industrial economy, namely the aristocracy, the peasantry, and the lower middle class of craftsmen and shopkeepers. Fourth, education could also have been a factor: institutionalized sexism limited university education to men. The university was the place where many of the new irreligious ideas circulated. In France, many more girls were sent to religious schools than boys. When girls studied beyond primary school, these schools were often segregated and at nunneries. While men were expected to receive a classical, humanistic education girls had much more limited access to the important and controversial works that might have challenged the status quo. Noble or upper-class women's function was governance of families, such that their educations, when they received one, consisted of "practical economics, basic religious training, and a safe dose of carefully selected classical and modern literature."³⁴⁹ Men were educated to be political, religious, and military leaders of society. Finally, machismo could have been a factor. Those who did not go to church could mock those who went for being dominated by their wives. Celibate priests could be looked down upon as not being "real men." In many parts of France, girls were expected to continue to go to mass until they married, whereas, for men, there was no such expectation. When men

³⁴⁹ Lougee, Carolyn C. "Noblesse, Domesticity, and Social Reform: The Education of Girls by Fénelon and Saint-Cyr." *History of Education Quarterly* 14, no. 1 (1974): 87–113.

attacked the Church, they often did so because they saw it as an affront to their rights as heads of households upon which the Church encroached.³⁵⁰

When men followed their gender roles into unbelief, this impacted the family. A study suggests that the slow secularization of religious belief grew due to the imbalance of religious worship in the household. The study was done in Switzerland in the 1990's and thus has uncertain applicability, yet it illuminates an interesting dynamic. The study looked at "Lifetime and inter-generational changes in religion and language." The survey showed that when both parents shared the same religious affiliation, there was an 89.9% probability that their children would also share it (nearly the same for Catholics and Protestants). The intriguing conclusion was that "when one parent was neither Catholic nor Protestant, and the other was Catholic, less than half of the respondents questioned adopted Catholicism (49.3% when the father was Catholic and 38.6% when the mother was Catholic)"³⁵¹ The most important factor of the child's continued religiosity was the religion of the father. If the father went to church regularly, between two-thirds to three-quarters of the children were churchgoers, regardless of whether the mother practiced. If the father went irregularly to church, only half to two-thirds of their offspring attended church regularly. The study in Switzerland suggests that the traditional importance of the father showed his children what was important in life. One can only speculate on the

³⁵⁰ McLeod, *Secularisation in Western Europe, 1848-1914*, 131-136.

³⁵¹ Werner Haug; Philippe Wanner (January 2000). "IV. The demographic characteristics of linguistic and religious groups in Switzerland". *The Demographic Characteristics of National Minorities in Certain European States. Population Studies* No. 31. Volume 2. Germany: Council of Europe. p. 154. ISBN 978-92-871-4159-0. Retrieved 12 November 2013.

exact reasons, but the lack of unity around religious ritual and practice appears to be the factor. The traditional, patriarchal role of the father helped create a deeper foundation that maintained the respect for worship and the dignity of belief. His authority and interests helped determine what was important to the child. Over time, the father's lack of belief undermined religious belief in his children. This process then slowly and generationally helped secularize the children. In addition, children might have had a hard time accepting doctrines that said their loving unreligious father was going to hell.

The predominance of men in the freethought movement suggests that masculinity would have been a further hurdle a woman would have to overcome to join the ranks. To be a freethinker was to follow in the footsteps of the father. A freethinker was also active, aggressive; it was a person who took pleasure in trying to dominate and refute religious people—to prove them wrong. The aggressive manner of debate and critiquing made it a combative role. A masculinity that took shape by polemical exchange and competition found a ready home in freethought communities. Freethinkers saw themselves as engaging in cultural war with Catholics—they were not simply unbelievers—they were missionaries of unbelief.

In looking again at the survey "Pourquoi nous sommes libres penseurs," in *La Callotte* several French freethinkers testify to the influence of their fathers. Only one person in the freethought survey mentioned their mother as a freethinker. Conversely,

42% (6 of 14) of those who said that they were raised within nonreligious families referred to the influence of their fathers on why they became freethinkers.

The freethought testimonies reinforced the importance of the father and the gendered nature of freethought. The father always appeared as the one who read the non-religious books. Fathers were the avenue to an alternative and outside the intellectual world. One of the respondents, Armand Gautier, a seventeen-year-old boy, said that his mother had not been baptized and his father was a freethinker: "...thus it was entirely natural that I did not develop a spiritual sentiment."³⁵² A respondent Salvador Torrents said that he began to read anticlerical journals because his father read them regularly. Having them in the home, he thus took to reading them himself. He "understood many things from these readings." Given a foundation of anticlerical teachings, his critical viewpoint on religion developed further during his time as a student, where he "realized the falsehood of religious teachings, all of the claims of theology, and the existence of the pretend God." He then affirmed his unbelief by mixing it with radical politics, becoming convinced that French society did not need God, the Church, the military, or capitalists and politicians. He finished his testimony with an affirmation of his freethought beliefs: "humanity can live and grow only by work, tolerance, peace, and liberty."³⁵³

Salvador Torrents demonstrated the importance of the father to provide him an alternative intellectual world to the religious one. While the father might have

³⁵² *Pourquoi nous sommes libres penseurs*, 75.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*, 38.

played a role in delegitimizing religious practice by demonstrating his indifference toward it, his greatest contribution to the son's rupture with the Church might have been to provide anticlerical literature. Many of the respondents say that their diverse readings of works on religion caused them to become freethinkers. Mentioned in the survey are classic works in philosophy by David Hume, John Stuart Mill, Voltaire, and Denis Diderot. However, what is notable in their readings is the significant influence of freethought and anticlerical literature. Unbelief perpetuated itself by putting out new literature on what would become fairly unoriginal and repetitive subjects. Old arguments had to be constantly rebottled and revived for each generation. The respondent Jean Bossu said that it was thanks to the publisher *L'Idée Libre*, and from the books of Lorulot, Manuel Dévaldès, J. L. Delvy, and Han Ryer, "that I became a true freethinker."³⁵⁴ Another correspondent mentioned the work of a contemporary freethinker Jules Claraz, saying that his book *La Faillite des religions* revealed to him the truth about religion. Freethinkers expanded their numbers through proselytization that took the form of pamphlets, books, conferences, and organizational groups. Several of the respondents to the survey testify to the fact that they were "converted" to freethought in this way. The expansion of freethought and unbelief in France was thus a consequence of the energy and passion of its members.

Early education for freethinkers among the Catholic primary and seminary schools failed to make a deep impression on many freethinkers. The role of the father appears much more important than schooling. Nonetheless, families and Catholic

³⁵⁴ Ibid., 26.

communities imposed Christian teachings upon their will and conscience. The rejection of their early education symbolized the first step towards freethought and an individual identity of their choosing. They saw freethought and unbelief as a viable alternative to their religious teachings. Unbelief became widespread enough that it was a viable alternative in Catholic France.

LOSING FAITH THROUGH THE CRITIQUE OF THE BIBLE: J. B. Lefèvre

At the center of Christian belief and the unbelief of freethinkers stands the Bible. The claim that the Bible was a miracle inspired by God caused the first bouts of skepticism for many freethinkers. Unfortunately, none of the personal testimonies provide detailed arguments of how they rejected it. Of those we have, the most famous deconversion testimony in France is Ernest Renan, who was born in Brittany within a deeply religious family. He lost his faith while studying philology and Biblical scholarship at Saint-Sulpice. In his education, he had learned to read German and had begun to read biblical criticism by German scholars such as Strauss. By 1845, he abandoned his faith and the Church. He wanted to find the hand of God in the Bible, proven by the infallibility of the Scriptures, which he felt was an essential tenet of the Catholic faith. In his research, he found unsettling errors and problems that shook his certitude. He said, "one finds fables, legends, and traces of the human hand...One single error proves that the Church is not infallible; a single weakness

demonstrates that the book is not revealed."³⁵⁵ This attitude is repeated and parroted in a hundred different ways and voices among freethinkers. Renan came to represent the rejection of divine revelation.

In the survey "Pourquoi nous sommes libres penseurs," most of the freethinkers dismiss the Bible and its stories aggressively and without nuance and thus have limited value. In contrast, the testimony of a navy doctor, J. B. Lefèvre is an exception; his work gives us an opportunity to see what a thoughtful, freethinker concluded about his reading of the Bible. He wrote his testimony at the age of twenty-eight while terminally ill with tuberculosis from which he presumably died soon after. This book stands as a defense and an explanation of his unbelief to his profoundly Christian family that included several priests. Lefèvre's family raised him to be a Catholic, and it is evident from his introduction that his family did not understand how, having been such a pious boy in his youth, he became a freethinker. He gave credit for his deconversion to his reflection on the Bible and readings in philosophy.

The testimony is first and foremost an account of the intellectual journey that led to his deconversion. He cites no masters or teachers who were responsible for his conversion. Rather he underwent a personal spiritual development that amounted to years of questions, readings, and reflections. There is no single ah-ha moment or mention of any influence from his father. Lefèvre's testimony is more than just an explanation of how he became a freethinker; it is also a concise argument that seeks

³⁵⁵ Ernest Renan, *Souvenirs d'enfance et de jeunesse*, ed. "Collection nouvelle", Calman Levy, s.d pp 256-7.

to refute the truth of Christianity. It is thus a testimony and a piece of anticlerical, irreligious propaganda. He describes in an evenhanded tone how rational inquiry caused his belief in God and Christianity to unravel. He organizes his argument in two main sections: the first part articulates the arguments against Christianity that led to his rupture, and the second part explains his point of view as a freethinker. What interests us here are the reasons he gives for abandoning his faith. His argument against Christianity comprises four sections: 1) the inadequacy of the proofs of God and the soul, 2) the rejection of miracles, 3) the historical accuracy of the Bible, and 4) the absurdity of religious claims. The second half of Lefèvre's testimony explained why people still believed in Christianity when reason should have prompted them to reject it.

The first crack in the foundation of his religious belief appeared after reading the proofs for the existence of God. Early in his life, Lefèvre says he possessed a curious, even rebellious mind--one that wanted to consider religious claims without being prompted by his teachers. He is thus perhaps an uncommon case and leaves one wondering if there are perhaps personality types within a spectrum of possibilities more prone to rebellion, questioning, and disobedience who seek out the errors and contradictions of their elders. If so, such men and women will historically always be pushing and changing the culture around them.

In any case, Lefèvre mind wanted to question while others sought justification. His curiosity inspired him to read all the arguments for the existence of

God while in secondary school. Rather than being relieved, he felt the authors of the arguments were trying to deceive him because behind their claims he saw one thing above all: "God exists because all that we understand cannot be explained without him." God was a fantastic concept to explain the curious fact of the world and because of the seemingly impossible to fill gaps in human knowledge. What Lefèvre wanted was irrefutable and compelling proof of the existence of God of the sort that science provided—not an appeal to the unknown and our ignorance. The study of science required empirical “facts” that provided “unassailable propositions.” A "proof" must be a "demonstration," which is an argument that Levebre seemed to consider as empirically objective and irrefutable by nature of its demonstration, a deeply positivistic conviction. Seeing that religion could not provide a demonstration, he doubted the claims of the theologians who found sustenance not in knowledge but mystery. Yet so many people believed and the convictions of so many intelligent men and women tormented him. What did they see that he did not?

His inquiry next led him to question the existence of the soul. Here too he read the proofs that defended its existence. However, rather than reassuring him of its existence, he saw the richness of the spirit in all animals. He credited not Darwin but a moral philosopher for convincing him of materialism, the book by M. Paul Janet *Le Matérialisme contemporaine*. Lefèvre found the materialist theory of nature to be more convincing for its explanatory power concerning the natural world. The idea of the soul being unique to the human being seemed to place animal life in a particularly awkward position. In the debates between the materialists and the spiritualists, the

materialists defended an idea of a "vital principle" that animated all life. The vital principle and the soul described the same phenomenon and could be taken to be identical. So he compared the two ideas. Were animals automatons or dynamic? Lefèvre found it more reasonable to assume that the force that drove human beings was the same force that drove other animals and plants. He concluded that if the soul and the vital principle were *not* the same, then the soul was not necessary for life and could not be demonstrated among humans any more than among animals. In consequence of examining the proofs of the soul, Lefèvre, without losing his faith, drifted towards materialism.

Confused but following down the path before him, he continued to practice Catholicism for several years. During this time, Lefèvre stood between two opposing beliefs. However, it was the inconsistency of his thoughts that left his conscience unresolved and pushed him to continue to question Catholicism. His old religious beliefs stayed with him because they had been deeply ingrained, but he drifted towards unorthodoxy and confusion. He admitted that he "could hardly separate deism, spiritualism, and Catholicism."³⁵⁶ Lefèvre held onto his traditional belief by following the logic of Pascal's Wager: if religion were right, he had everything to win, but if it were wrong, the loss would not be very significant. Nonetheless, he described two contradictory logics that competed for his mind: Reason argued that his faith had not been rigorously demonstrated, and the voice of his timid Belief

³⁵⁶ Jean-Baptiste-Gustave-Alfred Lefèvre, *Confidences d'un ancien croyant, par le Dr J.-B. Lefèvre ...* (Le Mans: Impr. de A. Drouin, 1890), 3.

reassured him that the lack of demonstration did not preclude the existence of God. During his spiritual journey toward unbelief, he did not name any intellectual companions other than his books. For those leaving the faith, such solitude would have made it a tremendous psychological and intellectual effort.

The many people who continued to accept the idea of God undermined Lefèvre's unbelief. The many cultivated believers suggested the reasonableness of religion. He told himself that he was content to die a Christian. However, his materialist convictions required palpable and compelling facts. If the soul and God were not demonstrable, then perhaps God displayed his presence through miracles. Further, if God were *a priori* true, then miracles could be true as well. Lefèvre examined Lourdes as his example. Lourdes stands out as an example where the belief in miracles encouraged credulity. His skeptical side saw a proliferation of superstitious belief. The problem about the miracles of Lourdes was that those who were healed had ailments that could have improved naturally. For example, there was no record of a real miracle such as the growing back of an eye, a finger, or the resurrection of a corpse. Instead, Lefèvre believed that people experienced what we would call a placebo effect. Their convictions may have indeed aided their healing, but it was the power of the mind over the body. He believed that hypnotism might have the same effect. As seen by his assessment of Lourdes, before he lost his faith, materialism had already won over his way of thinking—miracles were already excluded from possibility. His spirituality incrementally changed while his faith weakly triumphed over his doubt.

The superstitious belief of the crowd in the so-called miracles of Lourdes made him skeptical of all miracles. To believe in the miracles of the past, he needed to see proof that miracles were possible in his own time. Not believing them to be true in his own time, he was deeply skeptical that the past was any different. Indeed it is far too convenient that miracles happen in the distant past, are used as proof, but cannot be reproduced in the present. Lefevre then reflected on the miracles of the Bible and found it more convincing to think of these miracles as exaggeration and fable. When Jesus fed five thousand of his followers with a few loafs of bread, healed lepers, and ascended into heaven, the stories now appeared just as fantastic as the claims made at Lourdes. Thus, in his search to understand the proofs of God, the soul, and of miracles, he became slowly but steadily a convinced materialist. Never citing Hume, he might as well have: extraordinary claims (miracles) require extraordinary evidence.

Examining one by one the pillars of Christianity, the Bible was the next disappointment. To consider the truth of the Bible, he occupied himself with exegesis--historical critique of the Bible. He discovered the mundane origins of the Bible. Christianity no longer had the original four Gospels, and of the Gospels they did have, they had been chosen arbitrarily among some 50 similar writings. Scholars do not know the precise dates that the texts were written or who were the actual original authors. Further, the Bible had been copied by hand so many times over the centuries that it had lost its pure and original form. When he read the New Testament, he did not feel compelled to give it any more than a relative authority. The stories

appeared beyond the limits of reality, and he rejected all the miraculous stories as no more than fables and legends. He admitted that when he no longer believed in miracles, he could no longer believe in the Bible either. His belief in miracles had been the remaining principal support for his religious convictions. The historical study of religion and the Bible constituted the final blow:

The last study I did on the history of Jesus, the Church, and their respective teachings, as well as the history of comparative religions, caused the tottering edifice of my faith to crumble.³⁵⁷

His memoir recounts an emphatic disillusionment with the Bible as a doctor and a materialist who was influenced by both philosophy and historical critique. He read the critical and secular accounts of Biblical history by Strauss, Renan, and Peyrat. After he read their works, the Bible lost its divine luster. Two principal factors further damaged the vestiges of his Christianity: first, the dishonest way that the Catholic Church dealt with the problems; second, the lack of reality in Biblical stories appeared preposterous.

As to the first problem, Lefèvre was insulted by the failure of the Church to confront the problems he found. Rather, it seemed to him as if they had not read the same book, for if they had, they would see that if the Gospels were true, then the Catholic Church was false. If the Gospels were rejected, then not much remained of Christianity itself. Lefèvre concluded the Church preferred obscurity as its best defense. Instead of providing answers to troubled Catholics, the priest told the

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

distraught to leave the difficult task of interpreting the Bible to the authorities. Thus, most people never had to come face to face with the Bible. Instead, Lefèvre believed that people accepted without reflection the religious tradition of their culture. Most people only memorized selected texts from truncated chapters for use in the catechism. For the rest of the time, people remained indifferent to religion and died with their unexamined beliefs intact. There were no educational classes that taught them to be critical of the Bible. However, in France, one could find classes on how to accept the Bible, which they took as children and which were reinforced through Catholic ritual.

The problems of the Bible according to a materialist

For freethinkers like Lefèvre, the Bible was filled with preposterous claims beyond belief. Lefèvre found them lacking verisimilitude. He gave several examples to demonstrate why his unbelief was reasonable. One illustration he gave is the story of Jesus' childhood. When Jesus visited Jerusalem as a young boy, Jesus became separated from his parents and ended up at the temple in Jerusalem talking with religious scholars. During his discussion, Jesus apparently made a profound impression on the scholars. A young boy capturing the attention of religious scholars would have appeared incredible, but there is no description of the scholars wanting to develop such a young prodigy. Further, if the legend of Jesus being born as the King of the Jews were true, why are the two stories not connected? The texts of Matthew and Luke do not line up here. When Joseph asked Jesus why he had disappeared,

Jesus had to explain to him that he had been occupied with his father God, but Joseph and Marie are described as not understanding, implying they did not know about Jesus' divinity.

Lefèvre relied on Peyraut's historical critique of the Bible for exposing its issues. Peyraut argued that the Bible was not a historical document. For example, the feeding of five thousand people by Jesus in the desert smacked of gross exaggeration, and it lacked plausibility. Matthew 14:5 states that Herod had not initially executed John the Baptist because he feared his popularity among the people. Jesus hid after the execution of John, but he nonetheless attracted a great crowd, which would have no doubt alarmed the local authorities. Five thousand people camped in the desert for several days would have alerted all the authorities in the country, and if these people had jobs, they had to go back to work. What Lefèvre finds especially implausible is that the Second Gospel says that the apostles were not always significantly impressed with Jesus' miracles, such as the manifestation of bread and wine to feed the crowd. How could these miracles not be enough to completely convince them of the divine purpose of Jesus? Because they were not true, Lefèvre insinuates.

Although the historical analysis was important, Lefèvre argued these kinds of questions occur to any non-specialist with a close reading of the Bible, something that anyone could do. Take the resurrection, the greatest miracle that Jesus performed. Lefèvre found the four accounts untrustworthy due to a lack of consistency. There are two different accounts of the stone removed from the entrance to Jesus' tomb; the

reports did not agree on whether the stone was removed before or during the arrival of the women. Who informed the women about the resurrection of Jesus, of which they were not themselves witnesses? Mark said there was one man, Luke said there were two men, Matthew said there was one angel, and John said there were two angels. Further, John is the only one who says that Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalen in person at the tomb itself. With four people, there are four versions. There are different accounts of what happened when Jesus died as well. Only Matthew said that an earthquake struck Jerusalem while Luke said the curtain hanging on the four pillars of the Ark of the Covenant had been torn down the middle.

The resurrection of Lazarus by Jesus in John 11:4-46 also seemed suspicious. In the text of John, Jesus had to ask about the condition of Lazarus—was he alive or dead? Lefèvre suspected Lazarus to have been in a coma or powerful lethargy, proven by the question of the disciples who say, "If he sleeps, he will recover" (verse 12). Further, Jesus was strangely filled with grief, but if he were God, he would have known he would resurrect Lazarus. Rather, Lefèvre suspected that Lazarus came out of the coma and that Jesus pretended to have raised him from the dead. Perhaps he was not in a coma at all but a trance. Lefèvre was again echoing Hume: there was more reason to suggest an alternative explanation than to think that the laws of nature had been broken. It was easier to see Jesus as a trickster, who did not himself know what to expect, than the avatar of God. Lefèvre developed an alternative explanation: perhaps the trickster Jesus hypnotized Lazarus into a deep sleep. Jesus simply woke him at a preappointed time to great effect. If this were true, this would support the

idea that those who did not fall for the ruse had correctly reported Jesus as an imposture to the Pharisees.

Lefèvre proposed an alternative medical explanation for Jesus' resurrection. Perhaps Jesus did not die of his wounds but instead was taken down from the cross before his death and hidden by his friends. He would then have presented himself to his followers, pretended to be resurrected before dying of his wounds in some undisclosed location, and then disappeared from the historical scene. Lefèvre supports this claim by questioning the death blow given to Jesus by the Roman soldier who pierced the side of Jesus with his spear. According to the account, this caused blood and water to gush from Jesus' body. Lefèvre asserted that fluid does not pour out of a dead body, so he must have still been alive. Also, the fact that water spilled from his body means that the soldier punctured the stomach, which was not an immediately mortal wound. When Pilate, the Roman authority in Jerusalem, asked if Jesus were dead, he took the word of a soldier, who was clearly not a specialist on the subject of biological death. When Jesus was taken down from the cross, there was no testimony about the preparation of his body before placing it in the tomb. Instead, Joseph and Nicodemus might have noticed that he had not died and sought to fool the Roman guards. Thus, Jesus lived on long enough to create a story about his resurrection before his death.

To Lefèvre, what was considered a miracle two thousand years ago demanded a natural explanation in his day. In his view, religion was born in a credulous and

superstitious past full of fantastic stories that no longer corresponded with modern knowledge. There were too many holes in the religious point of view to believe in a time where miracles once frequently occurred but had since become absent. Lefèvre complained that miracles suspiciously stopped occurring and the miracles of the past were impossible to prove. Scientific thinking had taken over and modern times required rigorous methods of examination. This is how he makes sense of the story of Jesus' resurrection. He raised the question to his readers: is it not more plausible to believe in a completely naturalistic account of Jesus' tribulations than that of a miraculous resurrection that no one in his own time had ever witnessed?

He said there were many more issues he could discuss beyond just the Gospels. But limiting himself, he provided a list of complaints about the Gospels and in general:

- It is possible that Jesus was a descendant of David by Joseph as Matthew says in 1:16, but this is not feasible if he were born from a virgin. The dogma of the Virgin Mary contradicts the Bible.
- Jesus had several brothers and sisters who did not believe in him despite the unheard of marvel that marked his birth (Matthew 13, 55-56). Why were those closest to him during his youth not convinced?
- Jesus declared himself sent by God as the son of God and not as God himself. He prayed to God as anyone else might have, proving that he was not his equal (Matthew 26:36-39). Matthew's testimony contradicts the dogma of the

Trinity where Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and God are different incarnations of the same essence.

- Jesus declared categorically that the end of the world would take place within a generation. He declared the end times were at hand (Matthew 24: 26 as well as others). It was because of this that he admonished others to sell all their property, abstain from work, and to live as itinerants (Matthew 6: 25, 30).
- Jesus said that his kingdom was not of this world (Matthew 10: 9), but the Roman Catholic Church involved itself directly with money, politics, and power. After Jesus, the Church became a major actor in the struggles for temporal power.
- The Church itself rested on circular logic. The truth of the Gospels rests on the authority of the Church, but the authority of the Church depends on the testimony of the Gospels.
- When Jesus was asked to prove his power to do miracles such as changing stones into bread, throwing himself from the temple towers, making a sign appear in the sky, or coming down from the cross, he had only clever responses. Instead of showing his powers of miracle, he contented himself with healing the sick who had sufficient faith in his power.

Lefèvre ended this critique with "etc..., etc.,..." Having finished with the Gospels, he gave the familiar criticisms that could have come from any freethinker. He saw biblical stories as ludicrous and absurd. He asked, how could Adam and Eve

have disobeyed when they did not know good and evil? By what justice does God punish the later generations for the errors of the former? How can a perfect God repent of what He did formerly--such that he is not perfect and unchanging? How does the crucifixion of a God make up for eating an apple? At what point did God so love humanity that he wanted to sacrifice his son, whom he struck with harsh punishment for obeying his will? The list of questions is a testament to Lefèvre's rejection of the Judeo-Christian tradition and its way of explaining reality and the purpose of life. There was no place for analogy or allegory in his reading of the New Testament. The Bible fails to describe material reality as the growing fields of natural science did. Lefèvre saw only a tangle of concocted and contradictory stories from a pre-scientific age.

[The last stage of unbelief? Explaining religion](#)

If Lefèvre removed the wool from his eyes, why did so many people, and so many brilliant and intelligent people not come to the same conclusion as himself? Lefèvre could not answer this question satisfactorily. This was one of his more pressing concerns. The more convinced he was, the more he could not understand why others did not have the same realizations. So he sought to understand those he deemed credulous. As noted above, his deconversion had been a progression of small steps that led to his liberation from religious dogma and tradition. His deconversion did not result from one thing that proved his belief wrong, but from a series of factors that knocked out a number of foundational pillars. When enough of them were gone,

he realized that he was no longer Christian. The last stage of his deconversion was to explain away believers. It needed a scientific, materialistic explanation.

In trying to understand its power, Lefèvre saw the Church as an antiquated historical phenomenon that had entered its twilight phase. Religion proliferated when people believed widely in the gods. Widespread belief kept miracles and religion from being deeply questioned. What gave religious belief its force was its social organization. The Church was entirely a human institution supported by a seductive power transmitted by the strength of people's conviction. The power of the Church did not come from its miracles but its followers and its communities. It maintained the power of people's belief through social pressure. Where it did not, these communities worked to spread their doctrine, and over time, corrupted by the confidence of the majority will, used force and violence to impose social and intellectual conformity.

The result was a Church that set deep roots in society such that the uneducated did not know how not to believe. It was a part of who they were. However, the educated classes, a more skeptical group, were more likely to be indifferent to the Church.³⁵⁸ Deep roots and social stability kept religion in place. Lefèvre thought most people continued to believe because they did not read the Bible and had never truly considered the alternatives.

³⁵⁸ *ibid*, 49.

Lefèvre found his solution not in psychology (as one finds in Marx or Freud) but within indoctrination, echoing the critiques of Houtin and Alfaric. Because of faith, the annihilation of reason to Lefèvre, religion was imposed on the weak and the young, who were made to obey and learn from their superiors. One of the claims of many freethinkers is that people are taught to be religious. One is not born religious or spiritual—religious belief has to be cultivated. In the survey "Pourquoi nous sommes libres penseurs," Ernest Mourancho said that everyone is born a freethinker. If superstition were not inculcated in people, they "would live free in the complete liberty of thought."³⁵⁹

Lefèvre and others such as Mourancho believed that to have faith they had to be psychologically trained. People had to be taught what is good and bad. Lefèvre blamed the French education system. Catechism and Confession caused people to internalize Catholic values so that they learned it by heart until "absurd" ideas became dear. This happened first at the small seminaries, where people were exposed only insufficiently to impious objections against the faith. These schools molded and shaped the boys and girls with small exercises, retreats, and sermons. Books that impartially discussed religion were banned. The children in French society were force-fed religion in the small seminaries until they were prepared for the grand seminaries. They then entered convinced about the truth of their religion and the falsity of all others. Their lessons taught them to have an iron discipline that was

³⁵⁹ *Pourquoi nous sommes libres penseurs*, 35.

reinforced with the philosophy of Saint Thomas, who always had the last word about the great questions. Only then did they study the arguments of unbelief, after their defenses had already been built. The result was that their first impulse was to reject and refute criticisms. They were conscious of doubts and blamed desires on the temptations of the devil. They refrained from using their reason as they repressed their sexual desires by plunging themselves into prayer and mysticism. After four years of being a student at the Grand Seminaries, they had a robust faith that no incongruent facts could overcome. Contradictory facts struck and fell off the armor of their conviction. Due to this process, Lefèvre remarked, "These men lack one aptitude, the aptitude of verifying religious matters."³⁶⁰

He was making the additional claim that social psychology maintained Christian knowledge. He began to theorize that religious content was the collective agreement among adherents which provided its force and legitimacy. Religion was aided by the fact that supporting claims about the supernatural, heaven, or the afterlife were reduced to written accounts from people long gone and mysterious. Lefèvre described what the sociologist Peter Berger would later describe in his works *The Social Construction of Knowledge* and *The Sacred Canopy*. Berger, of course, articulated the notion of social construction more fully and more completely than Lefèvre had, but Berger put into words what many freethinkers assumed but had not fully articulated.

³⁶⁰ Ibid., 49-64.

It is worth briefly explaining Berger's theory because it clarifies what Levefre struggled to explain due to the lack of a fully articulated theory. The social construction of knowledge radically relativizes all claims to truth and contextualizes them within a web of social relations that determines the claims' survivability. All knowledge is subjective and social. The group makes and constructs a reality that becomes part of individual identity. Knowledge of oneself is upheld by social links that organize and explain the individual's place within the group. To let go of certain truth claims is to let go of one's social identity. Significantly, the theory explains why moral critiques of members and institutions outweigh the actual relevance of whether a claim is true or not.

Berger's theory of social construction is founded on the social relation of the individual to reality and society. Born with a minimal set of instincts, most of our behaviors and understanding will come from learning. We learn as we "externalize" ourselves in the process of shaping and relating to our environments. The theory assumes that people desire stability and security in the environment. The problem is that each time we externalize ourselves, the environment becomes unstable. We want to be able to predict both the environment and the responses to our actions. It is the role of society to provide this stable environment and make us believe in it. In Berger's terms, society "objectivates" by teaching us always to make the same choice. Most importantly, society treats these options as if they are not really choices, but required and inevitable. The process of learning these roles is "socialization." For socialization to work, we must internalize the roles and choices demanded as part of

our identity. They become a part of our inner sense of right and wrong. The totality of all the patterns that society objectivates is the "nomos," which makes a society's worldview (the sum of its knowledge and how things are). Society tries to persuade individuals that its nomos is objective and unchangeable to ensure stability and take it for granted without question. However, because people are constantly making choices and the environment is always changing, the nomos is inherently unstable. Religion has a special place in the nomos because it is rooted in the cosmic order. Its symbols and practices claim to be in touch with the "sacred power" of cosmic reality. Religion mirrors society in providing order and meaning to the cosmos. Religion hopes to convince the individuals that their lives, society, and religion are part of the same unified and orderly process.

In the social construction theory of knowledge, everything that passes for "objective knowledge" is an interpretation of reality. Ritual reminds people about the "right" way of life and its "true" meaning. Lefèvre implied that Catholic ritual, and the small and grand seminaries, used education as a ritual to reinforce Christianity. This created, as Berger described, an unshakable structure that undergirded the pattern of everyday life. Religious practice socially upheld Christian knowledge, and like all forms of knowledge, it had to be maintained by a group of people who were seen as both good and right. The nomos will seem correct so long as a strong plausibility structure supports it that is both moral and intellectual. For most people, the nomos is upheld by a social structure that is itself held together by morality—religions tell people what and what not to do. What frustrated Lefèvre was that men

and women followed Christianity for reasons that appeared to him outside of rationality. He hypothesized that religious belief was maintained because of the social pressure that upheld it. As a result, religious belief is a result of all the micro-processes of normative power that acts as a filter of information in support of the established nomos. The normative religious belief had social cachet and power. All other forms led towards alienation and ostracism. To overcome the nomos was to have a kind of social revolution. Indeed, behind the narrative of deconversion and reasons granted for the rupture with Christianity by freethinkers, the French Revolution and its support of democratic, egalitarian, and liberal values may have played the most important role for disturbing old social and moral relationships, allowing them to be redefined. That nearly all freethinkers identified with leftist radical and socialist parties strongly affirms this hypothesis. However, this is not the account given in personal testimonies, which causes the historian to pause and conjecture that the forces of historical political and moral change were carried forward unawares by the people of France.

Berger describes all knowledge as a social construct, which would include Lefevre's materialistic claims as much as the Catholic's supernatural claims. However, Lefèvre would argue that religious knowledge is socially constructed, but scientific knowledge is not. Lefèvre did not claim to be a relativist; he defended his deconversion as a process of enlightenment and unmasking. He believed he understood reality better. The religious suffered from a false way of knowing about the world of which they were unaware. Their belief was reinforced and maintained in

a deeply ingrained social structure and pattern. Their convictions were upheld by the social reinforcement and common practices that blocked them from penetrating the veil that Lefèvre had dismantled. For Lefèvre, they were looking through a glass darkly, to borrow a phrase from the Bible. Unbelief was liberation from this patterned way of seeing the world as well as emancipation from its moral strictures.

Tearing a hole in the Sacred Canopy through moral disaffection

The problem of the Church

One of Berger's insights about adherence to the nomos is that plausibility is supported by social status. The nomos and social structure can be judged by its moral standing. If priests are behaving poorly, then the religion itself becomes less plausible, even though their behavior does not falsify their religious claims. Ideas are accepted or rejected based on the willingness to conform to social values. The testimonies of freethinkers from the preceding survey suggest three ways that they were led to adopt non-belief: moral offenses, the problem of evil, and personal persecution. Moral offenses could emerge just from reading the Bible as the values of power politics within the Old Testament offended their modern liberal sensibilities. Take Leon Gillet, who said that he read the Bible at age fifteen and found it "repugnant" and "profoundly disgusting."³⁶¹ Likewise, Solange Saintours-Payenre

³⁶¹ Ibid., 33.

said she became a freethinker partly because "the vices of the Church and its ministers revolted my conception of morality."³⁶²

One of the most common responses among those who explained why they became freethinkers was the perceived corruption of the Church. That they were truly corrupt is doubted by the work of Ralph Gibson, who said that in fact, priests were mostly disciplined and abstinent.³⁶³ Nonetheless, the perception of priestly corruption was widely believed and propagated. Freethought journals such as *L'Athée* or *L'Action quotidienne* publicized any transgressions of priests to portray such incidents as common occurrences. One respondent, E. Rabau de Rorif said he became a freethinker because the Church was criminal. He claimed that the greatest of the Catholics committed the greatest crimes. For instance, he cited the intolerance Catholics displayed to other religions; that Catholicism struggled very hard to convince others of the necessity of faith by persuasion and not by example; that they demanded things that were materially impossible, followed up by the threat of hell if they disobeyed.³⁶⁴ The respondent Jean Keller said her knowledge of world history taught her the crimes of Catholicism, citing the Inquisition during the Middle Ages and the blessing of weapons during World War One.³⁶⁵

³⁶² Ibid., 63.

³⁶³ Gibson, *A Social History of French Catholicism, 1789-1914*, 75.

³⁶⁴ *Pourquoi nous sommes libres penseurs*, 24.

³⁶⁵ Ibid., 32.

The Problem of Evil

Those who witnessed World War One frequently cited the problem of evil.

One father said he lost faith in Providence because of the "great killing of 1914" where four of his children had died at an early age. The war took away the last of his illusions about God's goodness said the respondent R. Bordeneuve. The duplicity of priests, each praying for the victory of their nation, contradicted the idea of one Church and one people before God. For Dipio Manuel the war exposed the bankruptcy of religion with the priests playing "a shameful and fateful role."³⁶⁶

Another respondent, M. Riverault suffered disillusionment from his persecution for not being Catholic and from being in the war. He survived a gas attack and was sent to a Catholic hospital. When he told them that he did not identify as being Catholic, they treated him poorly and gave him second-rate treatment. Where the Church may have demonstrated its importance as the moral foundation of social life, it failed.

These two events erased the last of his religious beliefs.³⁶⁷ The testimony of J. Junca repeats this common refrain: his three brothers had fought in the First World War. Of the four, three were freethinkers. The Christian brother died first, followed by another brother. Junca said he should have been the first to die and added sarcastically that God was content only to take his leg. His conclusion after the war: "One would have to think of God as cruel, barbaric, and a killer to ignore the supplications made every hour by the old women."³⁶⁸ For those of limited spirituality, the war could be a

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 76.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 42

deciding factor. Albert Guichard was raised Catholic, learned the catechism, was baptized and did his first communion. Saying he had never been much of a believer, the war definitively turned him into a freethinker.³⁶⁹ For Jean Keller, the war was all the proof he needed to know God did not exist. Further, he rejected the moral authority of the Church for being a negative influence on social progress. He scathingly indicted the bible for blocking social progress and paralyzing the emancipation of women. For evidence, he cited Corinthians 14: 34 that says "let the women keep silent in the congregations."³⁷⁰

Moral dissonance and Emotional Trauma

However, sometimes their early experiences were traumatic or troubling. The encounters they had with religious authority figures left profound marks. These internal wounds helped lead them towards unbelief. While many freethinkers were quick to note that study and careful reasoning lay behind their loss of faith, there were a few who confessed to having a psychological reaction to their time in the seminaries.

Emotional suffering is one of the five factors of deconversion (discussed in Chapter 3) that comes out clearly in the testimonies. In the narrative of deconversion, this is a useful device. This helps the narrator give definitive shape and reason for the

³⁶⁹ Ibid., 46

³⁷⁰ Ibid., 32.

change, even though under scrutiny their deconversion actually occurred slowly over time; they used one case or one trauma as the example that cut their links to religion. In his classic work *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James said there were two significant factors for conversion: emotional shock and the movement from adolescence to maturity.³⁷¹ James stated that “Emotional occasions, especially violent ones, are extremely potent in precipitating mental rearrangements.”³⁷² According to James, the crucial years for adolescents were between the pubescent ages of fourteen and seventeen; for he says this is often the period of psychological crisis and change. Emotional shocks facilitate converting to new religious experiences and are pivotal for shaking the hold of old ideas and making room for new ones. However, they could equally be taken for conditions conducive to the conversion to unbelief. James argues,

A mind is a center of ideas...A mental system may be undermined or weakened by this interstitial alteration just as a building is, and yet for a time kept upright by dead habit. But a new perception, a sudden emotional shock, or an occasion which lays bare the organic alteration, will make the whole fabric fall together; and then the center of gravity sinks into an attitude more stable, for the new ideas that reach the center in the rearrangement seem now to be locked there, and the new structure remains permanent.³⁷³

For example, one of the respondents, A. Selve was raised in an orphanage managed by nuns in 1876, but when he was twelve, his grandparents removed him from their care so he could start working for the family. What was important in his

³⁷¹ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Mentor, 1958), 178-179.

³⁷² *Ibid.*, 178-179.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, 177.

memory was the treatment he received from the Church. He continued to be pious and had never missed a mass, but when he went to confess during Christmas, the priest refused him absolution to his great consternation. The next day, at work, he went to the priest's table for workers, the priest gave him absolution, to his relief, but Selve felt betrayed by this inconsistency and neglect. From that day forward, he thought the Church was nothing but a lie.³⁷⁴ This breach gave him the motivation to start asking questions, which led him to become a freethinker. Another example, J. Junca grew up in a devout family from the countryside, where "everyone followed the habits laid out by the Church." He was baptized and did his communion; however, during catechism, he was thrown out of class by the parish priest, who forced Junca to write a thousand times "I am a great rascalion" (*Je suis un pollisson d'une race geante*).³⁷⁵ This fairly puerile event is what he cited as the catalyst that led him to battle against Catholicism.

Having a different moral standard than the Church in sexuality was nearly never discussed among the respondents, nor much among the modernists. The topic of sex was never directly referred to or mentioned for reasons of respectability (if not the prudery of published works). Nonetheless, one respondent, Emmanuel Car from Vincennes implied in a cloaked manner that sex had been the catalyst for his departure from Catholicism. He started by saying he was "oriented towards freethought, smiling paradoxically." Without saying exactly what, several days before

³⁷⁴ *Pourquoi nous sommes libres penseurs*, 31-31.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

his first communion, he became guilty of committing two gross and mortal sins, both of which he hid from his confessor. Thus, he had a sacrilegious communion that he said, "detached [him] forever from religion."³⁷⁶ Not confessing the precise act suggests a sexual nature.

However, among the working classes, sex was more open and not seen as necessarily shameful or degrading. The working-class attitude towards sexuality flew in the face of a clergy that was neurotically obsessed by a fear of the body and its power to corrupt the people. The easy-going attitude of the working class towards sexuality would have alienated them from the Church and its teachings. Ralph Gibson, the social historian of Catholicism, argued that "the Church's attitude toward sex was one of the major forces for dechristianization in the population as a whole."³⁷⁷

As implied, a traumatic experience could disconnect people from the social bonds of Catholicism. A woman freethinker named Laure said she became a freethinker because of the two years that she lived with nuns in a pension house of Saint-Vincent de Paul in Paris. She said the nuns treated children as cheap labor and subjected them to a rigorous and hard regime. In the summer and winter, they woke up at 5:30 am for mass, ate soup for breakfast, and then worked making lingerie for a department store. The sisters pressured the children to be productive and punished them by withholding food. This happened to Laure, who had been falsely accused.

³⁷⁶ Ibid., 79.

³⁷⁷ Gibson, *A Social History of French Catholicism, 1789-1914*, 224.

She was unwilling to apologize and "bend the knee" to the offended party for a crime she had not committed. It became a standoff, and because she did not apologize, she did not eat for three days until she became too sick and had to be sent to a nurse's office for two weeks to recover. Further, she witnessed the nuns beating the children whose parents missed payments to support their child. Then when the parents visited, they smiled as if nothing had happened. Another freethinker told a similar story: L. Blache said that one of three principal reasons for her loss of faith was because she had been beaten. She had blasphemed the Virgin and received a severe beating as a punishment that left her in the bed for fifteen days. She concluded that "God provided so little paternal care that he could hardly exist."³⁷⁸

André Lorulot who became one of the most prominent freethinkers after World War I, provided another great example of traumatic moral disaffection. He fits into two categories: non-practicing father and emotional rupture. As an adult, Lorulot became an anarchist and antireligious freethinker. He edited *l'Anarchie* from 1909 to 1911, founded *L'Idée libre* in 1911, and *La Callotte* in 1930. He was born the 23rd of October, 1885 in Paris where he was raised in a modest family; his father had never received a formal education but was an avid reader and had worked in a print shop. His father had been a deist, a dedicated republican, and "not clerical." Lorulot's father had been literate and liked to read, but could not afford to buy books new, so he bought them used. Lorulot said he knew he had been poor because in a family trip to

³⁷⁸ *Pourquoi nous sommes libres penseurs*, 27.

town as a boy, he had been awestruck by all the beautiful merchandise in the store windows with which he had never played. His mother went to church due to her sincere piety and the social norms of the time. Because of her, young Lorolot never missed a mass or a sacrament and even recited his prayers out loud (which bothered his father, who wanted to rest after work). He confessed regularly and made a list of all his sins during catechism for confession. As a child, he was taken in by the ceremony and display of Catholicism. He said, "the staging of the ceremonies, the singing of hymns, the music, the ornaments, the vestments, etc., etc., all that contributed to the power of suggestion of which I had been the victim."³⁷⁹ The Church for him was an escape from the dreary and mundane. In his youth, religion was "the sole means that we had that could transport me, let me escape a little, and to bring me above a dull and monotone life to a vibrant, grand and beautiful place---but it was unfortunately only a chimera."³⁸⁰ Before he lost his faith, his Catholicism had been dear to him and was injured by anyone who insulted it. He believed what the priests told him, that anyone without religion would become vicious, criminal, and a scoundrel.

He lost his faith shortly after his first communion. He gave two principal reasons for this. First, the anticlerical literature of his father played a significant role in providing him a window outside of Catholicism. Here he learned to be a republican and an anticlerical. His father's radical journals, with a secular and Jacobin political

³⁷⁹ André Lorulot, *Histoire de ma vie et de mes idées* (Herblay: Editions de "L'Idée Libre," 1939), 47.

³⁸⁰ *ibid.*

bias, were his guides. He noted, however, that the radical journals did not attack faith itself, only the temporal and political goals of religion, i.e., clericalism:

My attention was thus attracted to the tyranny of the Church throughout the centuries--the crimes of the Inquisition, the wars of religion, Saint-Bartholomew, the Dragonnades, the Chouannerie, etc., etc., All this opened my eyes. I continued to believe in God, but I felt a suspicion for the Church, the Vatican, and the priests that became greater and greater."³⁸¹

The other principal reason for his rupture with Catholicism came from emotional trauma. To start, he lists the stress of doing First Communion, a fact mentioned by numerous other freethinkers in the survey. Communion was a threshold event for many—a badge to show they had been authentic Catholics. Lorulot had prepared for communion by prayer, going to instructional meetings and catechism lessons. The whole process made him anxious and feverish. The priest had told him to be sure not to touch the Eucharist with his teeth, which he remarked worried him out of all proportion. Further, the event financially costs a great deal to his mother, especially the buying of the candle, which stayed etched into his memory. He and his mother walked all around the town for a candle that he never got to light and that his father said was given to the Church to resell. That they would sell it again, offended Lorulot greatly. Because he had admired the priests, he had not thought it possible that they would concern themselves with business and making money off their faithful. This aggrandizement of the Church left a deep impression on him since his family was poor and they could not afford unnecessary expenses.

³⁸¹ Ibid, 49.

The crucial moment for Lorulot came during his preparation for his second Communion. During one of the days of his preparation, he had to wait with several other boys at the office of the priest, who at that time was speaking with a girl alone in a closed room. The boys began to smile, laugh, and tell jokes, making a lot of noise that echoed throughout the church to such an extent that the priest came out of the room to silence them. When the Abbé came out, he saw only that Lorulot was laughing, so the priest went straight for Lorulot and slapped him. Lorulot began to cry and did not stay to talk, feeling greatly offended because he had not truly been responsible for the noise. He admits it had been wrong to laugh, but it was even more wrong for the priest to strike him. After, he said he went home "entirely sheepish and was straight-a-way grounded by my mother. But I never set foot in the Church again. Small cause, great effect..."³⁸²

Being slapped by the priest did not extinguish Lorulot's faith entirely, but he ceased to be a practicing Catholic. His religious belief had been tightly bound up with his social relationship with the Church. His traumatic experience cut the links of loyalty to the Church and opened up space for criticism, a fertile field for Lorulot because his father had already prepared the soil and planted the seeds for his unbelief.

The complete unraveling of Lorulot's faith took time. He gave two additional factors as to what finalized his unbelief. The first was the problem of evil and God, which tormented him. He said, "Either he exists, and thus He is guilty, criminal, and

³⁸² Ibid, 52.

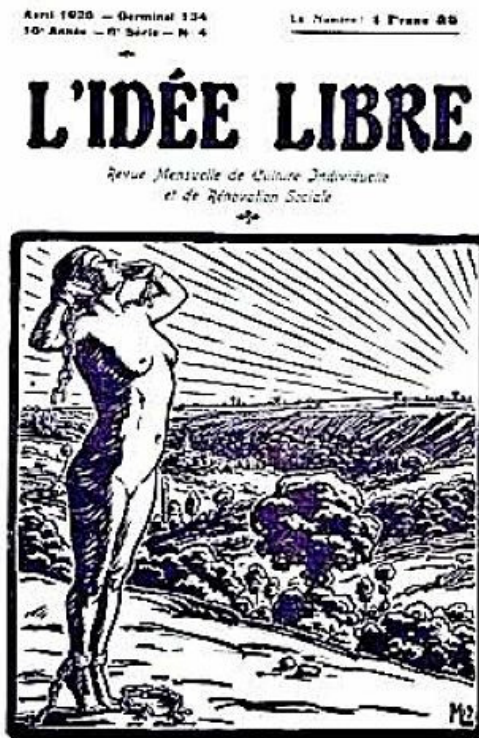
cruel because he has plunged humanity into suffering, or God does not exist, and we have no need of prayers or any religion."³⁸³ Second, he saw how religion supported inequality and the rich. Politically radical, Lorulot spoke against inequality and wanted social justice. Taking a Marxist position, he saw religion as a social tool for the powerful who use religion to win elections. He noted that all the socialists were unanimously against this kind of "trickery."

The moral offenses of the Church and the emotional trauma of being unfairly slapped by the priest are not arguments against the claims of the existence of God, at least not directly. Thus, two of the important factors that Lorulot gives for his rupture with Christianity were not "rational" reasons but psychological and political. While freethinkers prided themselves on using reason when describing the causes of how they became freethinkers, their testimonies provide a more complex story. Faith and belief are dependent on social relationships and moral congruity as much as they are on religious teachings.

³⁸³ *ibid.*



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Like Lorulot, many of the other respondents of the freethought survey mentioned the intellectual dissonance that came with their first communion, which ended up becoming a milepost on their way to unbelief. While this could be a traumatic experience, several mention the ritual as an affront to their rationality. J. De Tallenay says that it sparked one of her first serious doubts. Having a worried

³⁸⁴ Wikimedia Commons contributors, "File:Lorulot.jpg," *Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository*, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Lorulot.jpg&oldid=260792926> (accessed August 4, 2018).

³⁸⁵ Wikimedia Commons contributors, "File:L'idée libre avril 1926.jpg," *Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository*, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:L%27ld%C3%A9e libre avril 1926.jpg&oldid=260795243> (accessed August 4, 2018).

mind, she admitted that she had never had complete faith in what her elders told her. At ten years old she prepared her first communion; it seemed to be impossible and a great sacrilege that she could swallow her god and "digest him like a biscuit."³⁸⁶ In another testimony, the respondent M. Pourchet said he had been a believing Catholic until the age of thirteen, but after he had received the sacrament, he had his first doubts. He implied that the mystery of the Eucharist and other such practices disappointed his desire to know. He was told to accept that the mysteries of the sacraments were beyond comprehension. He said, what bothered him further was that Catholic priests did not seek to understand them. If the priests who administered the sacraments had doubts, they did not voice them. The result, he said, turned away those who could not accept that the wafer truly became the body of Christ. He rejected the miracle of the sacrament: the notion that a priest could bestow a kind of power or supernatural transformation to the things that he blessed. The respondents, Tallenay and Pourchet, reflect a secularized worldview at an early age that had little space for the claims of religion that smacked of magic and stretched their imaginations too far. Their world was not full of spirits and the power of God, but a stark material reality that the priest could not disrupt, as might have been possible in centuries past.

³⁸⁶ *Pourquoi nous sommes libres penseurs*, 12.

Indifference

The rupture with Catholicism was sometimes a straightforward and fluid part of their spiritual development that did not cause any significant shocks in their emotional or intellectual life. The first dozen of correspondents had been asked this explicitly. *Nearly all of them expressed the ease of their rupture.* Their reasons were thus sometimes frivolous and lighthearted. For example, Fernand Guillet says that his mother raised him Catholic, but it was forced upon him. As a child, he said he never admitted "the trembling theory of the divine."³⁸⁷ His belief never took hold because at ten years old, it struck him that "The good God on the cross--he was in plaster."³⁸⁸ When he asked his elders about this, they only laughed at him. When he told his father what had happened, his father told him he no longer had to go to Church.³⁸⁹ Another freethinker, Hugh Bryan, said that he had experienced his rupture at age twelve when he understood the concept of a paradox when studying grammar. In church the next Sunday, he thought "What a frightening paradox: a God crucified!"³⁹⁰ He had been a freethinker ever since.

Later, in the twentieth century, Sartre would experience something similar. For some, belief had become banal and inconsequential. Here is what Sartre had to say about his deconversion:

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 54.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

So there you are. It's pretty thin. God existed, but I didn't concern myself with him at all. And then one day at La Rochelle, while waiting for the Machado girls who used to keep me company every morning on my way to high school, I grew impatient at their lateness and, to while away my time, decided to think about God. "Well," I said, "he doesn't exist." It was something authentically self-evident, although I have no idea anymore what it is based on. And then it was over and done with.³⁹¹

Scientism and Clémence Royer

Freethinkers perceived the plausibility structure of Christianity as irrevocably undermined. If religion no longer provided the social cohesion of freethinkers—to support the *nomos*—then to what did they adhere? One response was simply to stop being concerned about traditional religious questions. Secular life provided ample means to live a fulfilled life. There was a kind of anti-intellectual trend among freethinkers that no longer wished to participate in philosophical and theological debates, partly out of exhaustion, partly because of the promise and allure of a science able to produce "facts" and "laws" that seemed to be outside of the debate. August Comte articulated this perspective in his philosophy of positivism. He proposed that human history had passed through the "three historical stages": the mythological or theological state, the one of religion; the metaphysical stage of speculative philosophy; and finally the scientific stage, the one of positive science. Comte was not the

³⁹¹ As cited in J.C.A. Gaskin, *Varieties of Unbelief: From Epicurus to Sartre* (Princeton Hall, New Jersey 1989) 214.

theorist of science but more a result and product of what others already felt and believed. There grew great confidence in science, seen as the only reliable form of knowledge. However, in the eighteenth century, the philosophical naturalism of Fontenelle and his successors did not reach much beyond a small minority. In the nineteenth century, science won over the educated and often the popular imagination. The Industrial Revolution further championed the power of science with the spread of railways, telegraphs, gas lighting, improvements in surgery, and cheap goods through large-scale manufacturing. All of this brought faith in unlimited material progress.³⁹² It was through science, technology, and mathematics that modern society claimed to have surpassed all the achievements of prior civilizations.

Science meant more than physics, chemistry, and technology. The expansion of the "human sciences" translated this confidence into a faith of understanding the totality of the human experience: this included studying the mind and the body through the physiology of human beings and psychology; an expanding and more serious history that looked at the world's religions critically; and, anthropology, a field that seeks to understand humanity through the relativity of culture and the objectivity of biology. These fields put a premium on progress, that knowledge would plow ahead until it reached the end of the knowable, enabling society to use this

³⁹² D. G Charlton, *Secular Religions in France, 1815-1870*. (London; New York: Published for the University of Hull by the Oxford University Press, 1963), 39-40.

knowledge for society's moral and social well being. Science would make possible the perfectibility of humanity.³⁹³

Alfred Loisy described this optimistic attitude of the scholars who thought religion and philosophy had become obsolete. In its place would be a truly rational, experimental science that would lead and procure the happiness of humanity. Loisy defined the positivist and scientific attitude of the time as:

They are persuaded that one can change man into a reasonable machine, govern his instincts, measure his joys, regulate his exercises, maintain his forces, foresee his interests and those of the collectivity with a rigorous and infallible program that will be provided by the chemists and the doctors, who are now in possession of the secrets of life, and in exchange for a mistaken ideal, we will confidently procure our well-being. This will happen thanks to the always perfectable natural sciences, of the social sciences, of hygiene, of education, society will finish by constituting a well-organized body, where all will be foreseen, where each will have their place with all the possibilities of their satisfaction possible for them, without another moral preoccupation except for the one that contributes to this beautiful order, without ulterior aspiration or hopes. All that is not susceptible to experimental verification should be considered a dead end.³⁹⁴

This is what D. G. Charlton called the "cult of science."

In addition to this optimism that buffeted the faith and the confidence of scientism, popularizers of materialism coming out of Germany promoted an atheist materialism upheld by science. The anticlerical/irreligious influences during the second half of the nineteenth century came from the popular science works by German materialists Carl Vogt (1817-1895), Rudolf Virchow (1821-1902), Jacob

³⁹³ *Ibid.*, 42.

³⁹⁴ Alfred Firmin Loisy et al., *La crise de la foi dans le temps present: (essais d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses)* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 61.

Moleschott (1822-1893), and Ludwig Büchner (1824-1899). They were not French atheists of the eighteenth century, men of letters or philosophes; they were “men of the laboratory”—men of medicine who looked to find the soul by using the scalpel and dissecting the human body. They were trained as physiologists and zoologists, and from the 1850s on, they helped lead the materialism controversy that included the origins of species and the rejection of the mind-body duality. They defended an empirical method of knowledge that relied on "the balance, the scalpel, and the crucible."³⁹⁵ They assembled texts to spread modern understanding from the works of physiologists, physicians, chemists, and naturalists. They claimed that matter is indestructible, eternal, and quantitatively invariable. It is in constant motion and changes only in its organization that ranges from low to high levels of complexity. The permanence and indestructible character rendered the hypothesis of God unnecessary and absurd. The human being is no different than the other animals in being a passing stage in the organization of matter, and natural processes will dissolve his being at his death. Life is a result of the innate movement, force, and energy of matter. These ideas were best expressed in Jacob Moleschott’s *The Circulation of Life* and Ludwig Büchner’s *Science and Nature*. The idea of the soul was nothing more than the self-consciousness of the mind and its thoughts, determined by the structure of the brain. Considered to have no soul, humans were the product of the movement of matter that followed the laws of nature. This led the materialists to postulate the controversial claim that free will was an illusion of consciousness. Vogt went so far

³⁹⁵ Jacqueline Lalouette, *La Libre pensée en France: 1848-1940* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2001), 160.

as to claim that science disproved religion, God, and the existence of the soul. While he might have garnered more support for freethought, his ideas about the illusion of free will and responsibility never took hold. He is better remembered for his clever formulations; for example, he said thought comes from the brain as just as urine comes from the kidneys. The physical evidence convinced Vogt that there was no soul--no ghost in the machine. While the controversial and categorical claims of their faith in science left many skeptical about their conclusiveness; significantly, Vogt had been able to popularize Darwin's ideas if not his own.

These ideas provided ideological support to unbelievers. So was science a primary factor in deconversion and promoting the freethought movement? Owen Chadwick maintained that the main critique wielded against Christianity was not science. "Its basis was ethical; its instrument the moral criticisms of the eighteenth century. It attacked Christian Churches, not in the name of knowledge, but the name of justice and freedom."³⁹⁶ In this view, the critique of Christian belief had less to do with the struggle of reason over superstition than the rejection of the atonement for its lack of justice. This kind of critique poked and prodded at the teachings of Christianity and pointed not to science but to the loss of freedom through the doctrine of grace, the crimes of the inquisition, and the failure of the Church to live up to its ideals. "The onslaught was more ethical than scientific."³⁹⁷ However, Chadwick

³⁹⁶ Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge England; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 155.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 156.

overstated the case. Science as the new "nomos" provided the world-building activity; freethinkers needed science as the new sacred canopy to reject religion so self-confidently. The two worked hand in hand. Chadwick should have stated that the moral and ethical problems came first, undermining the hold of religion and thus making science the rational justification for the moral rejection of Christianity.



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Clémence Royer in 1865 and a Caricature of Clémence Royer from *Les Hommes d'aujourd'hui* published in 1881.

³⁹⁸ Wikimedia Commons contributors, "File:Clemence Royer 1865 Nadar.jpg," *Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository*, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Clemence Royer 1865 Nadar.jpg&oldid=129470838](https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Clemence_Royer_1865_Nadar.jpg&oldid=129470838) (accessed August 4, 2018).

³⁹⁹ Wikimedia Commons contributors, "File:Clemence Royer caricature 1881.jpg," *Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository*, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Clemence Royer caricature 1881.jpg&oldid=250470651](https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Clemence_Royer_caricature_1881.jpg&oldid=250470651) (accessed August 4, 2018).

Thus we see that science played a central and critical secondary role.

Clémence Royer provides an example of the importance of science in providing a new “nomos” or ideological framework to orient her values and beliefs. Royer became famous in her time for being an intellectual, being a woman scholar, and for promoting staunchly irreligious ideas in the introduction to Darwin in 1862 that she had translated into French. She had become a phenomenon for being a self-taught feminist and woman who wrote about issues in economics, philosophy, and science. Her reputation grew to such a point that the Société d'Anthropologie de Paris invited her to give presentations and join their association. She was the only woman member for fifteen years. However, she was born into a conservative Catholic family. Her spiritual development and deconversion went through several typical phases: deep spirituality and trust in religion, a cooling off period, and then rupture due to new political beliefs and the embrace of scientific thinking. After her break with Christianity, she maintained a subtle deism and faith in providential progress before embracing a staunch materialism and unbelief.

Royer was born in 1830 in Nantes to parents loyal to the monarchy. Her father had been an army captain and royalist legitimist. After a foiled revolution plot to restore the Bourbon monarchy in 1832, her family fled France and lived in Switzerland for four years. Her parents taught her at home until the age of ten, after which they sent her to Sacré-Coeur convent school in Le Mans. However, she spent only a short time there because of the insufferable, self-righteous piety she acquired from their teachings. Her parents were good Catholics, but they did not appreciate it

when their daughter accused them of being sinners. Royer described her religious education as retardation of her formative years at a time of naive credulity. She was studying and absorbed in a world that did not exist. The role of science described present reality while her Catholic teachings were a fantasy of angels, saints, and a benevolent Father that punished the disobedient. Royer conceptually divided her education between the real and the religious, between the afterlife and this life. Catholic teachings took her away from dealing with contemporary life issues. Her bitter words express this clearly, "In order to understand the mysterious and the unintelligible, to feel the sentiments against nature, to imagine the unimaginable, [I] lost [my] care, all memory, all intelligence for things of the earth."⁴⁰⁰

Before going to the convent, she had possessed little spirituality or religious inspiration. She attended mass perfunctorily without understanding the sermons because her parents expected it of her as a dutiful daughter. Royer knew religion through images that depicted something akin to Zeus--a physical man with a long white beard who lived above the sky and to whom she prayed to every night before going to bed. She associated deep piety not with her family but with one of the family's old domestic servants who had given her medallions, images, and small statues of the Virgin Mary and other saints. As she became more aware of religious teachings, she accepted them as long as they appeared to her logical and intelligent. She had no notion that they were against the laws of nature. Catholic teachings filled

⁴⁰⁰ Clemence Royer, *Biographie de Clemence Royer*, (unpublished) 24.

her with images of heaven and hell, and she believed herself to be a sinner. As a response to her growing spirituality, Royer began to isolate herself in her room to live like an ascetic. During this phase, the only thing that interested her was religion. She had had a very warm relationship with her parents, but it became strained as she began to resent them and thought them spiritually damned. It bothered her that her parents did not observe regularly. Royer's parents endured her growing religiosity until one day her father invited her to the theater. Royer stubbornly refused to go because she considered theater to be a sinful art form, as the Church has taught her. Her father slapped her for her insubordination.⁴⁰¹

The challenge to her father caused her parents alarm, and so they stopped sending her to the convent school. After this, her religiosity cooled down and would never again reach such a boiling point. In 1843, her parents returned to Paris and shortly after separated due to the constant jealousy of her father. He decided to return to the village of his birth in Brittany. The absence of her father and no longer going to school at the convent caused her to feel "freed from a prison."⁴⁰² With her family separated, she developed an independence of person and mind. She says it was at this period that she put her feet back on the ground, and she abandoned her earlier religious pursuits. In the absence of religious practice and an encouraging social

⁴⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁴⁰² *Ibid.*, 35.

environment, her faith weakened. Her once ardent piety, without ritual and practice maintained by social reinforcement, was neglected for daily concerns.⁴⁰³

Then two things pushed her towards breaking with Christianity. Without directly saying that it changed her religious views, the 1848 Revolution was a turning point for her intellectually, "making many things light that were once dark."⁴⁰⁴ This new awakening caused her to doubt many of her former beliefs, causing the convictions of her youth to come undone. If her legitimist loyalties were tied to religion, she did not say so, but this is the moment when she first significantly questioned the teachings of her family and place in society. *Thus the first important step toward unbelief was a social rupture with her family.* Then in 1849, her father died. Royer does not state that this was a major shock for her directly, but it was at this point that she reevaluated her life and her future. It had been her father who pinned her down to conservatism. As a woman, marriage loomed, and this appeared to her as "resignation" to a quiet life. Instead, she searched for a profession that would make her independent. So she decided to become a teacher, one of the few occupations open to women in her day.

It is possible that changing occupations or life direction provided a pivotal moment that opened up space for something new, such as unbelief. William James also described an individual's "aims" as a principal reason for the change of religious belief. James stated, "To say a man is 'converted' means, in these terms, that religious

⁴⁰³ Ibid., 37-40.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., 41-43.

ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual center of his energy.”⁴⁰⁵ Also, one’s “aims” are pivotal to one’s mental state as the directional force seeking the most fitting solutions. Thus as life’s aims change, a new mental framework may be needed to support it. As “aims” change, one’s view of the world changes.⁴⁰⁶

In studying for the exams, Michelet's book *Histoire Romaine* greatly influenced her by giving her a newly found appreciation for historical critique. She also took a course in physics by Requerel, at the Conservatoire des Arts et Metiers. Michelet’s history and the physics class planted the doubts and arguments that would undermine her attachment to Christianity. In the natural sciences, she saw a straightforward refutation of Christian doctrine. She says that "It was a negation of all miracles, and according to this logic, it was a refutation of all Christian history."⁴⁰⁷

As a faithful Catholic, she had continued to observe; however, one of her first teaching positions was in Wales, where she taught girls mathematics and map-making skills in addition to the courses traditionally given to British girls: French, music, and English. To avoid attending Protestant services, she professed her Catholicism. This gave her time to go for long walks in nature and to visit historical sites. Her description of nature suggests that she wanted the reader to know that she had a fascination with and enjoyment of nature and being outside. Her time in Britain put

⁴⁰⁵ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 176.

⁴⁰⁶ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 175.

⁴⁰⁷ Royer, *Biographie*, 49.

her in contact with diverse groups of Protestant sects that raised in her mind the question of differing religious convictions and the relative nature of worship.

Her next teaching position took her back to France in what she called "one of the castles of the Crown," the province of Touraine, and she went back to attending Mass. However, her studies for the teaching exams and her experience in England weakened her loyalty to the Church. Here she stumbled into an old library and read the philosophes: Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot and the other Encyclopedists who created deep-seated indignation against her old teachers.⁴⁰⁸ Not only did they turn her against Catholic teaching but they instilled in her a passion for studying nature. In the summer of 1856, she taught at another chateau, near the birthplace of Jeanne d'Arc, the village of Beauvais. Her turning point occurred when she went to the confessional, the moment when she had to be honest with herself and with another person in a sacred space. Her honesty led her to ask the village priest whether one should continue to observe a religion in which one no longer believed. She told the priest "Prove to me that your religion is true and I am with you; otherwise, I will abandon my position and make war against you."⁴⁰⁹ The priest told her to read Pascal and loaned Royer some of his books. His logic repulsed her. She paraphrased Pascal as saying essentially, "one believes what one wants." She returned the book to the priest and told him that she rejected Pascal's fideism. Her chagrin with Pascal led to her final break with Catholicism and Christianity with this line to the village priest,

⁴⁰⁸ Clemence Royer, *Rectifications* (Unpublished), 6.

⁴⁰⁹ Royer, *Biographie*, 51.

"Your book is immoral. One does not believe what one wants. One has to want what one believes."⁴¹⁰ When she says want, she alludes to the nature that belief needs to be compelled by some force or reason to hold them in place. Danielle Dennet called this the Christian predicament of "believing in belief," i.e., to say that nothing justifies the first belief but the second belief that sees it as a positive belief to hold. Royer wanted a first-order belief compelled by her understanding of reality. Her study of Catholicism had led her to reject it and left her at a point in her beliefs (to which she as an aside says poetry had also led her) that she says is similar to a Christian Deism like that of Channing. Ultimately, Royer felt betrayed, and she admitted later that she came to hate the Church for wasting her youth on its teachings. Motivated to understand the world with a new set of lenses, she studied nature and science for ten years before she would pass from Deism and "arrived at absolute negation."⁴¹¹

In her description, she abandoned Catholicism because of its reliance on the unexplained (similar to Lefevre above). Religious thinkers were not able to provide evidence of the truth of their religion and instead rested on the inexplicable or unknown. They said, "yes, that is where God is. That thing you cannot explain that is God." For Royer, this was unacceptable. She wanted answers and resolution to her problems. Instead of accepting the unknown, she wanted to figure out the expanse of human knowledge. Thus, at the age of twenty, she told her mother she would no longer attend Church and was leaving France. Royer went to live in Switzerland in

⁴¹⁰ Royer, *Biographie*, 53.

⁴¹¹ Royer, *Rectification*, 6.

the same countryside that her father had fled to after the 1832 revolution. There in spiritual exile, she economized her inheritance and lived very modestly for several years, reading books on history, philosophy, and science, determined to find answers to the most important questions. She started first by reading about Christianity which led her to the German exegetes. She thought that they examined the facts and explained them but then went beyond the limits of their conclusions. Royer dismissed philosophy as sophisms that, like religion, thrived in the gaps of human knowledge. Science appealed to her the most. Science caused her to believe that the truth existed and it was obtainable by humanity. Science became the new organizing principle of her life, and she built her intellectual career around it. She began by offering a course in the natural sciences for women only, and she never turned back.

It would be easy to label her a positivist, but in fact, she did not consider herself to be one. Comte's philosophy of history does not stand out as being any more important than that of Michelet or Hegel from her testimony. Royer said that "the world has already gone beyond Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Comte and is looking for something better in Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, Bain and the whole English school."⁴¹² Where she stood in common with the practitioners of positivism and scientism was in her general rejection of metaphysics. This refusal, which often meant the rejection of philosophy, in general, was associated with Comte; however, this was a vulgarization of Comte's theory, itself a philosophy of science.

⁴¹² Clémence Royer, *Deux hypothèses sur l'hérédité* (Paris: BnF-P, 2016), <http://public.ebib.com/choice/PublicFullRecord.aspx?p=5411196>, 17.

Practitioners of science took only from the first part of Comte's theory (neglecting thus the Church of Positivism that Comte created in his later years). Comte's ideas appealed to her and others at the time in so far as they rejected both religion and philosophy as obsolete methods of knowing that had been replaced by science (positive knowledge according to Comte). Beyond that, there was little interest in pursuing his ideas. Scientists viewed Comte as an ally of science who encouraged nonphilosophical scientists to dismiss philosophy. While certainly many freethinkers highly valued philosophical critique, many believed that it had a much more limited role to play in the future of knowledge production. The freethinker Claraz echoed Royer's rejection, "We no longer believe in metaphysics because we know that in metaphysics there is no clear evidence or any rational certitude."⁴¹³ Comte became the symbol of science against philosophy and religion, contrary to the fact of his theory being a scientific philosophy. However, it should be noted that there were more subtle philosophical thinkers such as Abel Rey, who saw that Comte had eliminated conjecture about the unknowable but did not eliminate the importance of philosophy, which still had a place in making hypothetical glimpses of the future.⁴¹⁴ Nonetheless, Royer rejected metaphysics, believed in rational progress, and put her trust in a positivist method of knowledge. She also adopted as foundational the premise that human knowledge is susceptible to change. Her scientific and irreligious

⁴¹³ Jules Claraz, *La faillite des religions*. (Paris: E. Flammarion, 1912), <http://books.google.com/books?id=d0hkw9KAbLIC>, 379.

⁴¹⁴ Simon, *European Positivism in the Nineteenth Century: An Essay in Intellectual History*. (Port Washington: N.Y., Kennikat Press, 1972), 119-121.

views were expressed better in her introduction to Darwin's *Origin of Species* than in her autobiography.

Darwin's *Origin of Species* provided a platform for Royer to make irreligious attacks against Christianity. In the introduction, she championed evolution as the proof that Christianity was false. From the start of her introduction, Royer took an anticlerical position and defended her claims against hostile Christian interlocutors. She said that they wished to label her and others like her as disciples of St. Simon, Fourier, Comte, and atheists of liberty like Proudhon.⁴¹⁵ She accused them of being guilty of reductionism. Royer claimed to promote Darwin, not for the theories of others but for the love of truth. While denying to have any masters or deifying a secular genius, she propped up Darwin as a new champion of freethought.

To Royer, Darwin's work was more than just a book about nature and biology. It showed the revolutionary power of uncensored investigation based on "facts." She said that philosophy without the grounding of empiricism was built upon rationalism, a use of logic and imagination. Darwin's work had the virtue of using rationalism, logic, and empiricism in a way that was ultimately supported by the facts of his argument--facts that could be disputed and proven wrong (a hint of Karl Popper here).

"Far from being as Hegel says: too bad for the facts! The opposite of Hegel, the philosophes of nature question them with a scrupulous conscience, and attached to the empirical school, born in England with Locke and continued in France by Condillac and all the Encyclopedists. They look at the facts as the

⁴¹⁵ Charles Darwin and Clémence Auguste ROYER, *De l'Origine Des Espèces, Ou Des Lois Du Progrès Chez Les Êtres Organisés ... Traduit ... Sur La Troisième Édition ... Par Mlle Clémence Auguste Royer. Avec Une Préface et Des Notes Du Traducteur.* (614]. Paris, 1866).

unbending rule of all truth and the point of departure of all rational speculation, with the understanding that it provided an even better meaning to observe and understand."⁴¹⁶

In the introduction, Royer makes clear her rejection of the Church as the force of obscurity that sought to control knowledge. It was the authoritative institution that hindered the progress of the human mind. She asserted that Christianity had trapped the mind in a closed circle by making sacred dogmas out of ideas that had before been taught only as a hypothesis. The Pope declared that the Church protected and promoted science for the liberty of inquiry but as an authority, it curtailed and slowed human progress. The century of true human progress had occurred during the eighteenth century when Christianity fell under heavy critique. This was the century of liberty, human rights, progress, and an enlightenment greater than all that had come during the time of religion.⁴¹⁷ Royer rejected Christianity in favor of the liberty of thought--a value in-and-of-itself that was a boon to the quest for truth.

Central to her embrace of science was Darwin's theory of evolution as a refutation of Christianity. Evolution reinforced the sense that religion was under siege by a heretical counter-biblical theory of human origins. Darwin's theory rejected the teleological interpretation of humanity that Christianity proposed. Instead, it postulated chance as the driving factor of all change that determined the erratic

⁴¹⁶ Darwin and ROYER, *De l'Origine Des Espèces, Ou Des Lois Du Progrès Chez Les Êtres Organisés ... Traduit ... Sur La Troisième Édition ... Par Mlle Clémence Auguste Royer. Avec Une Préface et Des Notes Du Traducteur*, xxiv.

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*, xx.

history of life. For Royer, this was the great struggle of the century. Christian theology claimed Jesus to be the savior and redeemer, removing the sin that tainted humanity since the Fall. Humanity needed the grace of God to ascend. It was the reason that Jesus had been sent to Earth in Christian theology. If there was no original sin emerging from the same point, then the story of Genesis and Jesus the Redeemer was mistaken. Evolution contradicted the Bible. Royer wrote "The doctrine of Darwin is the rational revelation of progress itself and is positioned as an antagonist logic against the irrational revelation of the fall. These are two principles, two religions in conflict."⁴¹⁸ For Royer, Darwin was the knock-out blow to Christian theology, and the response of the Catholic authorities seemed to validate her assessment.

The Catholic Church aggravated the dispute by taking a traditional stance against the new science—making the conflict even more irreconcilable. Until 1940, Catholic authority officially maintained a culture of resistance, holding onto the creation of the Earth and man and women by God at a single moment. But after 1940, it adopted a strategy of accommodation that incorporated evolution into Christian theology, becoming a possible interpretation of the origins of life that is compatible with Christian doctrine. During the Third Republic, Catholicism maintained its doctrine of creation by disciplining its members and by a concordist framework or apologetic. Leon XIII affirmed the jurisdiction of faith over reason in his encyclical of 1893 *Deus Proventissimus*. Pius X made it his priority to combat modernism (as

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.*

shown in chapter 3) with his encyclical *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* and his *Lamentabili* decree. Rather than coming to terms with evolution, the truth of the biblical story was reaffirmed, and the literal interpretation of the Bible validated. The Church defended its position by appealing to the theology of Origin and Saint Augustin, which said there are four ways to read the Scriptures: the literal sense, the allegorical sense, the moral sense, and the anagogical sense. The Bible was not immediately comprehensible the Church claimed—it had to be deciphered and interpreted. The Church knew that certain stories weighed heavy on the believer; nonetheless, it rejected the autonomy of scientific discourse and sought to practice Catholic science by creating chairs in the natural sciences in geology and paleontology among others. Later the Church would change its strategy by making a distinction between chance and immanentism (divine guidance).⁴¹⁹

To Royer, Christianity was simply proven false. First, Revelation was clearly shown to be mistaken. Royer took the biblical stories of Genesis as propositions on the nature of reality that presented a static and fixed reality with the Earth at the center of the universe and the Fall of Adam as the start of human history. The rejection of creation had two ramifications. First, Darwinian evolution contradicted the idea of God creating the universe in one moment and all the species at the same time as is suggested in the Old Testament. Second, it rejected a static world that God created to fit His designs. Royer emphasized that the fall of humanity and the need for

⁴¹⁹ Philippe Portier, Michel Veuille, and Jean-Paul Willaime, *Théorie de l'évolution et religions* (Paris: Riveneuve, 2011), 124.

God's grace required that the sin of Adam and Eve rest at a single point in time.

Darwin's work demonstrated the mutability of life--that the only constant is constant change.

Darwin symbolized and helped formulate a particular faith in progress and science. Evolution not only provided a refutation to the Biblical story, but it provided an alternative model--a model free of the authority that hindered the flourishing of human thought and one that was capable of confronting its errors in a process of self-correction. It offered a theory of history and a model of historical change in constant development that was in contrast to the Christian model. There was no paradise in the past or original sin. The past was a time when things were simply less developed, less perfect. Humanity should not return to an earlier spiritual past but a new enlightened secular awakening. In her discussion of the importance of Darwin's work, Royer replaced her Catholic faith with a faith in progress, the power of science, and a non-interventionist God. However, Royer used Darwin's theory to support a theory of the evolution of human consciousness and knowledge, going beyond Darwin's claims. Gradual and continual progress has a greater resemblance to Lamarck than the half-hazard adaptations of survival developed in Darwin. Royer had created her own theory.

Although she rejected Christianity, Royer discussed human society as if it were the product of providential design. Her rejection of Christianity initially left her a Deist. She at first saw the qualities of God, as shown in the introduction to Darwin's

text, as evident in human discoveries and knowledge. Revelation is false; instead, humanity has access to rational revelation, the force that unites humanity to the greater trajectory of progress. Continual progress is for Royer the replacement for divine intervention while rational revelation is the replacement for religious worship. She expressed her convictions in religious form with a testimony of her belief in the triumph of science:

"Yes, I believe in revelation, but in a permanent revelation of man to himself and by himself, a rational revelation that is the result of scientific progress and of modern consciousness, a revelation always partial and relative that reveals by the acquisition of new truths and, even more so, by the elimination of ancient errors."⁴²⁰

Darwin's theory also exemplified the need for moral realism. Royer's legacy today is marred by her racial convictions. Royer believed that the theory of evolution explained the inequality of the races and demonstrated other people's biological inferiority. She cautioned against mixing the "Indo-Germanic" races with those of the "Mongols" and "negros." Society should promote a healthier breeding program so that it could weed out the "the weak, the infirm, the incurable, the mean--all the disgraces of nature."⁴²¹ It is worth noting that Hitler said he was teaching racial consciousness based on similar arguments of social Darwinism. Royer found in science and Darwin's theory a comprehensive ideology that provided a new moral system, a method of knowledge, and a new way to worship. In Royer's mind, she was

⁴²⁰ Darwin and ROYER, *De l'Origine Des Espèces, Ou Des Lois Du Progrès Chez Les Êtres Organisés ... Traduit ... Sur La Troisième Édition ... Par Mlle Clémence Auguste Royer. Avec Une Préface et Des Notes Du Traducteur*, lix.

⁴²¹ *Ibid.*, liij.

not preaching unbelief; she was supporting a new modern spirituality to replace the bankrupt one she rejected. Her unbelief led her to attack religious belief where she found it and replace it with secular notions practiced through rational debate and empirical investigation.

Science was not the singular cause of Royer's deconversion; nonetheless, it played a central and crucial role. She did not depict her struggle with Catholicism as a moral struggle, nor did she express the common ethical critiques freethinkers levied against Christianity. It is possible that she had a more complex view of Catholicism due to her father's conservatism. The Church is portrayed as immoral only in that it invested her energy into concerns not of this world. The revolution of 1848 and the death of her father acted as the catalysts that set her off in a different direction that led her to stumble into the readings of the philosophes. From here, her studies into philosophy and science cemented her unbelief. When she wrote against religion as she did in the introduction to the *Origin of Species*, the conclusions of science provided the chief ammunition. One is left concluding that without the arguments of science many freethinkers would never have abandoned Christianity. Chadwick's comment about the importance of ethical arguments are overstated because, without the scientific explanation, people might have left Catholicism but remained Christian—it took the alternative explanations of science to make unbelief plausible and compelling. This was echoed by some of the respondents to the freethought survey as well. One of the respondents to the survey, E. Bagners, said that "Science, at first, clarified all the absurdities of religion. Next, I recognized that all religion is

only exploitation of poor minds and weak character.”⁴²² Another, A. Verdaud listed his disposition towards observation and the conclusions of psychology as his principal reasons. His second principal reason had to do with the moral actions of the Church and the problem of evil.⁴²³

Disproving God

The historian D.G. Charlton, like Chadwick, argues that science is not the principal reason why people abandoned their faith in the nineteenth century. He notes several factors that frequently appear in the literature among the freethinkers. First, he admits that irreligious philosophy as found in John Stuart Mill, Comte, Spencer, and Littré supported freethought by arguing that religious claims were unobservable and philosophically meaningless. Included within this were the reaction to the metaphysical proofs of God and the rejection of miracles. Charlton concluded, “Although many historians have given greater stress to the scientific, philological, and philosophical grounds for unbelief, moral rejection of Christianity appears to have been in fact primary for all but professional philosophers.”⁴²⁴ For the nonphilosopher, more important were the assertion that Christian doctrines were backward, that evil and misery were left unchecked by an interventionist God, and finally the political, social, and moral practices of the Christian Churches.

⁴²² *Pourquoi nous sommes libres penseurs*, 75.

⁴²³ *Pourquoi nous sommes libres penseurs*, 67-68.

⁴²⁴ Charlton, *Secular Religions in France, 1815-1870*, 19.

The sources in 1900 validate much of what Charlton argued. However, the problem with religion can be framed differently. Irreligious critiques from moral discord are indeed prominent. However, in the freethought literature produced by Jules Claraz, Sébastien Faure, Charles Beaquier, and André Lorulot—some of the most important freethought propagandists at the beginning of the twentieth century—it is too easy, and it misses too much if one overemphasizes moral deconversion. Claraz, Faure, Beaquier, and Lorulot were the disseminators of popular anticlerical and freethought literature. While morality and science are at the core of their critiques, to understand the issue as a whole, their hostility toward Christianity must be reframed to represent their multifaceted critiques. They attacked religion, not solely on science or morality but rather on the *plausibility* of Christianity's truth claims and its *compatibility* with the state of modern knowledge. This was the crux of the issue with Christianity in nineteenth and twentieth-century unbelief.

The propaganda supporting freethought and denouncing Christianity does not fit directly into deconversion narratives. However, narratives of deconversion rarely give sufficient detail to the arguments that helped convince them to break with Christianity. When we look at the pamphlets and books that French freethinkers produced, we see that they gave very complex and mixed arguments that took into account science, morality, history, and philosophy.

Freethinkers in their concentrated and multi-pronged critique of religion asked if the hypothesis of the Biblical God corresponded with reality as it was understood.

The arguments of *plausibility* concentrated on the inconsistencies found within the Bible, Catholic dogmas, and the notion of God. The arguments of *compatibility* evaluated religious claims according to modern scientific and moral values. In these critiques, the anthropomorphic, loving and all-powerful god, who was the author of Revelation was rejected by not sufficiently meeting these criteria. In France, these critiques marked the end of a simplistic version of Christianity that had perhaps been a part of popular belief: i.e., the wizened man in the sky who intervened and explained the origins of the cosmos and humanities place within it. After this period, Catholic religious belief would coincide more closely with Protestant belief in reinterpreting the Bible through parable, symbol, and allegory as well as allowing for human error in the transmission of Scripture. Freethinkers were unwilling to reinterpret the Bible—this was Christian sophism trying to repackage a falsified and immoral creed. The hypothesis that the Christian God did not exist explained reality better than His existence. With this logic, rationality compelled freethinkers to abandon their Christian faith. It was more than scientific explanation and moral dissonance—this is a reductive account of the complexity of deconversion in late nineteenth and twentieth-century France (and the West). To save itself from the continuing critique of freethinkers, the Church would have to change. It would have to become plausible and compatible with modern values and knowledge.

If the universe is the product of God, argued freethinkers, there should be clear, consistent, signs that suggest God's presence. Inconsistent findings indicate that the hypothesis has deep flaws. This is one of the most common critiques. Claraz,

Beaquier, Mirman, and Lorulot questioned the dogmas of Christianity—a time-honored French tradition going back to the French Enlightenment and Voltaire’s *Philosophical Dictionary*. Freethinkers asked if God wanted people to know his message, why did God leave out the most central and foundational beliefs of Christianity from the Jews? One of the most important was the immortality of the soul. The Old Testament does not affirm the existence of immortality. Claraz asked, “Would God hide the future life from the Jewish people?” He added that the cultures and society around Moses, such as the Chaldeans, the Egyptians, the Syrians, the Phoenicians believed in immortality, but not the Jewish people? Claraz then noted that even the New Testament is not clear about this crucial point. The idea of immortality entered only with the apostolic fathers, who were the followers of the first twelve apostles. The Jews believed that physical death was the end.⁴²⁵ A similar argument was made for the future retribution of the soul. The point is that the message in the Bible has been changing. In the argument for plausibility, if the Christian message is predicated on the immortality of the soul and the afterlife, this should have been a part of the divine message from the beginning. Instead, the message is inconsistent and subject to change at different historical moments according to the writings of different men. It would be more plausible that if God wanted people to know his message, he would not have told it so incompletely and at varied and distant times.

⁴²⁵ Claraz, *La faillite des religions*, 274-275.

When freethinkers critiqued the concept of God, they often contrasted the Old Testament God with the God of the New Testament. The actions of God in the Old Testament correspond to a pagan God of antiquity akin to an angry and volatile Zeus. This is far removed from the loving God of the New Testament. If the God of the Bible was real, then God's character should not change. But His character does change. One finds a violent God in the Old Testament. For example: God killed 60,000 people after asking King David if he preferred a famine for seven years or a plague for three days (Kings 2: 24); God took part in wholesale slaughter when He invoked the Flood (Genesis 6-8); God destroyed the cities on the plain, including Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18-19); God killed the firstborn sons of Egypt during Passover (Exodus 11-12); God sanctioned the genocide of the Canaanites under Moses and Joshua (Numbers 21:2-3; Deuteronomy 20:17; Joshua 6:17, 21) . Claraz argued that this God was not the later Christian God. He found a disjuncture between the old and the new god of the Bible: "was the Jehova of the ancient Jews the same god as the Christians?"⁴²⁶ Jehova appeared to be a pagan god: "As we see, Jehovah, the god of the Hebrews did not differ at all from the other god-idols of all the other nations. One does not find anywhere in the Bible, the word of a false god. Hebrew monotheism, at its origin, consisted not in the idea that other gods did not exist, but that Isreal could only have Jehovah for their God."⁴²⁷ This God did not tell His followers to turn the other cheek when struck by their enemy.

⁴²⁶ Ibid., 97.

⁴²⁷ Ibid., 74.

In anticlerical zeal, freethinkers argued that Christian claims were so far from being plausible that they were absurd. Beauquier argued in this manner. He sought to isolate Christian teachings and to ask certain questions to illuminate the strangeness and bizarre logic accepted without question in the Christian story. For instance, he questioned the logic of Jesus as a savior, asking why an all-powerful God would need to send himself in human form to lift the sins that He had cursed them with himself? God could have done this through an act of his supreme will. Beauquier implies that it is more plausible that Jesus, a charismatic religious man, simply died and that his death had to be explained because the promised and foretold end times never arrived.⁴²⁸

Freethinkers often cited the argument of religious confusion. This argument appears in various forms, but each asks, if God wanted people to worship him, then why would his message not be clearer? If God wanted humanity to worship Him and only Him, then why were there so many other religions with mutually exclusive claims and theologies? It is more plausible to think that if God wanted humanity to worship him, his message would be universal and would have reached all people. Instead, freethinkers argued it was more reasonable to believe in none of them since they were unable to convince each other of their claims. Beauquier said:

Amongst all this diversity of belief, what is the catechism? Catholics say there is only one god and it is their God, the only true one. Unfortunately, the Jews, the Protestants, the Muslims, the Buddhists and a thousand others say as much

⁴²⁸ Charles Beauquier, *Petit catéchisme populaire du libre-penseur*, (Besançon: imp. Millot frères et Cie, 1902), 55-56.

with as much energy, with the same arguments and with the same testimonies, with the same confident superiority in the authenticity of their God. The proofs of mathematics and geometry are the same for all people in all places, and it is evident. But in religion, they start to divide and separate and differ immediately.⁴²⁹

Finally, Claraz harked back to Diderot, using prior philosophes as an authority—a rhetorical strategy that responds to Lefevre’s concern of how could so many intelligent people of the past believe—well, in fact, many intelligent people did not. He thus cites the heroes of the western intellectual tradition after each argument, going from Plato to Pascal to Kant. He used Diderot in this instance to imply that it is absurd to believe in the Christian God, or even a universal God. *It is implausible that God would hide if He wanted others to believe in Him.* God fails to settle the problem of His existence definitively. Why would a God want to hide while at the same time want everyone to worship him? Diderot said “If religion were true, it should be universal. A true religion, interesting to all people, in all times and all places should be eternal, universal and evident; so, none having this characteristic, they all appear false.”⁴³⁰

In addition to the arguments of God’s implausibility, freethinkers rejected Christianity and religion because it was incompatible with their modern sentiments and values. *First and foremost, it was not in line with modern scientific ideas.* This has been discussed above with Clémence Royer and Lefèvre. The claims of science’s

⁴²⁹ Ibid., 16.

⁴³⁰ As cited in Claraz, *La faillite des religions*, 141.

superiority are echoed in every freethought text at a near yelling pitch, asking why does Revelation (or a literal reading of the Bible) not coincide with modern knowledge? The Bible was seen as an obstacle for the progress of learning. It promoted obscurity. Mirman said loudly, “Christianity was built upon the foundation of the Bible and as a result it has proscribed science” and hindered and obstructed great scholars, as when Galileo had been humiliated, or when Michel Servet was burned at the stake.⁴³¹

The championing of science meant the support of materialism for most freethinkers, to which Christianity did not seem compatible. Science examined the physical and material world, and it failed to show that behind matter, there is a spiritual, supernatural being. The human body is the aggregation of physical matter, knowable by the method of empirical investigation. For example, Beauquier invoked the problem of matter and the soul. Rejecting mind-body dualism, he noted that everything we experience about our consciousness shows it is subject to material change. Our consciousness is affected by old age and succumbs to the increasing decay of age, finally rendering their faculties to fall back into a kind of mental infancy. When we fall sick, our mental faculties are affected; an injury to the head causes us to lose consciousness and can even permanently change our personality. We have no unchangeable essence.⁴³²

⁴³¹ Léon Mirman, *Ce qu'est la libre-pensée, pourquoi en notre âme et conscience nous sommes libres-penseurs, conférence faite par le citoyen Mirman, ... le 15 novembre 1903, au théâtre de Vitry-le-François*. (Vitry-le-François: Impr. du "Républicain, 1903), 7.

⁴³² Beauquier, *Petit catéchisme populaire du libre-penseur*, 41.

Claraz argued that religion was hopelessly bankrupt due to its inability to explain reality to its followers in a way compatible with secular theories. He demanded a holy book that could truly guide human inquiry and validate modern knowledge. Rather, he lamented that religious beliefs have been a weight upon the human mind. “All human knowledge,” Claraz said, “is more or less elucidated and perfected with time. By what capacity has the so-called science of God clarified and made itself clearer?”⁴³³ Religious knowledge has not become more evident nor has it produced conclusive proofs to convince other religious groups such that it has unified them or settled the debates. Claraz and other freethinkers wanted something close to a geometrical proof that would be evident to all people and for all time. Freethinkers wanted to believe only with rational certainty.

Second, moral dissonance with Christianity has allowed for the categorical dismissal of its institutions and claims as being incompatible with modern progressive values. The God of the Old Testament and the historical actions of the Church were incompatible with feminism, free love, equality, etc. The Church had not been able to transcend its historical period. It contained and reproduced the historical values of the time. After the American and French Revolutions, the ideas and arguments for the universal rights of all people had become widely disseminated. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen of 1789 proclaimed the value and importance of all men, who had a right to life, liberty, and property. This

⁴³³ Claraz, *La faillite des religions*, 142.

corresponded with the moral rejection of Catholicism found in the personal testimonies discussed above. Among such liberal values, there was no place for a chosen people. The morality of the Bible seemed entirely out of place. As argued in Charlton's explanation, the moral rejection of Christianity was an important factor after 1870: freethinkers rejected Catholicism because they held that Christian doctrines were immoral, that it could not answer the question of evil, and that Christian practices were archaic or an obstacle to progress.

The problem of evil was an often cited reason in the personal testimonies and was a significant, if not the principle, argument against the existence of the Christian god. The Christian god is claimed to be a just and loving God, but, say the freethinkers, the stories in the Old Testament do not support this assertion. As noted above, they liked to point out that the stories say that God indiscriminately killed the firstborn of Egypt, drowned the people during Noah's time, and demanded the extermination of the Canaanites.

Sébastien Faure used a series of traditional arguments in his work "12 Proofs of the Inexistence of God" (to which an anarchist group said, "ha, we know there are 13!"). He wished to show that the idea of the Christian god was implausible and incompatible with modern values. He mixed the problem of evil argument with the argument of religious confusion: a good God would not leave so many of his children in anguish and uncertainty of His divine mission and good news. He asked, "what do you think of a God who shows himself to one part of his children while the others

remain in the dark?”⁴³⁴ Next, a good God would not have invented hell. Hell as punishment is considered to be immoral itself—no good God would design this in the terms it is described in the Bible. Faure argued that a good God who was all-powerful could have created humanity as naturally good. Instead, he created good and evil, that called for him to send a part of his creation to the eternal punishment he had invented just for them. God also could admit everyone into heaven and simply annihilate the perverts—no need for eternal punishment. Eternal punishment violates the fundamental rules of equity, that is an equitable punishment in proportion to the crime. Eternal punishment would eventually outweigh any and all crimes. Thus, God is not infinitely good or infinitely merciful, but a twisted being that takes pleasure in torment.

Faure, Miran, Claraz, Lorolot, all refer to the ancient critique made by Sextus Empiricus in the 2nd century that concludes that the concept of a good, just, all-powerful God is incomprehensible. This ancient argument of skepticism is frequently repeated in the literature, often in truncated form. Claraz and Faure both fully articulate it in its full. It goes like this: Either God wants to remove the evil of this world but cannot, or he can but does not want to, or he cannot nor does he want to, or he wants to and he can. If he wants to remove evil but cannot, then he is impotent, and this is contrary to the nature of God. If he can remove evil but does not want to, then he is wicked, and this is against his nature. If he does not want to remove evil

⁴³⁴ Sébastien Faure, *Les 12 preuves de l'inexistence de Dieu [suivi de] Les paroles d'une croyante et de [Réponse à une croyante]* (Saint-Georges-d'Oléron: Les Éditions Libertaires, 2004), 34.

and cannot do it, then God is at the same time wicked and impotent.⁴³⁵ Andre Lorulot said that “in the cries of the suffering, one can hear exclaimed *my god*; the cry is judicious and the complaint is just.”⁴³⁶

Faure responded to the common claim that evil could be explained by autonomy and free will that God gave humanity. He responded that even so, if we are to grant the Christian that moral evil comes from human volition, it does not rid life of physical evil. Physical evil is the sickness, the horrible accidents, the infirmity of the old, the infants who die only days after their birth. It is the harsh realities and untold suffering that occur from natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, famines, disease, and tempests. Humanity is not responsible for this. “If God created the universe, he created a nature that devastates his children.”⁴³⁷

Religious principles such as Original Sin were considered to be immoral. Beauquier and Claraz both condemn Original Sin as an unfair imposition by God. To Beauquier, the epitome of injustice is to punish someone for the faults of their ancestors. The dogma of original sin requires that everyone receive baptism or be condemned forever; thus small infants were considered condemned until the notion of purgatory was invented in the 14th century to compensate for this unacceptable result.

⁴³⁵ Claraz, *La faillite des religions*, 145 ; Faure, *Les 12 preuves de l'inexistence de Dieu [suivi de] Les paroles d'une croyante et de [Réponse à une croyante]*, 33-50 ; André Lorulot, *Pourquoi je suis athée!* (Saint-Georges d'Oléron: Les Éd. libertaires, 2004.

⁴³⁶ Lorulot, *Pourquoi je suis athée!*, 73.

⁴³⁷ Faure, *Les 12 preuves de l'inexistence de Dieu [suivi de] Les paroles d'une croyante et de [Réponse à une croyante]*, 39.

Beauquier complained that this caused some doctors to prioritize the life of the baby over that of the mother during a trauma at childbirth.⁴³⁸

Finally, the third common critique of incompatibility was historical; Beauquier, Claraz, Minam, and Lorulot's condemned Christianity for insufficient evidence. They went further however in their analysis; they thought like social scientists, looking for social and cultural influences that might explain Christianity. In its most superficial form, they simply examined the Bible at face value. For example, the story of Jesus was critiqued as unhistorical for having insufficient sources outside of its followers to validate it is as a real event. Some freethinkers such as Alfaric Prosper argued that the historical veracity of Jesus could not be proven. They also looked at the claims of Jesus himself, noting the discrepancy of the proclaimed end times that would lead the Jewish people to the conquest of the world and the development of the Catholic Church. Freethinkers claimed the Church was built on unfulfilled promises. They interpreted the Church as a product of social and cultural exchange. Contact with the Greek and Roman world caused Christianity to take the forms of their practices until Roman Catholicism resembled the pagan faith it originally condemned. The Church became full of new idols and fetishes that emphasized the worshipping of saints who each possessed particular characteristics, as the pagan gods of old, "making in heaven a giant bazaar."⁴³⁹

⁴³⁸ Beauquier, *Petit catéchisme populaire du libre-penseur*, 29-33.

⁴³⁹ Mirman, *Ce qu'est la libre-pensée, pourquoi en notre âme et conscience nous sommes libres-penseurs, conférence faite par le citoyen Mirman, ... le 15 novembre 1903, au théâtre de Vitry-le-François*, 17.

Freethinkers were looking for proof beyond the testimonies of already indoctrinated Christians. Evidence coming from those who did not worship Jesus would be more impressive, showing the importance of the historical moment in regards to the extraordinary claims. Freethinkers complained that when they examined the sources, they found only a haphazardly formulated religion, uncertain of many of its key claims that were decided only after the time of Jesus; this late development of Christianity marked it as an improvised invention of converts. Claraz remarked that historians of the period say nothing of Jesus, his importance grew only later after his death. Freethinkers were asking if God wanted to spread his message, could he not have done it more convincingly? Why was the whole world not shaken by a message sent by God? Why would God on Earth not convince everyone who could witness His presence? Claraz rejected the Bible for lacking historical validity—its sources came only from the evangelists. This is a peculiarity in itself, for a religion of the Book, why did Jesus not present his teaching himself in a systematic formalized text? Especially if God planned to spread the teachings after? Instead, the Christian canon was acquired piecemeal over several hundred years. Next, Claraz declared it is more reasonable to see Jesus as a reforming Jew, who presented no more than a schism and a new sect. He never declared he was God incarnate; this had only been made canonical at the Council of Nicea. Finally, Claraz noted that Jesus teachings were not entirely extraordinary or original—his teachings resembled ideas and morals found in Indian, Greek, and Roman philosophies several centuries before Christ.

Claraz and other freethinkers such as Joseph Turmel, Alfaric Prosper, and Alfred Loisy all argued that they found it more plausible to believe that Christianity was a result of religious syncretism. Christianity had absorbed and adopted the ideas of the ancient religions. Anticlerical literature would attack the originality of Christianity to say that Christianity was cut from the same cloth as the other religions. The idea of a redeemer, a savior, was not new. Claraz argued that the Greeks and the Romans each had their own religion that professed the dogma of the redemption or the mediation. “It was one of the oldest fables which had cradled humanity.”⁴⁴⁰ Claraz compared Christianity directly to Mithraism, suggesting explicit borrowing. For example, Claraz said that the Persians also believed that the death of their God allowed for their salvation. Mithraism also had the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, the Eucharist, and Penitence. There were angels of light and angels of darkness. They had a paradise and a hell. Thus, says the freethinker, Christianity resulted from religious syncretism, borrowing and exchanging ideas already prevalent in its historical period—it was far from being a revelation from God that alerted them to a wholly new truth.⁴⁴¹

When freethinkers looked at Christianity, they saw a historical creation with an invented—not revealed--book that required ingenious sophisms to be upheld in the face of modern knowledge. They rejected its originality. They questioned its sectarian status in the world for a religion that proclaimed a universal kingdom of God but was

⁴⁴⁰ Claraz, *La faillite des religions*, 360.

⁴⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 210-255.

based on the incarnation of a historical God on Earth. The old way of understanding religion through the stories, the miracles, and the claims of the Bible no longer satisfied the modern mind. They rejected the literal interpretation of the Bible, and they called for a morality that could be understood outside the commands of a God who seemed incomprehensible. For freethinkers, the Christianity of the literal Bible was at its end; the concept of the God of the Bible who personally intervened, caused miracles, and spoke directly to His worshippers had become implausible to reason and incompatible with modern scientific understanding.

Conclusion

The testimonies of the respondents to the freethought survey, Lefèvre, Lorolut, and Royer provide a diverse assortment of reasons for their deconversion. To summarize, the best indicator of becoming a freethinker was whether they were male. Sexism and gender roles still dominated French culture and these roles provided very different life experiences. Second, although freethinkers championed reason and science, many told stories of breaking with the Church because of a psychological or emotional trauma associated with Catholicism. Science and reason were just secondary factors for such folks. However, for others, the loss of faith was a solitary and inner struggle of reasoning through the facts and claims. Lefèvre detailed the struggle of his examination of the Bible. Wanting empirical proof and evidence was a telling sign of the influence of the scientific method on religious thought. People wanted to be convinced in terms of contemporary knowledge. Chadwick and Charlton said that the primary cause was moral disagreement with Christian doctrine

and behavior. While this was partly true, what they did not mention was the importance of the changing requirements of evidence that caused people to be disaffected. Further, they do not adequately emphasize that what was central was the changing social and political orientations that caused a shift in values that no longer harmonized with Catholicism. The Catholic Church was adamantly against Lorulot's anarchist, socialists, and freethinking organizations. Because the Catholic Church did not hold the same orientation of social values, it caused people to lose respect for Catholic authority and dissolved the attachments of their loyalty to Catholicism. Further, what people wanted was a religion that was compatible with modern methods of knowledge and put into plausible terms that could convince the requirements of their reason. Because Catholicism could not meet these requirements, they abandoned it.

Chapter 5. Exile

Catholicism binds its followers in powerful ritual practices that provide countless ceremonial occasions, holidays, times for individual confession, and a meaning to life. Without such a framework one must find a new life orientation. Thus, leaving Catholicism had several notable effects upon the *évadés*, the left modernists, and freethinkers. These effects are numerous; however, three observable trends mark their voyage into unbelief: *inversion, absorption, and/or spiritual drift*. The public lives of the left modernists, Loyson, Royer, and Lorulot, provide a window into the different trajectories into unbelief after deconversion and how the phenomena of inversion, absorption, and spiritual drift overlapped.

Inversion

First, Catholicism left a lifelong mark on many of those who broke with it. Where before they had been committed to Catholicism, after deconversion, unable to remove the impressions of the faith of their birth, they become committed to overturning and refuting Catholicism—an *inversion* of their life commitment. The *évadés* had the peculiar characteristic of coming to the conclusion that what they once wholeheartedly believed in was not just a little bit wrong, but entirely and categorically wrong to such a degree that they would henceforth identify as “not Catholic” and sometimes militantly anti-Catholic.

To be a priest is to be a propagator of spiritual knowledge and a way of life. Priests define themselves by their vocational aim to spread a moral, social, and religious faith. In deconverting from Catholicism, the *évadés* sometimes experienced a violent jolt that angered or upset them to such a degree that they would live the rest of their lives through this one experience. They became the preachers of unbelief; they sought to free people from an indoctrination that they saw as false, an entanglement of falsehoods, and tragically life-consuming. Christopher Hitchens, a prominent American atheist and public intellectual, was asked why he engaged in constant debates; he said he felt obligated to do so because “religion is the greatest lie ever told.”⁴⁴² Unbelievers such as Albert Houtin or Joseph Turmel in early twentieth-century France had the same mission. However, their energy *and enthusiasm for combating Catholicism was acutely tied to their rejection and expulsion from the Catholic ranks.*

Inversion, like radicalization, is abetted by the severity of the oppression and intolerance of authority that effectively removes the middle ground and polarizes the dispute. For the *évadés*, Rome rebutted their message with the energy and power at its disposal. For the Catholics, the political struggle against the Church during the Dreyfus Affair, the Separation in 1905, the growth of socialism, the anticlerical measures of the Third Republic, and the modernist crisis, gave the impression of being besieged from all sides. In response, the Vatican sought to shore up the ranks of the clergy and put them back into line. The modernist crisis was treated as an elitist

⁴⁴² COLLISION: Christopher Hitchens vs. Douglas Wilson (LEVEL4, 2009).

affair that affected a small, though vocal, group of Catholics whose repression was for the greater good of Catholicism. Père Pouget remarked that “The Church cannot move fast because in doing so it would scandalize believers. Rome acts with authority, and we have to admit that she is right to do so. There may be three hundred people with a critical outlook, but there are millions and millions of other souls to consider.”⁴⁴³ No one knows how many priests were sympathetic to modernist reform; estimates range from 1,500 to 15,000. All of this fueled an anti-modernist reaction and censorship. During the reign of Pope Pius X, the conservative side of the Church combating modernism responded by professing “integral Catholicism.” Integral Catholics dedicated themselves to defending dogmatic truth, authority, and scholasticism.

Integral Catholics acted as the reactionary guard. The Encyclical *Pascendi* in 1907 encouraged bishops to maintain a careful eye for priests expressing modernist ideas. The leader of integral Catholicism was Monsignor Benigni, a prelate in the Secretariat of State. The integralist operated through a bulletin named *Paulus Pianum*, popularly known as the *Sapiniere*, which represented a kind of Catholic Freemasonry and may have remained unknown if it were not discovered after the First World War. *Sapiniere* acted under extreme discretion. It had its own secret code for letters and Benigni himself had twelve different signatures. The *Sapiniere* co-ordinated resistance to modernism, demochristianity, inter-confessionalism, and a perceived

⁴⁴³ As cited in Adrien Dansette and John Dingle, *Religious History of Modern France Vol.2*, (Freiburg; Edinburgh: Herder Nelson, 1961), 308.

Judeo-masonic plot against the Church. They created a secret watch-dog like organization that rooted out liberal Catholicism. In parallel with the formation of Sapiniere, the symbolic act of the Church publicly occurred in 1908 with *Lamentabili Sane* and the encyclical *Pascendi*, which were followed with disciplinary measures. *Pascendi* was a call to identify and list suspect Catholics among the staffs of faculties and seminaries, the nomination of a censor for Catholic publications, and the drafting of a report to be sent every three months to Rome by bishops and superiors of religious orders. In 1910, the Holy See took the extra step of requiring all priests having a pastoral charge to sign an antimodernist oath. This oath affirmed that God could be demonstrated by rational means, the value and intellectual nature of belief, the creation of the institution of the Church during Jesus' life on earth, and the immutability of dogmas.⁴⁴⁴

Pius X was not a reforming pope. His tenure as the leader of the Holy See saw the centralization and consolidation of the papal office and the triumph of Ultramontane Catholicism. When Pius X condemned the modernists in 1907 and the Social Catholic Sillon movement in 1910, founded by Marc Sangier, the Catholic Church embraced the ideology of resistance it had constructed over the last hundred years. Catholic resistance ran counter to the democratic age it confronted. For the liberal priests still in their dioceses, they experienced what became known as the "Black Terror" as the Holy See sought to extirpate the modernist heresy and drove it

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid., 311-312.

underground. The Church would remain closed to reform and would not experience an opening until the 1960s with Vatican II.

Under pressure by the Church from those in the secret watch group of Monsignor Benigni, silence, conformity, and frustrated ambitions remained the only avenue available to reform-minded Catholics after 1907. The unbending line taken by the Church helped justify the rebellion by the *évadés* who broke with Catholicism in one of two ways, by choice or by the will of the Vatican. For example, three of the notable modernists were excommunicated by the Pope: Alfred Loisy in 1908, Joseph Turmel in 1930, and Prosper Alfaric in 1932. Albert Houtin and Marcel Hébert left by choice after being marginalized and impoverished. All of them joined secular society, but they were by profession teachers or historians, and they broke with the Church after many long years in Catholic service. Turmel, who was the youngest at the moment of his deconversion at 27 years old, was pushed out at the age of 70, which made his financial transition much more difficult. All of them had a difficult task in integrating themselves into society.

In place of being priests, they became defenders of a new form of comprehension, a “truth” devoid of a personal, knowable God. With this new truth, they continued to live as men engaged in a spiritual quest. Formerly, their faith was the means of knowing reality; this did not change: they passed from the saving of souls to the emancipation of minds. Their life and their identity was strongly linked to their former faith in the Church; after deconversion and rupture, their identity was linked to their belief that the Church was a force of obfuscation and backwardness.

The *évadés* continued to construct their worldview around that of the Catholic Church.

The fascinating aspect is that qualitatively, they became the inverse of what they once were. In their rejection of Christianity, they were never able to escape entirely. They lived the rest of their life as atheist priests. However, their separation from the Church led them towards a nuanced unbelief. On one side this unbelief varied from a mystical faith that oscillated continually between belief, unbelief, and the unknown. On the other side, their rupture with the Catholicism permitted their skepticism to grow without restriction. The passion and drive that once caused them to believe, now caused them to disbelieve. Where once they were the knight and defender of the faith, they became its greatest outspoken opponent, seeking to undermine and deconvert others. *Évadés* like Houtin and Turmel wanted to put the Church out of business. Where once they were devoted to the expansion of Catholicism, after deconversion, they devoted themselves to its decline.

This did not have to lead to radical inversion. André Bourrier, an example of those who converted to Protestantism, and other liberal Catholics, represented a mild form of rupture. However, Bourrier was defined and marked by his time within the Church. He too devoted himself to helping others leave the Church and to challenging the legitimacy of Catholicism. Bourrier expressed the characteristics of inversion by his dedication to challenging and undermining Catholicism by encouraging priests to leave. Further, he became absorbed in Protestantism that provided a similar project to the mission of Catholicism.

Absorption: Refashioning the Sacred Canopy

Second, the rationalist, liberal values that undergirded deconversion caused a realignment that allowed them to be absorbed in new projects that replaced Catholicism, such as freethought, the propagation of science, socialism, etc. Absorption validated and confirmed their intellectual deviance from Catholicism and provided the *évadés* with a new institutional framework by which they could find self-worth and social recognition. The *évadés* adopted new projects to which they were devoted and often to which they were zealously committed. Interestingly, Christian existential philosopher Paul Tillich considered this to be authentic religious behavior. He called it an “ultimate concern.” Tillich argued that those who committed themselves entirely to a cause or action implicitly acted with a conviction of holding this cause or action as a “truth” and “ultimate concern.” The new cause provided the moral and intellectual compass and guide in how to live their lives and provided purpose and meaning. Many of the *évadés* believed that revealing the error of Church teachings and liberating the human mind were an ultimate good that provided greater moral and intellectual fulfillment. Where once the complexities of faith demanded their highest faculties, “truth” now replaced it. Alone, lost in the wilderness of disaffiliation, the *évadés* replaced the Catholic Church with that of freethought, politics, or the pursuit of scientific inquiry.

Articulated unbelief as seen by Royer, Alfarcic, Turmel, Houtin, and the liberal Christianity of Bourrier and Loyson belonged to an intellectual trend that partly tore western civilization from the culture of antiquity and the middle ages. Most significantly they discovered associations that matched their evolving values and allowed them to be absorbed into alternative causes. Notably, the sociopolitical culture of the Third Republic provided the ground for unbelief to take root through irreligious, liberal, political organizations. These groups helped make unbelief respectable. During the Third Republic this could take several forms: freethought, Freemasonry, socialism, republicanism, or more liberal religious groups. On the one hand, these groups represented a civil and political rights movement towards religious liberty or social justice. On the other hand, they represented a revolutionary cultural phenomenon that strove to break with the past and at the extreme political ends could express itself through an illiberal and intolerant ideology that sought to culturally eliminate Catholicism while attempting to avoid serious civil unrest (1789-1794, 1870, 1882, 1901-1905). The importance of absorption of Royer into the Anthropology Society, Turmel and Alfarcic's into the freethought groups, and Bourrier into liberal Protestantism represented the social nature of irreligion.

The success of freethought and socialist groups represented a triumph of humanist values. Freethought coincided with the values of freedom of inquiry and liberal individualism free of the Church. Absorption of the *évadés* into another group had two fundamental causes. First, it appealed to the liberal, autonomous believer such as Bourrier, who moved from the authoritarian structure of Catholicism to

liberal Protestantism that embraced the autonomy and individualism of the believer. The declining power of Catholicism in France was a result of its loss of monopolistic power to control and align the values of contemporary France. Instead, the social cohesion and cultural practices of Catholicism in France slowly eroded. Second, joining a group justified their radicalization into irreligion by providing the social capital for their irreligious belief. Irreligion provided a small number of people a calling to unite and change society; albeit, a calling that lasted only the short time it took for them to achieve many of their goals.

Slow Spiritual Drift

Third, some experienced *spiritual drift* because they were no longer anchored in a single tradition. Spiritual drift could lead back to Christianity, or it could result in absolute atheism (radicalization); however, lacking the reigns of authority to guide them, it symbolizes the middle ground of unbelief—the ambiguous zones where belief and unbelief overlap, where people think and believe free of necessity and enforced doctrine. Spiritual drift is perhaps the last and most prevalent phase of deconversion that leads to a slowly expanding secularization because it cuts the individual from the social cement that upholds organized belief systems.

Those who did not experience significant inversion experienced a drift into a condition that promoted secularity. Since they avoided tying themselves to a group or

a doctrine, the *évadés*' beliefs no longer needed to be defined or confessed. Having a mixed assortment of beliefs carried a low social cost, so long as they stayed within the acceptable parameters of educated and contemporary claims of knowledge. This undefined status of spirituality, the spiritual feeling of belonging to something greater than ourselves, is best defined as spiritual mysticism due to its ambiguous connections to the "greater unknown." Nonetheless, spiritual drift into undefined unbelief or mysticism is a significant step in the expansion of unbelief. Mysticism detached people from organized and institutionalized religions that had the social, cultural, and economic capital to expand and maintain itself. Without a central authority, a narrative of redemption and salvation (theodicy to Berger), or other psychically compelling reasons to adopt mysticism, mysticism generates only a feeble current of cultural diffusion.

The *Évadés*

Turmel and Alfaric - Inversion

Deconversion for Turmel, Houtin, and Prosper led them closer towards atheism and skepticism. The break with Catholicism removed the shields from the buffeting winds of their doubt. Their lives would follow a trajectory that became more and more radical.

Early on Joseph Turmel became an inverted, covert priest of atheism. He was content to die within the Church, defining it as his moral right after Christianity had

already taken away his life. His rancor against the Church took the form of his many books written under pseudonyms; however, he was uncovered and pursued by Abbé Saltet, who had correctly deduced that Turmel had clandestinely written heretical and blasphemous books under the pseudonym Herzog and Dupin. In fact, Turmel used more names than that, fourteen names in all. Only in 1930 did Saltet successfully shine a revealing light upon Turmel's extraordinary duplicity. Turmel's first response was to deny all accusations, and then seeing he had lost the game, to avow that he had been the actual author of sixty-one books and articles. Turmel hoped that the Holy See would buy his silence with his confession and a promise to stop working so that he could live out his life in peace. After his repeated offense and the profundity of his deception, the Holy Office refused to make such an offer. Instead, at the age of 70 years old, the Holy Office excommunicated him on the 6th of May, 1930 and his books were put on the Index. The Church cast Turmel out of the warm comfort he had always counted on. Nevertheless, his life changed little after he lost his parish. Having always lived alone, he lived as he had always lived. He remained in the town of his parish in Rennes on rue Waldeck-Rousseau and continued to frequent the library and continued to write his anticlerical *Histoires de Dogmes* in six volumes between the years 1931 and 1936. With his expulsion, he attracted the attention of the anticlericals and freethinkers while the priests of Rennes completely shunned him. In 1932, Victor Droinneau announced that the Library of the Circle of Light and Freethought Rennaise would have the books of Turmel printed. Next, André Lorulot visited Turmel during a series of anticlerical conferences in Ille-et-Vilaine. Lorulot

was at this point the secretary and delegate of propaganda for the National Federation of Freethinkers. Their meeting represented the status and respect accorded to Turmel by freethinkers. Thus, on the 2nd of July 1935, Turmel joined the society of La Lumière de Rennes. However, he did not participate in person; rather he sent letters of support to their events and conferences. In turn, the freethinkers became Turmel's patron and support, furnishing him material aid.

His expulsion in a way meant little—he had long ago become an atheist priest. Turmel lived a life of habit. His books were principally written for specialists, and he was not really understood outside of his profession—his audience had always been the members of the Church. As a historian of Catholic dogmas, his life was dedicated to the overturning and disintegration of what he had been put in charge of defending. His inversion occurred early in his life and he lived subsequently always as a committed priest of unbelief. In another day and age, he might have been put on trial and executed, which would have turned him into a hero in the annals of freethought. Instead, he died as he had lived, in solitude.⁴⁴⁵

Alfaric

Prosper Alfaric provides an example of someone who experienced spiritual drift that led to his inversion. Alfaric left the Church after a slow dissolution of his faith in Catholicism. He discreetly abandoned the clergy in 1909. To cause the least

⁴⁴⁵ Joseph Turmel, *Comment j'ai donné congé aux dogmes* (Herblay: Éditions Idée libre, 1935) ; H Baudru, "Une vie d'hircoerf: Joseph Turmel (1859-1943)," *Annales de Bretagne et des pays de l'Ouest*. 114, no. 1 (2007): 185–98.

disturbance possible to the Church, he was counseled to leave France and to obtain a university degree in history so he could once again teach. A specialist in Catholicism, between 1912 and 1918, he prepared a thesis on the intellectual evolution of Saint Augustine. Further, during his years at the school, he married. Among the left modernists, Alfarcic was the only one who mentions sexual relations, although many other *évadés* married (Jules Claraz for example). In 1919, he obtained a university position at the University of Strasbourg. However, he continued to study religion because his background made him especially proficient in Christian history. No longer attached to the authority and control of the Church, his studies wandered further and further. He could not hold his silence and he found his personal accomplishment and fulfillment in attacking and undermining Christianity through historical research. His work led him to examine the cults and the myths of various époques and countries, Christianity and Gnosticism, and the Jesus of Saint Paul.

The symbolic public act of Alfarcic's inversion occurred when he joined in 1930 a local freethinkers group, the Union Rationaliste. He said that he "had not left a great Church to close himself in a Chapel...my first care was to the truth, for which [he] had resigned his post in Albi."⁴⁴⁶ L'Union Rationalist organized a conference in 1932 where he presented his research with the advertised subject: "Jesus, did he exist?". No! said Alfarcic and he presented all the alleged reasons why the story of Jesus was a myth. Later, he published a small book titled *Le problème de Jésus et les*

⁴⁴⁶ Prosper Alfarcic, *De la foi à la raison: scènes vécues* (Paris: Publications de l'Union rationaliste, 1955), 283.

origines du christianisme based on this conference. Embarrassed and offended by the assertions, the Archbishop of Paris forbade Christians to read it. From the point of view of the Holy Office, the fact that a former professor of one the Grand Seminaries had made an argued and rational critique for not believing in Jesus was offensive. Further, Alfaric received an official letter from the Vatican that said his book would be added to the Index, and unless he retracted his claims, he would be excommunicated. Alfaric refused and was excommunicated in 1933. However, Alfaric observed that French culture had changed so much by 1933, that the results of excommunication were negligible. There was little palpable change in his standard of living: socially, he continued to be treated as he had before by the members of his community.⁴⁴⁷

Alfaric said that he continued to search for the truth; however, he looked for it only by revealing the errors of Christianity. He worked on Christianity in terms of studying it as cultural syncretism, which coincided with his conviction of Jesus as a myth. In 1946, he continued with his anti-Christian work: at a conference on the « social origins of Christianity » given at the Sorbonne for a meeting of the Union Rationalist group. When he retired, Alfaric returned to Paris, the city he loved the most. His desire was to continue to be active, which he pursued by forming The Circle of Ernest Renan, a “group of free minds” who did research in complete independence on the questions of the history of Christianity.⁴⁴⁸ The examination of

⁴⁴⁷ Alfaric, *De la foi à la raison*, 285-288.

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

the problems of Christianity became the expression of his spirituality. He died in 1955 as a freethinker, believing in science and progress.⁴⁴⁹

Turmel and Alfaric both displayed a complete inversion. Having lost their faith in Christianity, they both became freethinkers. Turmel, in fact, had long been a freethinker in isolation. According to one of his biographers Michelle Le Normand, Turmel became an immanentist and materialist.⁴⁵⁰ His method is evident in the history books that he wrote: the final word on historical questions always deferred to empirical evidence rather than Christian dogma. He said straightforwardly in the conclusion of his memoir that the evidence proved that what Catholics believed in one particular historical period was different than what they believed in another. Their doctrine was not universally the same over time and thus did not appear divinely inspired. History desacralized and demythologized the teachings of the Church and revealed the actual origin of change in the Church and in the inventions of the dogmas that were never taught by Jesus or his apostles. Belief had evolved and “God” was a scientific question. The historical perspective equally dominated the work of Alfaric. After his deconversion, he no longer saw Christianity and religion with sympathy or compassion. For example, when he read *The Life of Jesus* by Ernest Renan, known for its sympathetic portrait of Jesus, Alfaric said that the book resembled less a historical work than a “literary jewel, a shimmering pearl, but

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid., 270-293.

⁴⁵⁰ Joseph Turmel and Michel Le Normand, *Autobiographie* (Rennes (45 rue du Capitaine-Maignan, 35000): La Libre pensée rennaisse, 2003), 12-14.

false.”⁴⁵¹ While it undermined Christianity in a sympathetic and compassionate way, it was not historical. At the same time, he saw the other books of Renan on the Apostles or Saint Paul as “legendary romances.”⁴⁵² He wanted scholarship to be tightly tied only to the sources. His disbelief grew to such a degree that the Christian God became no more than a myth equivalent to Zeus or Mithras. Alfaric died an unbeliever and a skeptic dedicated to refuting Catholicism.

As products of spiritual drift, Turmel, Alfaric, and Houtin did not confess to be “atheists”, although perhaps Turmel and Houtin had crossed the line without confession. Instead, they preferred to live in the ambiguous space of uncertainty and the unknown. It would be wrong to say that they held the same beliefs. Each man had his conviction, the result of his research. Turmel believed in an infinite energy in the universe, a kind of immanent God. However, this God was the universe itself, without personality, intervention, or a reflective conscience.⁴⁵³ Where Hébert believed in the harmony of the universe, Turmel described a faith in a religion of humanity that worshiped beauty, truth, and justice—a humanist faith. Further, although Turmel claimed there was a greater harmony, it was a blind, indifferent and universal force. Humanity was all alone in the universe, without aid. Thus, Turmel’s biographer, Normand, claimed that Turmel was an atheist because of his affirmation of materialism and his silence on the existence of the soul and an afterlife. That Turmel

⁴⁵¹ Alfaric, *De la foi à la raison*, 288.

⁴⁵² Ibid.

⁴⁵³ Turmel and Le Normand, *Autobiographie*, 12-14.

lived nearly his whole life in the Church, makes his life a curiosity. How many other Turmels were there? Houtin believed there were many.

Houtin – inversion and spiritual drift

The latter half of Albert Houtin's life represented both inversion and spiritual drift. The trajectory of Albert Houtin's spirituality was a slow slide into deeper and deeper skepticism that encompassed twenty-five years. He lived in the margin of society since 1903 after his books were put on the Index on December 4th, 1903. A Catholic pariah and a real malcontent, he was no longer able to obtain a post within a single diocese and was forced to live with his parents. During the years from 1904 to 1909, he stayed active by writing articles for *Le Siècle*, a radical journal that covered religious affairs, and published four works of history. After a long spiritual development, his conscience prodded him to resign his soutane in 1912. His new liberty permitted him to write the book *l'Histoire du modernisme catholique* (1913). Houtin continued to publish books after his rupture in the same way he had during the years in the Church. Further, he found a modestly paid job at the Musée pédagogique et à la bibliothèque centrale de l'enseignement primaire, where he worked until the end of his life in 1926. Within secular society, he earned a supplemental income by working for la Société de l'histoire de la Révolution française with a significant hiatus due to the start of the war in 1914. Next, in 1920, he published a book that he wrote in 1913 on Père Hyacinthe Loyson and in 1925 he wrote a book on Marcel Hébert. Last, he wrote his own autobiography in 1925. This dissertation is in many ways an

ode to Houtin and his efforts to witness, expose, and catalog the spiritual crisis of early twentieth-century France. His premature death in 1926 put an end to his work.

The Church was never far away for Houtin: he continually rejected the calls of his sister and of his former confessor G. Letourneau, curé de Saint-Sulpice, to return to Catholicism. Instead, Houtin dedicated his life to writing about the institution he left, but rather than supporting it, he documented the significant public ruptures of famous Catholics as an open critique and a record for posterity.

Houtin walked deeper into unbelief at the end of his life. Spiritual drift deepened his separation from belief in God. Nonetheless, his educational background and his interest caused his post-Catholic life to continue to be centered around Catholicism. At his break with the Church in 1912, he conserved his belief in God and the possibility of the immortality of the soul (a theist). In the next ten years, however, his doubts significantly grew. On October 17, 1925, he suffered from pulmonary congestion that forced him to confront his death. Periodically, he did what he called an “inventory” of his beliefs, where he defined the current state of his thoughts and beliefs. His fourth and final “inventory” in his autobiography *Ma vie laïque* (1928) showed he had become more and more radical. He said that theism represented “pretend proofs, and lawyerly delaying tactics...” He declared that he did not have the feeling of belonging to any school of thought. God seemed to him an invention. Religion was “the dream, the troubled psyche, an illusion, the lie of the imposter...” Everything became suspect in his eyes. The confidence of men in their

faith was nothing more than arrogance because they confirmed it especially to maintain and keep their place in society and for their career. The skeptic and the irreligious were less at fault than the religious. He thanked the disinterested methods of science and history that had emancipated him from an insincere conviction. Humanity was all alone in the universe. He believed science alone could be disinterested—all the other roads towards knowledge were corrupted by human fallibility. Thus, the disconnected years after his rupture had slowly destroyed his former faith, and through a process of spiritual drift, he died a profound and lucid skeptic in 1926.

Loyson –spiritual drift

Charles Loyson is a good example of slow spiritual drift. Strong in his faith till the later part of his life, once he lost his anchor and social connection to Catholicism, his faith wandered. His conviction in traditional Christianity deteriorated because he had no social responsibility. Loyson left the Church in 1869 and then tried to reform Catholicism through the independent Gallican Church in the 1890s, which ultimately failed. In his later years, Loyson's influence ebbed, but he was remembered among the *évadés*. For example, Bourrier noted how little hope he had to start his own independent Catholic Church if the great orator Loyson had already failed in the attempt.

Cast aloft into the desert of non-institutional evangelism, Loyson spent his last years wandering the Middle East where he made failed proposals for projects such as a non-denominational girl's school in Jerusalem. Having won few victories, he turned further inward in his isolation as he aged—to the point that he ceased to be Christian and Catholic in the traditional sense. A symbol of this change was his inability to instill the Christian faith in his son, who had become a pantheist and had rejected all the forms of traditional religion. Perhaps most important, Loyson's middle way stood neglected and ignored. Theodore Stanton visited Loyson in 1893; Stanton said that Loyson's efforts were no more than a "coup dans l'eau," i.e., an effort that produces no results. Stanton asserted that the growth of Protestantism was sickly. Catholicism stood alone against unbelief while "indifference, infidelity, freethought, and atheism [were] on the increase."⁴⁵⁴ In this environment, the non-Catholic missionary represented a futile effort. France was strangely closed to a compromise solution. Stanton asserted that Protestants (and we can insert here non-orthodox Catholics) were "nearly lost to view in the vast army of Catholicism and Freethought."⁴⁵⁵

Charles Jean Marie Loyson died in 1912 without a Catholic Priest at his side for his confession. His acquired pessimism grew as a wound in his faith and left him entirely estranged from the Church. On his tomb, the last sentence read, "For twenty years, he preached Catholic reform and the union of the Churches (1873-1893); then

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid, 452.

⁴⁵⁵ Theodore Stanton, "The Religious Outlook in France," in Paul Carus, *The Monist* (Open Court, 1893).

for twenty years more, he moved beyond all the Churches in his spiritual development until he became a freethinking monotheist.”⁴⁵⁶ Remarkably, it did not say Christian. Had he drifted spiritually so far from his first convictions because of his exile?

Loyson represented a liberal wing of Catholic thought who had sought reform but encountered resistance and failure at every turn. He, like Bourrier, signified the values of the liberal conscious that wanted moral autonomy as part of their spiritual development. Not finding a solution, his individualistic and liberal beliefs led him to becoming a “freebeliever.” This ultimately led him into a vague, undefined spirituality and his son into unbelief.

We can see slow spiritual drift among the left modernists as well. Marcel Hébert had left his Catholic high school teaching post in 1903. Before his rupture, he had already changed his teaching and transmitted his vision of Catholicism at the school where he taught. It was a Catholicism that emphasized justice, charity and social assistance for workers. With his friend Vignot, he consecrated the Church of the Fénelon school to men where he gave sermons devoid of religious dogma that resembled evangelical socialism. In his classes, he abandoned the lessons of a Christianity founded on the revealed truth and instead promoted a Hegelian like evolutionary Christian faith. Before being interrupted, he was in the process of inventing his own form of Catholicism. However, after his publication of *Souvenirs*

⁴⁵⁶ Albert Houtin, *Le père Hyacinthe, prêtre solitaire: 1893-1912* (Paris: Emile Nourry, 1924), 229.

d'Assise in 1899, his place in the Church was in peril. Cardinal Richard confronted him, telling him to denounce his essay or lose his place as director in the school. Hébert resigned and lived with his sister in destitution until he left for a life of exile in Belgium between the years 1903-1907, where he was able to teach and write. Notably, until 1903, Hébert continued to go to mass at the school chapel. In a letter in September 1901, he wrote to Cardinal Richard to defend his position in the Church. He explained, despite his beliefs, he had always supported the students in their faith and never proposed that they should break with the Church. In effect, he had continued to be loyal to Catholicism in his way.⁴⁵⁷

In Belgium Hébert was spiritually unattached and he became a mystic, a socialist, and a journalist. He found work thanks to the socialists and wrote articles for the journal *Le Peuple*. More, he collaborated with Émile Vandervelde, head of the Belgium worker party and future president of the International. L'Université Nouvelle hired him, and he taught a course titled "Critique of Christian Dogmas: the problems that they pose in our day." However, he never found a large public audience. It was an active life, but not an exceptional one. In 1907, Hébert returned to Paris and lived with his sister until his death in 1916. In Paris, he lived his last years in tranquility. The event of the war in 1914 created a heavy burden upon his remaining spirituality and optimism. The war proved to him that humanity was not capable of attaining a level of reason sufficient to surmount the irrational. He cynically noted that although

⁴⁵⁷ Albert Houtin, *Un prêtre symboliste, Marcel Hébert (1851-1916) avec un portrait* (Saint-Amand-Montrond (Cher) Paris: Impr. Bussière F. Rieder et Cie, éditeurs, 7, place Saint-Sulpice, 1925).

Christianity had not stopped the war, it was still a necessary step for the improvement of humanity. Totally removed from Christianity, he had become more and more a freethinker and skeptic. Because he decided to leave Paris, however, his impact was considerably lessened. His influence diminished without an audience from the same cultural milieu. Hébert's relation to the Church was his cultural capital, such that Belgium ended up being intellectual exile. Hébert, like the other left modernists, was always a former priest and might have remained one had he not been cut loose into spiritual drift.

In his drift, Hébert left Catholicism and wandered into skepticism. He was not able to conceive of life after death, but he was not a materialist. He held onto a fervent hope that there was an afterlife, not wanting to confirm or deny the possibility. His rapport with Christianity continued to be sentimental and powerful. A statue of Christ remained suspended above his bed until his death, symbolically illustrating his spiritual wandering, nostalgia, and confusion. Nonetheless, Hébert rejected the idea of a creator God who was infinite, good, and all-powerful because of the widespread suffering in the world. Hell and eternal torture were also rejected. He had a mystical vision of the world that was neither atheistic nor Christian that affirmed only the existence of an eternal energy that belonged to a universal movement towards greater harmony. Being a skeptic, he maintained a critical eye towards science, mainly because consciousness remained unexplained. At his burial, he asked that a « free believer » give his eulogy to demonstrate that he adhered to no single confession. He became skeptical of all religions, but he continued to believe

that the immortality of the soul and God were beyond human knowledge. He died believing and full of hope.⁴⁵⁸

Loisy – spiritual drift

In a similar case, Alfred Loisy spiritually drifted back and forth between mysticism and radical unbelief after being expelled from the clergy. The decree of the encyclical *Pascendi* in 1907 made Loisy's ideas blasphemous and heretical. His excommunication followed shortly after on May 7, 1908, because he refused to recant his ideas. Like Joseph Turmel, he remained dedicated to his work and continued to live as a priest without a flock. At the house, he wore his civilian clothes, but when he left, he continued to wear his ecclesiastical garb. Being a man of habit, just as before, he worked every morning and read every night. Unlike the other left modernists, his rupture did not cause him to struggle with destitution. Between 1909 and 1932, he took a prestigious and sought-after teaching post at the College de France, where he was considered by public opinion to be the successor to Ernest Renan. Free from Catholic authority, he resuscitated his journal *Revue d'histoire et de littérature religieuse*. Henceforth, he lived a life of routine and work. A contemporary and critic among the left modernists, Sartiaux said in a severe tone that after 1907 « the story of his life did not have a single event. »⁴⁵⁹ His life rests in his books and articles. He

⁴⁵⁸ Houtin, *Un prêtre symboliste*, 206-220.

⁴⁵⁹ Albert Houtin, Emile Poulat, and Félix Sartiaux, *Alfred Loisy; sa vie, son œuvre*. (Paris: Éditions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1960), 119.

published fourteen books after his rupture, but because he was removed from the Church, his historic role receded.

Loisy's diminishing belief in Christianity is evident in his portrayal of Jesus in his scholarly work. According to Loisy in *L'Évangile et l'Église* (1904), Jesus was the seed that would become the tree. However, after Loisy's excommunication, Jesus ceased to be central. Without the institution of the Church to maintain and censor his publications, his thoughts radicalized. In 1907, Jesus was the "law of love," later and less magnificent, Jesus became the "match" that lit the world on fire with Christianity, inspired by "a profound sense of humanity." Jesus as the son of God and the redeemer of all humanity he no longer found supportable. Later still, Loisy lost his belief in the historic Jesus entirely. Rather than seeing Jesus as a man who converted the West, he considered Jesus a mythical person. Between the years 1911 and 1925, he entered a skeptical new stage. Loisy openly attacked the foundations of Christianity. Jesus was not the actual source of inspiration for Christianity; he had come to symbolize the syncretization and imitation of other mystery religions, like the cult of Osiris, of Attis or Mithra. These cults had in common the history of a god who was born, died, and resurrected for the salvation of humanity. Loisy asked if Saint Paul had not transformed Christianity into the image of these other cults.⁴⁶⁰ In fact, Loisy adopted a position similar to that of Turmel, who held Christianity to be a pious fraud (Turmel, in fact, bitterly accused him of plagiarism).

⁴⁶⁰ Albert Houtin, Emile Poulat, and Félix Sartiaux, *Alfred Loisy; sa vie, son œuvre*. (Paris: Éditions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1960), 218.

Like Hébert, spiritual drift permitted Loisy's belief to become ambiguous. It is evident that he ceased to be Catholic, although he continued to look the part by wearing the uniform of a priest. Loisy's belief remains a controversial subject for his biographers. The controversy around his faith in God was created from an authorized biography that Loisy had tasked Houtin, who accused Loisy of being an atheist, dishonest, and driven by ambition. According to Houtin, he hid his real desire to destroy the Church early on in his career to keep his role as spokesperson of the modernists. Houtin concluded this from his personal discussions with Loisy and from hints in Loisy's early letters. In contrast, Loisy's friend Henri Brémond, in *Un clerc qui n'a pas trahi*, defended the good Catholic intentions of Loisy before his excommunication. After the death of Loisy, another friend, Boyer de Saint Suzanne wrote *Alfred Loisy entre la foi et l'incroyance* (1968) that located Loisy's faith, not in unbelief, but between immanentism and mysticism.

Having lost his faith in a personal, interventionist God, Loisy continued in his commitment to reforming religion. Like August Comte, Loisy did not believe that a society could produce social harmony among all its members without religion. Loisy hoped that contemporary Catholicism would be replaced by a new religion so society could progress to a higher level of civilization. He put his faith in spiritual progress, in science, and in a moral order that would unite the different people of the world. These ideas were expressed in his book *Guerre et religion* (1915) and *La Religion* (1917). However, the war reduced his faith to agnosticism; he kept only his faith in mystery and the inexplicable nature of consciousness, the moral conscience, and

spiritual experience.⁴⁶¹ He believed more in the pragmatic function of scientific knowledge than metaphysics; however, the writings of Henri Bergson, especially *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion* (1932) appealed to his view of religion. After Bergson, his conception of religion became that of a vital force, of an élan capable of cultural creativity. Loisy believed that a spiritual and mystical force was the common point shared between the world's religions. This force was a power for assimilation, creativity, and transformation of human life. Thus, Loisy entered a third phase in his ever developing spiritual beliefs. Agnosticism was much less emphasized because of his belief in an enigmatic force. According to Boyer, Loisy rediscovered an attenuated God in an evolutionary spirituality. The « intuition » of Bergson became the « faith » of Loisy.⁴⁶²

Loisy maintained this mysticism until the end of his life. It was a conception that was opaque, mysterious, and without defined contours. In 1937, at the age of 80, he said « God is the last reason, the profundity of life, the unfathomable. »⁴⁶³ In a letter to Boyer dated February 27, 1918, Loisy expressed a conception of God that resembled his spiritual drifting and the vision he held at the end of his life:

I do not scrutinize the mystery of God. I do not deny God. Such a negation would hardly make any sense. The word « God » means so many things, that of these multiple meanings, it is not possible that nothing remains. I estimate that God, in the philosophic sense of the word, as the sole principle of the universe, is inconceivable. It appears to me that God, in the historical sense of the word, the Christian god, providential father, savior and remunerator,

⁴⁶¹ Émile Goichot, *Alfred Loisy et ses amis* (Paris: Cerf, 2002), 118-125.

⁴⁶² Raymond de Boyer de Sainte Suzanne, *Alfred Loisy entre la foi et l'incroyance / préface de Henri Gouhier*. (Paris: Éditions du Centurion, 1968), 120.

⁴⁶³ Boyer de Sainte Suzanne, *Alfred Loisy entre la foi et l'incroyance / préface de Henri Gouhier*. 145

disappeared with the concept of the world and of history of which it was the ultimate expression.⁴⁶⁴

Clemence Royer: absorption and inversion—science as a mode of life and a new morality

Clemence Royer's father's separation from her mother and his subsequent death released Royer from the social bonds that tied her to her former beliefs. Her anger at being ignorant of secular cultural and scientific ideas inspired her to become a new kind of missionary of freethought that she made explicit by moving to Switzerland and leaving France and her family behind. Cut off from all influences, her break opened her up to the radical ideas from the books she had read at the Lausanne public library in 1856. Royer came to know intimately l'Academie de Lausanne, a place that provided teaching opportunities to French freethinkers and republicans. Most importantly, she met the former deputy of the Second Republic, Pascal Duprat, who taught political science at the Academie de Lausanne and edited two journals. Duprat, in an unhappy marriage, would become the love of Royer's life, father of her son, and would accompany her until his death in 1885. Duprat had been a Saint-Simonian and his marriage to his first wife had been a free union, something beyond the pale for Royer. She never advocated free love (she believed in strict monogamy outside of marriage).⁴⁶⁵

⁴⁶⁴ Loisy, letter February 28, 1918 in Boyer de Sainte Suzanne, *Alfred Loisy entre la foi et l'incroyance / préface de Henri Gouhier*, 187.

⁴⁶⁵ 72-73.

With her new connections through Duprat, one of Royer's first publications was titled an *Introduction to the Philosophy of Women*, that described the startling and awakening encounter with science as a woman. Royer wanted to introduce and teach this formerly exclusive domain of men to other women. Living with Duprat, she taught women-only classes. Dedicated to a materialist explanation of life and matter, her translation of Darwin's *Origin of Species* for French readers remained a high water mark of her success and an honor. Her living conditions were mostly determined by Duprat who carried more of the financial burden. They moved to Italy in 1864 and spent time in Turin and then Florence before eventually going back to Paris. Royer was absorbed in the life of radical republicans through Duprat and also absorbed in the project of the emancipation of women—a cause that held religious-like importance for her.

Duprat died in 1865; her personal income being small, she fell into mild poverty and moved into a small apartment in the 14th arrondissement in Paris next to Montsouris Park. She lived a quiet life of publishing and writing. By 1873, Royer became a regular contributing member of the Société d'Anthropology, contributing to discussions with the other anthropologists and writing papers for the society. She debated issues on Aryan origins, atavism in evolution, curious genetic variation of humans such as the “man dog”, the declining population growth rate in France, and the unequal place of women. Her ideas about women culminated in a book that would never be published that mixed her Darwinian and progressive ideas.

Her entry into what she later called “A Little Scientific Church” symbolized her absorption into irreligion. Though this did not represent a deeper conversion, it represents the union of an organization with values that were equivalent to what the historian Jennifer Hecht called evangelical atheism.⁴⁶⁶ They turned atheism into the functional replacement for religion—that is, it possessed holy ritual objects, events, and sacred ideas. Part of their project was to translate the sacred into the profane. The sacred word of truth was not the Bible but the proofs of science; freethinking anthropologists hoped to change the world through the publication of their ideas. As a new scientific discipline of the human being, anthropology claimed to provide the material proofs of human nature. This was done by taking bone lengths, collecting flint shards from archeological digs, measuring the sizes of skulls, weighing brain matter and noting cultural practices such as breastfeeding in Tunisia. In one of the little-remembered but fascinating moments of science, anthropologists tried to confirm the inferiority of women by the different size and weight of their brains. In fact, the Société d’Anthropologie awarded Gustave Le Bon the Godard Prize for his contribution on “demonstrating” the inferiority of women’s brains. Le Bon concluded that women were naturally inferior because the size difference between men and women’s brains were more exaggerated among “civilized” people and that this provided the explanation and justification of women’s limited social and cultural role.

⁴⁶⁶ Joy Harvey, *“Almost a Man of Genius”: Clémence Royer, Feminism, and Nineteenth-Century Science* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

Royer had entered the laboratory and was convinced by the evidence. She concluded that she must have an abnormally large brain for a woman.⁴⁶⁷

Royer's commitment to science inspired her to rethink morality and the common good. She thought through selective breeding that women had become freer from their sexual impulses than men. Women were only intent on marrying because it was their only available vocation. Society needed to educate women but also regulate the sexes. She thought in racial terms as well and feared that Asians would out-breed the West. Royer advocated matriarchy as a better society and hoped that a female science would emerge to correct masculine errors. However, the Société d'Anthropologie would not publish her ideas due to their controversial nature and organizational politics: the Society hoped to create a state-sponsored School of Anthropology and could not appear to be creating a school of freethought.

Royer completed her inversion of Catholicism by producing defacto irreligious literature. Her interests lay in scientific and philosophical analysis. She had already displayed her inversion with the first edition she had translated of Darwin's *Origin of Species*. In 1880, seeking to earn some money, she did a second edition after getting Darwin's permission. In her next project, she sought to justify secular values in her work "Le Bien et la loi morale" where she argued that the foundation of all moral law lay in biological utility and the progress towards happiness. She theorized that inorganic matter also abided by universal law. Royer entered into

⁴⁶⁷ Jennifer Michael HECHT, *The End of the Soul: Scientific Modernity, Atheism, and Anthropology in France*. (Columbia University Press., 2006), 41, 91-134.

theories about how matter and physics worked to explain *everything* from the foundations up, starting with the repulsion and attraction of matter. She dabbled in theoretical explanations that sought to close Cartesian dualism and utilitarian ethics. Next, she claimed mathematics to be the basis for absolute truth, because it had its own demonstration, however, she did not believe that one science could prove the absolute truth of another. In 1882 she tackled social evolution by considering animal and human psychology. In the 1880s she continued to work on science, giving long monographs to the Institute of France and also the Academie des Sciences. In her later years, she became broadly recognized; the culmination was her inclusion in Marguerite Durand's daily feminist paper, *La Fronde* that targeted middle-class women in 1897. Durand asked Royer to write a regular column on science. *La Fronde* provided an important voice for women over the next twenty years, and this community provided further shelter for Royer's unbelief. One of Royer's first articles was in support of Alfred Dreyfus⁴⁶⁸.

If her last state of belief is measured by her last years, then she became more and more absorbed by the alternative theory of materialism. She brought Darwinian evolution to the atom, asserting that the atom was in a struggle for survival. This conflict produced the force pushing the world as atomic forces sought to occupy the most space possible. She wrote about gravitation, atomic psychic activity—attempting to close what mystery remained with the scientific hypothesis of consciousness and the energy of life. She theorized that matter was pushing and

⁴⁶⁸ Harvey, *Almost a Man of Genius*, 140-183.

pulling in a cyclical cosmology where suns and galaxies were part of condensing and exploding gasses. There was even a bold section on Newton where she claimed to have corrected him. This work culminated in her publishing a cosmology in 1900, *La Constitution du monde*, through a materialist and scientific publisher Schleicher Frères. Now a celebrity, she received the Legion of Honor reward and was celebrated by the woman of La Fronde. She lived the rest of her life on a small stipend provided by the French government before dying in 1902. At her funeral, members of the scientific, feminist, and Masonic communities spoke in her honor.⁴⁶⁹ Interestingly, she did not dedicate her body or brain to the Société d'Anthropologie as members were expected to do (One wonders if it were not because of its sexist theories.).

Her life represents the inversion, absorption, and drift that followed deconversion among the *évadés*. She experienced drift after the death of her father cut her free from his influence. After her slow deconversion, she quickly fell into inversion: she devoted her life to promoting a secular theory of the cosmos to which Catholicism acted as the foil. Her inversion was less marked than that of the *évadés* since she focused on the propagation of science and not the direct refutation of Catholicism. However, she had written provocatively in the introduction to her translation of Darwin's *Origin of Species* that evolution disproved Catholicism. Finally, feminism and the Société d'Anthropologie absorbed her energy and provided her a new creed.

⁴⁶⁹ Harvey, *Almost a Man of Genius*, 166-183

Lorulot – absorption into anarchy, socialism, and freethought

Andre Lorulot illustrates another way absorption functioned after deconversion. A prominent freethinker, anticlerical, and radical, Lorulot's deconversion was defined by absorption through political and social alternatives. As a young man, a one-legged revolutionary, Albert Joseph, known as a "Libertad" greatly influenced Lorulot. Lorulot wrote in Joseph's journal *L'anarchie* starting in 1905. His commitment to anarchy inspired Lorulot to build a commune with his girlfriend and other anarchists at St Germain en Laye. During this time Lorulot wrote a controversial antinationalist pamphlet *L'idole patrie et ses consequence* that prompted government officials to indict him for inciting soldiers to disobedience. He was arrested and served a fifteen-month jail sentence. By the time he was released from prison, the commune had fallen apart and Libertad had died, so Lorulot took over *L'anarchie* and began another journal, *L'idee libre*, a review.

As a pacifist and propagandist, Lorulot fell into trouble with the law again during World War One. He did another prison sentence along with Leon Prouvost for the defamation of the military and the spreading of false information. With the arrival of the Russian Revolution, Lorulot identified with communism more than anarchism. In fact, between the year 1905 and 1908 Lorulot experienced a disillusionment with anarchism that he described as similar to his disillusionment with Catholicism for offering false promises and absolutes. This came partly from his time with the failed commune that caused him to confront the dreams and claims of anarchism and

communism, “these meditations fortified my individualist philosophy, without healing me entirely of the dream of ‘collective enterprise.’”⁴⁷⁰ He would leave anarchism completely in 1911 because he felt it had become increasingly violent and illegal. His parting words with anarchism were a critique of human character, “The most significant cause of disunion is pride, from the moral point of view, and selfishness from the material point of view.”⁴⁷¹

Similarly, Lorulot’s late reflections on socialism display disillusionment and disappointment that pushed him into a cautious skepticism. His experience with the ideologies of anarchism and socialism affirmed his commitment to freethought: “The first principle that it is important to inspire is a prudent wisdom: the absolute truth does not exist; there exist only the contingent and relative truths that have the complexity of universal phenomena...The remedy of pride and dogmatism is the spirit of doubt. To doubt all. And especially oneself.”⁴⁷² His journal, *L’idée Libre* was not supposed to be an organ of a party or for a single perspective such as anarchism or socialism. He idealistically characterized it as independent and free: “A true educational review must be independent of all dogma and all system.”⁴⁷³ Instead, it was dedicated to freethought, to the emancipation of the mind. “The changing of regimes and political revolutions will serve nothing if men remain prisoners of their

⁴⁷⁰ André Lorulot, *Histoire de ma vie et de mes idées* (Herblay: Editions de “L’idée Libre,” 1939), 103, 129.

⁴⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷² *Ibid.*, 125-129.

⁴⁷³ *Ibid.*

prejudices, of their blindness, and of their errors,” Lorulot wrote with conviction.⁴⁷⁴ However, he had clear convictions: he wanted to teach people to see Universal Reason and to cultivate a higher morality among them. He firmly believed that to make a better society, government must make men and women better.⁴⁷⁵ Improving society required philosophical and scientific education of the masses. He preached what sounded similar to the moralism of religious progressives by supporting sobriety and anti-smoking, but also good hygiene, physical health, and cleanliness. While he promoted unbelief, he defended toleration and the difference of opinion. In the 1930s, Lorulot tended to distance himself from anarchists and referred to himself as an independent rationalist.

With the creation of *L'idée Libre*, Lorulot became a passionate and dedicated propagator of radicalism and anticlericalism. He became a freethought champion/priest. His mission and occupation was tied as much to his political belief as much to his unbelief. He wrote and published thousands of articles and gave innumerable public speeches. One of the chapters of his autobiography is titled “Three thousand contradictory conferences.” He believed himself born to be a militant, destined to fight and struggle his whole life. In 1921, he was named directeur du Comité et délégué à la propagande de la Fédération nationale de la Libre pensée where he became one of the most demanded names for speeches, debates, and conferences. The sense of fairness that he extols in his autobiography is less

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁵ Lorulot, *Histoire de ma vie et de mes idées*, 159.

represented in his creation of the journal *La Calotte*, a monthly satirical journal where he often attacked his opponents. He considered his journal dedicated to combat, “par excellence.” The occupation in 1939 caused him to turn his journal *La Calotte* into a journal of resistance, titled *La Vague*.

After World War II, he became the General Secretary and then President of the Federation de la libre penseurs de Franc et de la communauté and simultaneously the President of L’Union mondiale des Libres Penseurs, where he rededicated his time to freethought and anticlericalism. Humanity remained for him conflicted with problematic ideologies: “We must reconcile individualism with communism, liberty with solidarity. We must realize the maximum of justice and equality in democracy without falling into statism. Authority is indispensable, but it must never fall into tyranny...”⁴⁷⁶ With the cultivation and improvement of human character, society could be delivered from the trifecta of “Money, Church, and State.”⁴⁷⁷ He abruptly died in 1963 and his funeral was accompanied by a large crowd representing the French Left who spoke in his honor. Speaking at his funeral were several prominent radicals: Margarite Perlau from the société de la Chevalier de la Barre; Lemoine for the Freemasons, Dr. Drumont for the Grand Orient de France, Maurice Joyeux for the Fédération anarchists, and by Jean Cotereau for freethought.⁴⁷⁸

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid., 208.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁸ André Lorulot, *Pourquoi je suis athée!* (Saint-Georges d’Oléron: Les Éd. libertaires, 2004), 10-11.

Freethought and anticlericalism provided a social and moral framework for Lorulot. The loss of religion was simply replaced with a substitutive “ultimate concern” based around the need to spread the message of progress offered by anarchism and socialism that completely absorbed Lorulot. Durkheim claimed that which is social is moral and that religion is fundamentally (and reductively) social. Once religion was replaced by alternative moral and ethical social creeds, spirituality became an irrelevant point for Lorulot. *He disbelieved with the same amount of conviction that he believed in the alternative moral values of his causes, such that his conviction in unbelief was as strong as his conviction in secular values.* So long as the moral systems were at odds, Christianity was an opposing moral belief system, and thus nearly impossible for him once he was committed, to his universal humanism. His values ran against those of the Church, and so he could never believe. In defending his moral viewpoint, his leftist anticlerical cause had filled him with “chimeric hope that boiled between the walls.”⁴⁷⁹ Secular zealotry and purpose undergirded his militantism.

In Peter Berger’s theory of religion, religion is instrumental in locating and legitimating social institutions in the sacred and cosmic frame of reference. Religion must create a plausible theodicy that explains the lived through experience and suffering of the individual within a larger explanatory framework. Theodicy in this sense means to have a basic system that makes sense of right and wrong, good and

⁴⁷⁹ Peter Ludwig Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The social construction of reality: a treatise in the sociology of knowledge* (New York: Anchor Book, 1996), 151.

bad, and a justification of why the moral wrongs or goods of a society function the way they do. It helps explain reality and the place of the subject within. A plausible theodicy—that need not be complex—allows the individual to integrate “anomic experiences of his biography into the socially established nomos and its subjective correlate in his own consciousness.”⁴⁸⁰ This nomos provides the social legitimation of knowledge and therefore provides the pillars of belief. Berger referred to this as the Sacred Canopy that provided the shelter from the nihilistic and painful condition of an unresponsive and impenetrable universe. Freethought and socialist groups provided a new nomos, a new answer to why people suffered. Freethinkers claimed religion obfuscated and retarded the growth of society. If only people could free themselves from wrongheaded ideas, then they could more quickly construct the road to the ideal society. Liberalism also provided a solution—once people could be protected from the tyranny of privilege, human freedom would permit social progress through democratic change and the continual growth of a moral, human personhood. Freethinkers, socialists, republicans, anarchists, liberals, etc. came to mean more than just the union of people around shared values: they came to represent the justification of their beliefs about nature and reality. In the nineteenth and twentieth century, society no longer rested under a shared sacred canopy--it had been torn asunder and became a plethora of small competing umbrellas.

⁴⁸⁰ Berger and Luckmann, *The social construction of reality*, 58.

Religious conviction was undergirded by the need for sociability and shared moral values. Humanistic freethought and scientific associations absorbed and provided enough social cohesion to meet the existential needs of French men and women who left Catholicism. A loose social conformity to a new system and network of beliefs provided justification and legitimation to an alternative form of knowledge that was protected by liberal values and attracted sufficient numbers in the nineteenth century to establish an alternative social fabric.

Conclusion

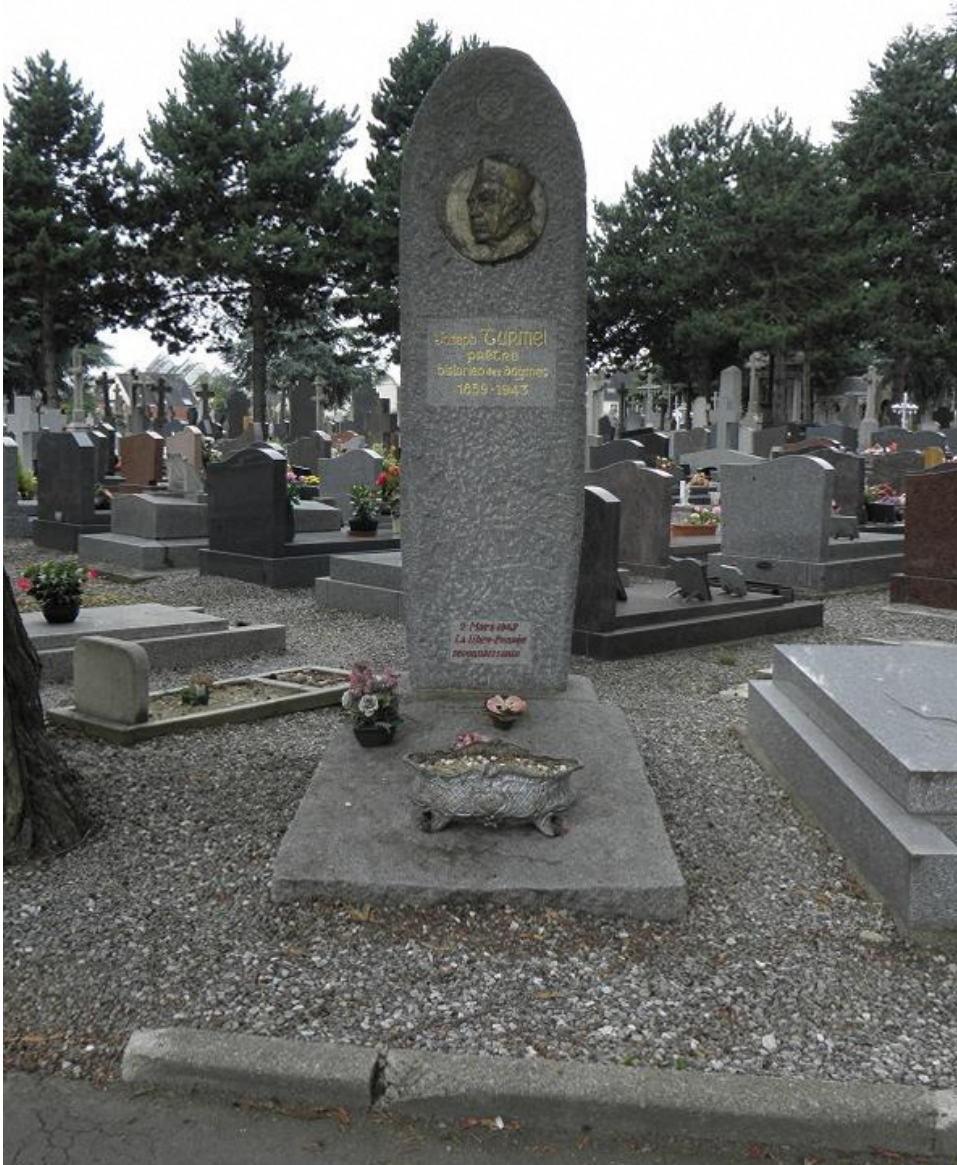
After deconversion from Catholicism, the voyage into unbelief of the *évadés* demonstrates three notable recurring patterns: inversion, spiritual drift, and absorption. Deconversion meant for many former Catholics an inversion of their identity. It turned them against what had once been a defining characteristic of their lives that guided and shaped their every decision. Once free of Catholicism, those who experienced inversion would be marked by their deconversion, a life-defining event, that could be abrupt and fiery as it was for Royer or slow and gradual as it was for Alfaric. They could not separate or move on from Catholicism and would be defined by it for the rest of their lives as being “not Catholic” (and for some, “not religious/Christian”). They would be defined by what they were not. Deconversion for the *évadés* such as Loisy, Hebert, and Loyson cast them into a spiritual drift and exile that slowly but characteristically dissolved all of their former convictions through the cracks and fissures of doubt and inquiry. Spiritual drift allowed for their

intellectual development outside of Catholicism. Without social reinforcement, belief easily wandered. Spiritual drift also weakened the structure that upheld religious belief, for without authority, ritual, and tradition, religious belief was left greatly enfeebled before the secularizing force of science and skepticism. Finally, absorption into freethought or scientific groups provided a new set of values that gave the *évadés* purpose and social legitimation. Absorption need not lead to inversion; it could provide an alternative nomos and a moral/social framework that simply ignored and rejected Catholicism. However, freethought groups allowed the deconverted to combine inversion and absorption, giving meaning and significance to their rupture with Catholicism.



Resting place of Marcel Hébert in Père-Lachaise

⁴⁸¹ Wikimedia Commons contributors, "File:Père-Lachaise - Division 87 - Marcel Hébert 01.jpg," *Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository*, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:P%C3%A8re-Lachaise - Division 87 - Marcel H%C3%A9bert 01.jpg&oldid=300806497> (accessed August 3, 2018).



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Headstone of Joseph Turmel

⁴⁸² Wikimedia Commons contributors, "File:Rennes (35) Cimetière du Nord Tombe J. Turmel.jpg," *Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository*, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Rennes_\(35\)_Cimeti%C3%A8re_du_Nord_Tombe_J._Turmel.jpg&oldid=156403962](https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Rennes_(35)_Cimeti%C3%A8re_du_Nord_Tombe_J._Turmel.jpg&oldid=156403962) (accessed August 3, 2018).

Conclusion

It is not simply that beliefs are true or false, they also have social capital in terms that people's convictions are impacted by social and psychological costs and benefits. How useful and how ingrained are beliefs in the traditions and practices of the society? Beliefs are not held in a vacuum. Ideas and beliefs require support to survive. If no social utility or recognition is given to them, they grow feeble, and people will refrain from adopting them. Beliefs are also held by individuals who engage in social interactions. People internalize ideas and values through socialization and by interacting with their social surroundings. Beliefs and values are accepted based on their persuasiveness, their correspondence with social acceptance, and partly by their usefulness. Socially unacceptable ideas cause people to suffer shame and ostracism and thus are suppressed or hidden; this was why Joseph Turmel hid his unbelief while staying in the priesthood until an old man in his late seventies, all the while writing clandestine tracts undermining the mission of the Church. In the nineteenth century, unbelief was no longer the source of social stigma it had once been. It is a fact that in the second half of the nineteenth-century French men and women began to openly disaffiliate with the Church and support anticlericalism, which culminated in the separation of the church and state in 1905 and the corresponding laicization campaigns.

Berger and Luckmann in their theory about the social construction of reality suggest that our belief systems are objectified and become institutionalized, legitimated, and historicized. To maintain their existence, cultural institutions are bound up in a process reification by its practitioners to defend the cultural institutions plausibility. The identity of each person is formed as they are socialized into their social environment. In our interactions, the agents of the social institutions within the nomos attempt to control behavior with predefined patterns. Each person is simultaneously constructing an “objective” reality that evaluates and examines the institution that limits his or her behavior. A truly effective social institution requires little coercion, and most people will follow the rules and do what is taught and expected of them through the process of socialization that was learned as a child and through work or schooling. Language is the medium to teach the logic required for legitimation of the social institution. This logic is expressed through language to render the logic of the social institution plausible. Often this process is taken for granted and people accept the logic from the socially available stock of knowledge. However, logic is not inherent to the social institutions and internalizing the social institution into each person requires interaction. People had accepted Christianity until it ran into the problem of objectifying its social institutions due to the changing intellectual, political, and social trends of the modern period. Christianity could no longer objectify itself through the use of language to demonstrate the plausibility of its logic, so people felt free to redefine their social identities around a different way of being in the world. But this was not simply a logic of science and rationality and

seeing right and wrong answers. Rather the new logic was made plausible by supporting a belief that matched the new social and political conditions of modern society.

Concretely, two factors challenged the legitimacy of Christianity: the liberal political revolution that brought a change of values that promoted individualism, autonomy, equality, and the freedom of conscience; the second factor was the changing methods of knowledge production that incorporated the trends of rationalism and empirical science that developed into a theory of materialism. Starting with the latter, science and rationalism played key roles in undermining the Church as a social institution. New methods of knowledge production that had begun with the Scientific Revolution in the fifteenth century had triumphed with Isaac Newton in the seventeenth century. Observation and mathematical demonstration combined with the rationalism of Descartes, which held reason as the sole arbiter of truth. Together this method of knowledge production created a mechanistic worldview that had little need of Christianity. While Charles Taylor may argue that science did not disprove God, many freethinkers and atheists believed that it had. Clemence Royer stated very explicitly in the introduction of her translation of Darwin's *Origin of Species* that Christianity had been refuted. Under the lens of history, anthropology, geology, and biology the Biblical story of Christianity looked incompatible with discoveries in modern science. Further, religion in a rational age appeared more and more implausible. For freethinkers such as Lefèvre, the Biblical stories smacked of superstition and legend that could only have been produced in the

more credulous age of antiquity. Among the *évadés* and left Modernists such as Houtin, Alfarié, and Turmel, Christianity practiced an obsolete form of legitimation through methods of knowledge production mastered and articulated in the Late Middle Ages.

Lefèvre and Clemence Royer are just two examples of how scientific materialism was used to refute and reject Catholicism, yet it was not a quick process. The process of deconversion involved years of doubting and searching. Lefèvre's testimony shows how the pillars of his beliefs were slowly undermined until his faith remained unsupported; then, he slowly and surely ceased to be a believer and became a freethinker. Lefèvre listed one by one how he slowly deconstructed the pillars of that faith: he was not persuaded by the arguments of God's existence, he could see no proof for the soul, he was convinced miracles were impossible, and the Bible was far from a perfect and miraculous book. Then finally, he says that his faith was harmed by the fact that the Church acted without integrity because it hid its problems. Lefèvre was a rationalist and empiricist who needed spiritual claims to be verified, and science provided a more persuasive model with limitations and rules of self-correction.

However, the testimonies of those who abandoned their faith show that behind the rational justification to truth and science, there was an important social component to their deconversions. Liberalism competed and overlapped with Christianity creating a new set of navigating principles that would sometimes be

combined with nationalism, the middle-class work ethic of material progress, socialism, etc. These values were supported through social movements and revolutions. When the Church took the conservative side of the revolutions in 1792, 1848, and 1870 it encouraged French republicans, radicals, and freethinkers to stop practicing Catholicism. There needed to be a viable middle ground for people whose values did not accept monarchy, hierarchy, and deference to tradition. As discussed in Chapter 2, Bourrier's progressive protestant liberal Church could have been prevented if the Catholic authorities had permitted more egalitarian, more inclusive, and less doctrinal forms of worship. Further, Loyson showed how much he wanted to stay within the Catholic fold, if only he could have found a venue and audience for his brand of Catholicism. But outside of official recognition by the Catholic authorities, Loyson had no legitimacy. For Catholics to follow Loyson out of Catholicism meant spiritual revolution, a social cost that French Catholics were not willing to pay or support. Alfred Loisy was another example of someone who would have stayed Catholic, in all likelihood, if had he been permitted to reconcile the Bible and Catholic doctrines with the findings and conclusions of the social sciences. Instead, he was pushed out, and he became one of the Church's staunchest critics.

Deconverting from Catholicism required a social and moral shift that preceded or coincided with their changed intellectual and spiritual beliefs. Something had to pry away the years of socialization. Leaving Catholicism for the left modernists held a high social cost. It is argued in Chapter 3 and 4 especially, that those who experienced a deconversion had a moral shift first. What is social is moral. It is

people's belief in the moral values that guarantee social cohesion around socially constructed institutions and their various practices. Questioning the moral or social structure inherently challenges the intellectual structure that it supports. Indeed, for Lorulot the freethinker, he was invested in Catholicism, anarchism, or socialism only so far as his moral needs were satisfied; when they were not, he abandoned one ideology after another until he ended up as a freethinking rationalist. *Lorulot disbelieved in so far as he believed in the moral values of his alternative causes, such that his conviction in unbelief was as strong as his conviction in secular values.* To restate, Lorulot embraced secular humanism and its set of values, which did not overlap with Christianity and its values as he conceived it. So long as he felt that his convictions conflicted with Christianity, he could never believe in it. There was no room for God and his ideology had no need of God either. If he lost his conviction in secular humanism, then perhaps there might be some space for a newfound belief in God.

The social and moral crises that delegitimized Christianity took various forms. For the left modernists, who provide a much more thorough testimony, their early upbringing by their mothers and religious authorities had limited and constricted their horizons such that breaking from their tutelage meant reaching intellectual and spiritual maturity. They needed the space to express the issues and problems they had uncovered in their historical investigations which required open debate and discussion, not obedience and conformity. Loisy is a particularly fascinating case study whose letters and testimony display that his spiritual loyalty to Catholicism

coincided with his recognition and success within the Church. When the power structure refused to permit his radical ideas, his faith evaporated. After being excommunicated, he went into the stages of inversion and spiritual drift that stripped him of nearly all his remaining former beliefs. For the left modernists who had dedicated themselves to the priesthood, the cost was high to break with their Catholic beliefs. Beliefs hold social capital and can have clear costs and benefits. The denunciation and censorship of their works and their voices were too much. This caused an undue burden in their attempts to honestly carry out their occupation as historians and engage in free inquiry. They chose to keep their independence and autonomy to protect their moral integrity and sincerity.

All the groundwork for unbelief had been laid in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by rationalism and mechanistic science. The French Enlightenment philosophes had fully articulated a theory of atheism that provided an alternative creed; however, lacking a political and moral structure to guide people, unbelief was not necessary or helpful until the rise of liberalism and the ideologies of the nineteenth century. Unbelief had no significant social capital until the French Revolution. Catholicism is rooted in tradition and habit that had constructed social institutions that acted as a compass to navigate the complex moral geography of human life. Leaving these social institutions behind was difficult and occurred mostly when people were confronted with social or moral crisis. The rise of unbelief was not a determined cultural trend; had the Church reformed and adopted a conciliatory approach to republicanism, better supported the lower classes in their struggles for

social justice, and allowed a middle ground for reformers, the spiritual crisis of nineteenth-century France might have been greatly diminished. Because it did not, it led its former supporters into a process of open and dedicated rebellion (inversion), into pursuing alternative creeds (absorption), or into spiritually drifting without ritual or tradition to hold them in place that ultimately led them into unbelief and feelings of indifference.

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