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# Faith and Terror: Religion in the French Revolution

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UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO

# Faith and Terror

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## Religion in the French Revolution

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## **Abstract:**

This thesis explores expressions of Catholic belief and practice during the Radical Phase of the French Revolution. Religion was one of the most contentious issues of the Revolution and the government's treatment of it was one of the major causes for popular discontent and even counterrevolution. As the Revolution turned more radical it became more dangerous to follow traditional Catholicism, yet dechristianization did not end its practice. The goal of this study is to understand the ways in which French men and women were able to maintain their faith despite the government's increasingly hostile approach to dealing with religion. It utilizes three main primary sources from individuals of varying social class and circumstance to illuminate the struggles of Catholics throughout France during this time of upheaval. Overall this study will show that through small acts religious practice was able to withstand state-sanctioned suppression.

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## **Introduction**

From its beginnings in 1789, one of the major issues of the French Revolution was that of religion. It was an issue which appeared in nearly all *cahiers de doléances*, the documents of grievances drawn up by the members of the Estates General. When the National Assembly was formed the issue of the Church was almost immediately approached. In 1789 the body decreed that Church land would become property of the state to use at it saw fit. Later that year the Assembly prohibited religious vows, offering stipends to those who decided to leave their religious houses to rejoin French society. This was paired with a push for former religious men and women to marry each other in order to fulfill what was seen as their natural destiny.

In 1790 the National Assembly restructured the French Church into a more egalitarian system based on the election of priests and bishops as well as turning the salaries of the clergy from a private, Roman issue to the responsibility of the government. This act was similar to others in Europe around this time, however the act became controversial the following year when an oath of allegiance to the National Assembly became required for all clerics. The controversy over the act led to a schism between the Constitutional clergy who took the oath and the refractory clergy which abstained. These non-juring priests would later become subject to decrees subjecting them to deportation and the victims of incredible violence in the September Massacres and the later Terror. Under the National Convention attempts to restructure the Church would turn to aggression against Catholicism. Religious practice was outlawed and replaced with the Cult of the Supreme Being, a deist state religion. The state eventually turned against its own Constitutional Church and while measures against religious practice would lessen

under the later Directory, the Catholic Church in France would not be reestablished until the Concordat of Napoleon in 1801.

In the context of the rapid shift from restructuring Catholicism to driving its practice out of France, the question of reality versus the laws of the national government in Paris becomes extremely important. While the various assemblies were slowly dechristianizing France, what was really going on for the country's people? That is a question this thesis seeks to ask. I will explore whether or not Catholic practice was in some sense able to continue despite the dechristianization attempt made by the Revolutionary governments.

This thesis does not seek to determine whether or not the dechristianization movement which existed in France during the Radical Phase of the revolution, 1792-1794, was successful. A definitive answer to that question would take years buried in archives and may never be able to be resolved as each town and region had its own political and socioeconomic context which resulted in the movement's ability to take hold. Instead this paper will show that some religious practice did continue and explore the ways in which these beliefs and practices were able to persist during this Radical Phase. Through analysis of three eye witness accounts of the Revolution, I hope to illustrate that the depth of religious belief ran deeper in France than those in power might have wished.

To begin with, it is necessary to consider how the history of power and society in France was intricately linked with the history of Catholicism. In the year 800 Charlemagne became the first French king to be coronated in a ceremony called a *sacre*, a name which itself suggests a deep connection between religion and political power. During these ceremonies, which were usually held in the cathedral of Reims, the king swore a coronation oath that began with an

ecclesiastical pledge to defend the Church.<sup>1</sup> For centuries after French kings were known in Rome as *Rex christianissimus*, "most Christian king."<sup>2</sup> A similar indication of the important relationship between France and the institutional Church was the choice of the Schism Papacy to establish court in the southern city of Avignon. This backing of the Church served as a way to legitimize power both within France and within Christendom.

The potency of French Catholicism in the Late Medieval and Early Modern periods can be seen in the French Wars of Religion, which enveloped the country between the massacre at Vassy in 1562 and the Peace of Alais in 1629.<sup>3</sup> Like much of Western Europe after the Reformation, Christianity in France was no longer a homogenous ideal. In the early years of the sixteenth century, a reform movement developed which sought to renew Catholicism and revitalize a "deplorable" French clergy.<sup>4</sup> Many of the reformers' ideas, however, echoed those of Lutheranism, which came to be a source of tension between scholars at the Sorbonne. Eventually this issue led to condemnation by the Parlement of Paris and a number of scholars, both Catholic and Protestant fled the country.<sup>5</sup>

As the century continued, a number of nobles and commoners were drawn to the burgeoning religion of Calvinism. Some within the court, notably the Guise family, saw the rise of Protestantism as a threat which needed to be dealt with. The somewhat more moderate approach of the regent Catherine de Medici, who at the outset wished to end the violent conflicts which had arisen, only exacerbated the anger of the Guises.<sup>6</sup> By 1562 armies had been mobilized on both sides of the ever more violent and politicized conflict.<sup>7</sup> Bloodshed continued over the

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<sup>1</sup> Mack P. Holt, *The French Wars of Religion, 1562-1629* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Holt, *French Wars of Religion*, 8.

<sup>3</sup> Holt, *French Wars of Religion*, 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-14.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-17.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-49.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 50-56.

next decade with several clashes across the country as well as the infamous St. Bartholomew's Day massacre.<sup>8</sup>

Fighting subsided for many years until Henry of Navarre, a Protestant, was made heir to the throne in the mid-1580s. He ascended the throne in 1589 and in 1593 essentially ended the Wars of Religion by converting to Catholicism and, five years later, issuing the Edict of Nantes. This decision to convert to Catholicism in order to bring peace to France illustrates just how deep the ties to the Church were in country. Politically, Henry needed the Church in order to legitimize his claim among the Catholic League as well as abroad. According to historian Mack P. Holt, however, this conversion was also part of a broader plan to establish lasting peace in the country by creating a country once again unified by religion.<sup>9</sup> If this was the case, his choice of Catholicism must have spoken to more than just the religion of the powerful nobility but to that of the commoner class as well.

This desire to reunify France religiously was never realized in the nearly two centuries which elapsed between the Edict of Nantes and the outbreak of the French Revolution. During the first part of the seventeenth century the Huguenots, or French Protestants, were protected under the Edict which had given them unprecedented civil and religious liberties. These liberties were hindered somewhat when Cardinal Richelieu signed the Peace of Alais in 1629, rescinding the military rights given to them by Henry IV.<sup>10</sup> The dismantling of the Edict continued with greater enthusiasm during the reign of Louis XIV. During a number of sweeps across the Huguenot areas of southern France, there was moderate success in conversion. This convinced the king that he could triumph over the "heresy" of Huguenot Calvinism prompting him to issue

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 81-95.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>10</sup> Geoffrey Adams, *The Huguenots and French opinion, 1685-1787* (Canada: Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion, 1991), 7.

the Edict of Fontainebleau in 1684, rescinding the rights previously granted to Protestants by the state.<sup>11</sup> Following the Edict many Huguenots decided to convert but a large number also chose to emigrate. Persecution ebbed following the death of Louis XIV and in a 1787 Edict, the young Louis XVI restored rights to the group.<sup>12</sup>

The history of religious tension in France, while turbulent, is also suggestive of just how deeply the roots of Catholicism ran among the French people. In each religious conflict from the Wars of Religion to the revocation and reinstatement of the Edict of Nantes, it is clear that the dominant side was that of the Catholic Church. It is this resistance to decline which makes the intense dechristianization programs implemented by the various governments during the French Revolution, particularly during the Reign of Terror, such an anomaly. Although it is clear that the religious tradition most widely ascribed to in the time leading up to the revolution was Roman Catholicism, that is not to say that there was no division within French practice of Catholicism itself. In fact, some of the political policies of the revolution came out of theological debate within the religion.

In the mid-seventeenth century a cult within the Catholic Church rose up around the ideas of the Bishop of Ypres, Cornelius Jansen. Citing the works of St Augustine, Jansen claimed that people were in fact already fated for either salvation or damnation.<sup>13</sup> The established Church viewed these ideas as too similar to Calvinism and thus deemed heretical. Jansenists, on the other hand, disagreed claiming that they were in no way separate from conventional Catholicism.<sup>14</sup> While this ultimately was true, during the century and a half preceding the French Revolution the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 7-8.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 295-304.

<sup>13</sup> William Doyle, *Jansenism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc.), 1.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 1.

conflict between the two supposed sides dominated theological discussion as well as politics in France.<sup>15</sup>

The ideas of Jansenism, while based on Jansen's interpretations, were really brought into the broader consciousness of French theological scholars by the writings of Angélique Arnauld in the 1640s. These writings, many of which were written in French rather than Latin, were almost immediately denounced by the Jesuits of the country. Thanks to longstanding traditions of French law and the French clergy which disdained papal interference in non-doctrinal matters, however, the movement was able to spread.<sup>16</sup> Soon its assertions about free will and predestination were being debated at the Sorbonne and creating deep divisions among theologians. These divisions caused some clerical unrest in Paris which in an atmosphere of broader rebellion and crisis in the country led Louis XIV, his ministers, and most notably the chief minister Mazarin to distrust the Jansenists.<sup>17</sup>

Being one of the more powerful leaders in France as well as a cardinal, Mazarin pushed the Parlement of Paris to enforce a formulary among the clergy which would officially condemn Jansenist ideas on free will and salvation. While the Parlement did eventually accept the motion, they were hesitant to do so as it conceded to the Pope a greater amount of authority over the Church in France.<sup>18</sup> Their desire to maintain some sort of control over the French Church was echoed by Louis XIV who created a decade long rupture between Rome and France after he declared himself absolute sovereign and reiterated the superiority of Church council over the pope. When this ended however, the parlement once again found itself with less control over the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 25-30.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 31.

affairs of the local clergy; a fact they greatly resented. On top of that the king once more influenced papal intervention in the Jansenist problem.<sup>19</sup>

At the start of the eighteenth century the prominence of Jansenism within France seemed to be dwindling, at least as a religious practice. Old Jansenist leaders began to die off and they were replaced by a younger generation of clerics who agreed with the claim of heresy first put forth by the Jesuits nearly a century before.<sup>20</sup> Before their death knell, however, they both brought an end to the Jesuit order in France and left a lasting impact on French politics. During the height of their persecution under Louis XIV, the Jansenists had begun to question what created political legitimacy. In the early 1750s it became a practice among the clergy to deny last rites to those who could not produce a confession note signed by the priest to whom they had last confessed. This was used against many Jansenists in Paris, to the horror of many who saw it as clerical despotism. When complaints about the practice were taken before the king he frequently acted to prevent the parlement from interfering. Eventually the king did communicate with Rome to ban the practice of refusing last rites, but the newly prominent Jansenists were already beginning to consider whether the king should have the ability to prevent the parlement from acting.<sup>21</sup> When the Revolution began, this was one of the essential questions. The conflict surrounding Jansenism also foreshadowed in many ways the desire of the French government to separate itself from the influence of Rome and to limit the powers of the king over the parlements. The French Revolution was, nonetheless, the end of Jansenism as it was often blamed by those who were startled at its rapid acceleration. As a result when religious practice

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 42-46. This bull was known as *Unigenitus* and infringed upon the traditional liberties of the Gallican Church. When it was first introduced many members of the clergy, both Jansenist and not, were ardently opposed to it. By the 1740s this opposition had for the most part died out.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 50-54.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 62-64.

began to resurface in France following the dechristianization of the early Revolution, Jansenism was no longer a factor.<sup>22</sup>

When King Louis XVI summoned the Estates General to meet in 1789 there was little thought in the minds of those who were elected to the assembly about the bloody revolution which would engulf France over the following decade. Examining the *cahiers de doléances* which were brought to the assembly by each representative, the demands they put forth were hardly revolutionary compared to the events which followed. According to a study done by Gilbert Shapiro and John Markoff, the vast majority of local *cahiers* in 1789 focused on greatly equality between the Third Estate and the first two, particularly in regards to taxation and social mobility. The study shows that the Third Estate hoped to abolish tax privilege for the Nobility and the Clergy, create a standardized taxation system, and gain access to careers which had previously been off limits to them such as the military and administrative offices.<sup>23</sup> They also had a number of grievances concerning the Church.

In regards to the religious culture of France the *cahiers* make it clear that the French in general were interested in returning to a more Franco-centric, yet still Catholic, Church. There were six sets of religious grievances which appear in the collected *cahiers*: a demand for the end of clerical privilege, secularization of several social institutions, full or partial state control of Church property, the end of legal and fiscal prerogatives of the papacy within the French Church, expanded religious toleration, and greater power given to local parish clergy.<sup>24</sup> While many of these desires suggest a move away from the Church, they are more indicative of a move away from papal interference than an abandonment of Catholicism. As the country moved toward the

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 72-85.

<sup>23</sup> Gilbert Shapiro and John Markoff, *Revolutionary Demands* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 258, 312.

<sup>24</sup> Timothy Tackett, "The West in France in 1789: The Religious Factor In The Origins of Counterrevolution," in *Revolutionary Demands*, Gilbert Shapiro and John Markoff (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 338.

modern age, particularly in the wake of the Enlightenment and the example of the American Revolution, the French wanted to create a more equal society which allowed for political involvement based on merit rather than exclusively on birth and wealth. This meant casting off many of the old ways, including a further reduction of the influence of the pope on the internal affairs of otherwise sovereign nations. It did not mean, at least at the outset, a desertion of Catholic practice. It must also be remembered that the *cahiers* favored towns rather than the more rural areas of the country.

In 1789, those delegates to the Estates General and later the National Assembly who were not actively religious themselves were generally divided into two groups of thought on religion. The first group ascribed to views similar to those of Voltaire, who disdained the institution of the Church as a group which abused power yet saw the importance of religion "to keep mankind in order, and to make men merit the goodness of God by their virtue."<sup>25</sup> This group's intentions toward religion were those seen in the *cahiers*: maintenance of the Church with greater French control. The second, and perhaps smaller group, believed in the ideas of Rousseau who saw the Catholic Church as superstitious and ridiculous. Rousseau desired to slowly supersede Catholicism in France with a state religion similar to deism in which reason could triumph.<sup>26</sup>

The first year of the Revolution featured a religious policy which largely responded to the grievances of the *cahiers*. As the majority of priests were commoners, more like the members of the Third Estate than the bishops who administered the Church in France, many joined the National Assembly when it was formed. Outside of Paris, many Catholics welcomed the Revolution as a movement which allowed them to combine more freely their structured faith

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<sup>25</sup> Noah Shusterman, *The French Revolution: faith, desire, and politics* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 12.

<sup>26</sup> Joseph F. Byrnes, *Catholic and French Forever* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 3.

with folk traditions without drawing the disapproval of the Church hierarchy.<sup>27</sup> The desire merely to reform the pre-existing structure of a well accepted religion over time transformed into dechristianization; a process which went hand in hand with the downfall of the monarchy.

For the Revolutionary leaders who arose in the early years of the decade, the end of the Ancien Régime meant an end to its excesses. As Louis XVI's power waned, the disdain of the Montagnards towards the monarchy increased exponentially. While the original authors of the Revolution sought to create a constitutional monarchy like that of England, the hesitations of the king to accept reforms as well as his disastrous Flight to Varennes in the summer of 1791 proved that no such government could truly be established. Since the monarchy's power was historically so linked with that of the Church, it is little surprise that the revolutionaries also began to attack this institution. In 1790 the Civil Constitution of the Clergy was passed, creating a more Gallican organization of the Church which aligned with the ideas of the *cahiers*. It redrew the lines of diocese to match those of the administrative divisions, allowed for election of bishops by the priests of the country, and established clergy salaries to be paid by the government rather than by Rome.<sup>28</sup> While many of the bishops were unhappy with the changes, other clerics supported the early reforms of the Church. The Civil Constitution of the Clergy was not, like later legislation, meant to destroy the Catholic Church within France. The ecclesiastical committee which created it was largely comprised of devout Catholics who sought to align it with the ideas of Revolution while purging it of its excesses. It did, however, concern those Catholics who were already startled by earlier decrees calling for the confiscation of Church property and the prohibition of monastic vows.

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<sup>27</sup> Shusterman, *The French Revolution*, 11.

<sup>28</sup> Byrnes, *Catholic and French Forever*, 5-6.

The turning point of religious policy in the Revolution was not these early reforms, but rather the Ecclesiastical Oath of 1791. The idea of an oath was first posited in the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, though it had been intended only for any new clergy who would be elected in the future.<sup>29</sup> By mid-1790, however, the National Assembly was becoming increasingly polarized over the new religious policies. There were calls to require an oath of allegiance to the Civil Constitution and the Assembly despite loyalty oaths having already been made by those clergy who joined the Assembly in 1789. Before the oath was enforced, the seeds of discomfort were already blossoming among the people of France and the clergy.<sup>30</sup>

While many claimed that the Assembly had no desire to attack the spiritual authority of the Church, many clergymen were uncertain that this was the case. Revolutionaries such as Mirabeau pushed forward an amendment in the Assembly calling for "pure and simple" oaths with no ambiguity. In addition the pope issued a condemnation of the oath and the Civil Constitution itself. This made the question of loyalty black and white: you were either with the revolution or with the pope.<sup>31</sup> It is this event which historians such as William Doyle and Timothy Tackett have identified as the turning point for religion in the Revolution and for the Revolution as a whole. It forced both clergy and the common citizen to question whether they could fully support the new order in France.<sup>32</sup> For many of them the answer was no.

As the Revolution became increasingly radical under the leadership of Robespierre the government's campaign against the Church became increasingly more zealous. Events such as the September Massacres of 1792, the dissolution of the Constitutional Church, and the

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<sup>29</sup> "The Civil Constitution of the Clergy," in *The French Revolution Sourcebook*, ed. John Hardman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 115-116.

<sup>30</sup> Timothy Tackett, *Religion, Revolution, and Regional Culture in Eighteenth-Century France: The Ecclesiastical Oath of 1791* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 16-24.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-26.

<sup>32</sup> William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 144-145.

establishment of the Cult of Reason point toward a government set on the destruction of the backwardness which they associated with the Catholic Church. Much of this is likely the result of a desire to disassociate the new France from its monarchical past by any means necessary while also eliminating external influence on the new republic. For some more radical revolutionaries, Catholicism was too closely associated with the threat of counterrevolution to be trusted. Considering this mindset it is clear that religion played as great a role in the course of the Revolution as political ideas did.

Dechristianization is generally defined as the removal of Christian influence, characteristic, or practice from something. Within the context of the Revolution this was most prominent in the government's efforts to destabilize and ultimately destroy the Catholic Church in France. This movement reached its height during the Terror, but was extremely varied across the different regions of France as well as over the course of the Revolution. Policies concerning dechristianization led to political fragmentation and were influential in the formation of counterrevolutionary uprisings. In many ways these policies and reactions to them were the driving force behind the early Revolution, an idea which will be explored in later chapters.

Within scholarship of the French Revolution attention to the importance of religion in shaping its outcome has only recently become prominent. One of the great early historians of the Revolution, Alexis de Tocqueville, made almost no mention of anything religious in his volume *The Ancien Régime and the Revolution*. Beginning in the 1960s, scholars began to look at the social aspects of the Revolution and in particular the role of the Church. One of the early studies of the Church came from John McManners.<sup>33</sup> This book serves largely as a summary of the religious movements and despite expanding the definition of religion and religious belief to include the various cults that arose during the Revolutionary decade, focuses for the most part on

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<sup>33</sup> John McManners, *The French Revolution and the Church* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 1-4.

the Catholic Church. It laid important groundwork for the religious issues which were involved in driving France toward Revolution.

Not long after McManners' book, French Historian Michel Vovelle published *Religion et Révolution: la déchristianisation de l'an II*.<sup>34</sup> While focusing on the southeast of France, Vovelle looked at the effort to dechristianize and how it spread throughout the area. His sources include clerical records, reports, and speeches. Vovelle's argument seems to be that the success of dechristianization was something very localized and that the movement tended to predate the Revolutionary period. This idea then suggests that more conservative regions saw less dechristianization while more progressive regions were predisposed to a move away from religion. He argues that the decline in monetary gifts being left to the Church in wills during the mid-eighteenth century shows that Catholicism was already on the decline.

Historians over the past several decades have sought to determine whether dechristianization was an inevitable process accelerated by the radical policies of the Revolution and if it was not was the movement to dechristianize France successful. Vovelle's book established one side of this debate which, further asserted by his second book in 1991, has continued to see some support from other scholars such as Noah Shusterman. Shusterman, while admitting that certain forms of Catholic practice were still very visible in the secular world of Ancien Régime France, states that there was a marked decline in Catholicism in the lead up to the Revolution.<sup>35</sup> The main evidence for this argument comes from records concerning the distribution of money after death as well as drawing heavily on the rates of ecclesiastical abdications throughout the country.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Michel Vovelle, *Religion et Révolution: la Déchristianisation de l'an II*. (Paris: Hachette, 1976), 9-15, 285-300.

<sup>35</sup> Shusterman, *The French Revolution*, 13.

<sup>36</sup> Michel Vovelle, *The Revolution against the Church* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1991), 1-11.

The opposite side of this debate suggests that dechristianization was successful in certain places not because of some geographic determinism but rather based on the specific situation of each individual town. It also suggests that secularization does not mean dechristianization and asserts the roots of Catholicism ran deeply enough in the culture of the French people that the success of the movements was not as spectacular as it would appear. One of the founding scholars on this side of the debate is Suzanne Desan. In her 1990 book, Desan used the department of Yonne, not far from Paris, to show that pro-Revolutionary feeling and a desire to maintain religion were not mutually exclusive ideas. Yonne in the early revolution had a Jacobin club and welcomed the Revolution and its religious policies as a way to integrate folk practices into their practice of Catholicism.<sup>37</sup> The people of the region were religious outside of their relationship to the clergy. They celebrated religious days and mass, and women played a crucial role in the continued demand for worship. This focus on the relationship between gender and religion was further explored in the second section of Olwen Hufton's 1992 *Women and the Limits of Citizenship in the French Revolution*.<sup>38</sup> Other historians whose work places them on this side of the debate include Timothy Tackett, Edward J. Woell, and Nigel Aston.

The first chapter of the paper will use the memoirs left behind by the papal envoy to Paris in the early years of the Revolution. Imprisoned along with many other religious figures, the internuncio's political position within the clergy provides insight into the ways in which the situation of Paris escalated to the point of the September Massacres and the threat of the guillotine in the months following. He also recounts experiences which suggest that not even all the *patriotes* of Paris were necessarily in agreement with the policies of their leaders.

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<sup>37</sup> Suzanne Desan, *Reclaiming the Sacred* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 25.

<sup>38</sup> Olwen Hufton, *Women and the Limits of Citizenship in the French Revolution* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).

Chapter Two will follow the religious aspect of the Revolution to the south of France, particularly the city of Lyon. It analyzes the very lengthy letter the Abbess Marie-Jéronyme Verot wrote in 1794 to another member of her order at another house. The letter highlights the unique situation of France's second city during the Revolution and allows for an exploration of the ways in which the south of the country responded to the religious policies of the Revolutionary government as compared to those in the north.

The final chapter will draw from the prison diaries of the Duchesse de Duras to explore the relationship between the crumbling aristocracy and religion. Imprisoned for her position within the court of Louis XVI, the Duchess's diary provides an aristocratic context to the religious conflicts of the Revolution. Due to the longstanding relationship between nobility and religion her diaries will be augmented by examining the religiously motivated, nobility-led royalist revolts in the Vendée and what they reveal about this relationship. This chapter will focus on the northwest of France, which was a royalist and Catholic holdout during the early years of the Revolution.

## **Chapter One: The Internuncio of Paris**

The oath of loyalty which was added to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy in 1791 was an incredibly divisive issue among the clergy of France as well as the common people and those religious men and women who were not required to take the oath. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, many Catholics distrusted the juring clergy due to their willingness to defy the Pope's condemnation of the oath. Initially, between fifty-two and fifty-five percent of parish clergy decided to take the oath. By 1792 a fair number of clergymen had retracted their oath, yet the percentage of juring clergy remained at about forty-nine percent.<sup>39</sup> Those who refused to take the oath became known as refractory or non-juring priests. In 1791 these clergymen were largely driven out of their parishes, not able to perform Mass, and sometimes accosted on the streets. As the political climate in Paris became more radical, however, to be a refractory priest became increasingly dangerous. In the infamous September Massacres of 1792 it was not the Constitutional Clergy which was attacked, though their persecution would come eventually. Instead it was the refractory clergy along with many other victims who happened to have found themselves imprisoned during the summer of 1792 who were slaughtered in prison. A firsthand account of these massacres is found in the memoirs of Monsignor de Salamon.

Monsignor de Salamon was only about thirty years old when the Revolution began in 1789, yet he had already established himself on a national and international level. He was born in Italy but was sent to France to continue his studies at an oratory in Lyon.<sup>40</sup> He was made a priest at the age of twenty-two by papal dispensation and also became a magistrate and was a member

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<sup>39</sup> Timothy Tackett, *Religion, Revolution, and Regional Culture in Eighteenth-Century France: The Ecclesiastical Oath of 1791* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 40-43.

<sup>40</sup> Monsignor de Salamon, *Unpublished Memoirs of The Internuncio at Paris During the Revolution, 1790-1801*, ed. Abbé Bridier (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company: 1896), 37-38.

of the Parlement of Paris between 1787 and 1789.<sup>41</sup> These experiences allowed him an understanding of the declining status of the clergy and the royal family within the capital as France moved towards Revolution, yet his indebtedness to the Pope made him unable to refuse the appointment of internuncio to Louis XVI in 1790.<sup>42</sup> He never took the ecclesiastical oath and at the end of August 1792 the internuncio was arrested and imprisoned with other religious men. He managed to escape the massacres unharmed, yet still was forced to live in hiding until the end of the Terror. His experiences reflect those of many refractory priests throughout France and reveal the availability of help for non-juring clergy, even within Paris itself.

The Civil Constitution of the Clergy was largely accepted when it was first put forth in early 1790. It called for the redrawing of bishopric boundaries to match those of the departments and the election of priests to ecclesiastical office. A clause declared that the elected bishops may not ask the Pope for confirmation but need not break ties with him "in token of the unity of faith and of the communion he should maintain with him." The constitution also called for newly elected clergymen to swear an oath to "care for the faithful of the diocese which is entrusted to him, to be faithful to the nation, to the law and to the king and to maintain with all his power the constitution decreed by the National Assembly and accepted by the king."<sup>43</sup> This oath was not asking a particularly difficult thing of the clergy and did not apply to the vast majority of clergymen as they were already in office.<sup>44</sup>

By the end of 1790 the National Assembly decided to expand the oath of allegiance to the constitution to all clergy members, whether new or incumbent. This was paired with the promise to remove all those who refused to take the oath within one week from their positions. The

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 6-7.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 5-8.

<sup>43</sup> "The civil constitution of the clergy," in *The French Revolution Sourcebook*, ed. John Hardman (London: Arnold, 1999), 115-116.

<sup>44</sup> Tackett, *Religion, Revolution and Region Culture*, 18-19.

National Assembly feared the interference of the papacy in political affairs of France, but the decision to expand the oath to cover all clergymen may largely have been in an attempt to prevent the religious schism which it would, in fact, eventually bring about. The Assembly desired to prove that they were not trying to change or destroy religion in order to turn public opinion in favor of the new government.<sup>45</sup> This recognition of the importance of religion in French society is ironic considering the events which shortly followed.

The National Assembly misread the views of many of the parish priests. They assumed that resistance would come largely from bishops seeking to promote their own self interest. However, the new insistence on non-restrictive oaths paired with the condemnation of the constitution by the pope complicated the issue.<sup>46</sup> This condemnation meant that clergymen were left with the decision to either support Rome or the National Assembly. Such a choice led many priests as well as many lay people to question the legitimacy of their new government.<sup>47</sup> If the government could take control of the Church away from the pope, who would be able to put a check on their power. As the status of the monarchy continued to deteriorate, such considerations no doubt became uneasy.

The distribution of those who took the oath was varied across France. Within small rural communities the majority of clergymen generally did not take the oath, and the same is seen in towns of more than eight thousand residents. In fact, according to the data the percentage of juring parish clergy decreased as the size of the towns increased. The exception is the city of Paris, yet even there only about forty-eight percent of the parish clergy subscribed to the oath.<sup>48</sup> Oath-taking was lower in regions such as northwestern and western France, which would later

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 25-26.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 50-51

see the revolts of the Vendée and the Chouannerie, and higher across the central part of the country.<sup>49</sup> This distribution of juring and non-juring clergy played a key role in the counterrevolutionary conflicts which arose during 1792 and 1793.

In deciding whether or not to take the oath, both refractory and constitutional clergy approached the issue from a number of viewpoints. For most refractory priests the logic behind their decisions lay in their understanding of religion and theology.<sup>50</sup> Many priests who took this view cited the pope as the central figure in their decision, thus when he condemned it they found themselves unwilling to break from his authority. For others there was a disdain for the restructuring of the church. They felt that the hierarchy within the Church provided them a sense of discipline which the National Assembly was stripping them of. Another group of non-juring priests viewed the oath as part of the struggle between Church belief and the deist philosophy which was seen to dominate the mindset of the new government. There is even evidence that some refractory clergy were at their core *patriotes*, but could not go against their conscience or the pope. This group would likely have accepted a restrictive oath which made allowance for the Church as well.<sup>51</sup>

Overwhelmingly refractory priests decided to refuse the oath due to the conflict they perceived between it and the Church. The juring clergy felt differently. Abbé Gregoire, the leader of the constitutional clergy, viewed the oath as an act completely outside of the realm of religion. He believed the oath did not mean that a priest had to agree with all of the policies of the National Assembly, but by taking the oath one showed that one supported some change to the government.<sup>52</sup> This view, and its suggestion of a necessity to appear loyal to the National

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 53-54.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 61-65.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 67.

Assembly, may be indicative of a fear of reprisal or a desire to self-promote. Given the number of parishes and church offices opened by the forced departure of the refractory clergy, a decision to take the oath meant unprecedented opportunity for many. In addition, there has been some evidence that at least a few juring priests justified their decision in terms of material gain.<sup>53</sup> For many, however, there was an underlying sense of the constitution fulfilling the promise of Gallicanism which had always played a role in the French Church. In their minds the oath revitalized a Church which had been corrupted.<sup>54</sup>

Whatever their reasons for submitting or refusing, the oath created a rift in the religious life of France. Refractory priests were no longer allowed to perform their religious duties, which distressed many citizens. As seen in the letter of Mère Marie-Jéronyme Vérot as well as the Duchess's prison diaries, a substantial number of lay people viewed the oath in the same ways as their non-juring clerics. In their eyes the juring clergy had expressly gone against the command of the pope and had thus separated themselves from true Catholicism. Instead of attending the Masses of the constitutional clergy they sought out refractory priests and received what sacraments they could. This phenomenon, as the abbess noted, annoyed both juring priests and local officials. Such direct disobedience to the laws of the state fueled its fears of counterrevolution. When the monarchy fell in August of 1792, the National Convention decided that the time had come to solve the problem of refractory clergy.

Since the end of 1791 there had been discussion of exiling refractory priests in order to stop them from turning people against the revolutionary cause.<sup>55</sup> Conversations about such a measure were pushed off when the king seemingly regained some role in the proceedings, but action against the non-juring clergy did not altogether cease. In the spring of 1792, peasants in

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 68-69.

<sup>55</sup> William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 177.

Languedoc-Roussillon ransacked the homes of nobles and refractory priests in retribution for the drowning of sixty-nine National Guardsmen. Whether or not these priests actually played a role in the drowning, the thought of losing the gains which they had made in 1789 led the people to lash out against what they believed to be sources of counterrevolution.<sup>56</sup> They were not entirely wrong, as revolts in the northwest of France cited the treatment of non-juring priests among their reasons for rising up against the Legislative Assembly.

On the 14th of August, 1792 the Legislative Assembly once again returned to the question of deporting the refractory clergy. The laws which had been passed earlier that year were decided to have too many loopholes, so the Assembly created a new oath which eliminated any mention of religion at all. It was denounced by royalists as being too fanatical, though at least one royalist seminarian recommended that the refractory clergy take it rather than risk starvation.<sup>57</sup> Few must have taken it for the next month hundreds of non-juring clergy were massacred in prisons across Paris and the country.<sup>58</sup>

Monsignor de Salamon was arrested on the 27th of August, 1792 just days before the September Massacres. As internuncio, Salamon was in possession of the archives of his position. Likely fearing some conspiracy in addition to the fact that he was a non-juring priest, a group of *patriotes* confiscated these archives during the arrest. Fortunately, his own correspondence had been hidden by his housekeeper, a fact which would aid him in his later release. Salamon was taken to the préfecture de police where he was held with about eighty other prisoners, most of whom were clergymen.<sup>59</sup> His interactions with these other clergymen and particularly with the

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 182-183.

<sup>57</sup> John McManners, *The French Revolution and the Church* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1970), 65-67.

<sup>58</sup> Mère Marie-Jéronyme Vérot, *I Leave You My Heart: A Visitandine Chronicle of the French Revolution: Letter of 15 May 1794* (Philadelphia: Saint Joseph's University Press, 2000), 66.

<sup>59</sup> Monsignor de Salalom, *Unpublished Memoirs*, 13-18.

*patriotes* he confronted there paint an image of the Revolution's religious policies which is anything but black and white.

When he first arrived in prison the Monsignor was, reasonably, fearful of losing his life. He described how he "did not ambition for martyrdom" and thus did not pray for spiritual solace or absolution of his sins as many of the other priests did. This fact bothered the Monsignor because he feared it made him discreditable.<sup>60</sup> In contrast to the image he paints of himself, Salamon describes many of the other clergymen in terms of their holiness. One curé, for instance, was described as being "as saintly as an anchorite."<sup>61</sup> Another was described as being "as venerable for his virtues as for his years: he was eighty."<sup>62</sup> Such commendations suggest that even in the face of persecution these priests had stayed true to their convictions.

Despite his young age and his insecurities about not willingly accepting his death, the Monsignor's position within the hierarchy of the Church was obvious in the way his colleagues treated him during his time at the Mairie. As mentioned before, many non-juring priests refused the oath in part because of the importance they placed on the Church's hierarchical structure. Although only a Monsignor, being the representative of the pope placed Salamon higher than his fellow prisoners. In one instance a priest who was not imprisoned came to the Mairie in order to seek the Monsignor's advice. He stated that he had been sent by a handful of bishops and archbishops from surrounding areas to seek the internuncio's advice on the oath of liberty and equality which was recently passed.<sup>63</sup> This reliance by priests of high office on the internuncio's word suggests that even under intense pressure, refractory priests were determined to maintain

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 28-30.

their connection to the pope. Even fear of death did not sway those who decided to refuse the oaths.

On the 1st of September the Monsignor and sixty-two other prisoners were transferred to the Abbaye, which had previously belonged to the Benedictines. The rest of the prisoners had the misfortune of being left behind in order to be transferred during the afternoon of September 2nd, right when the infamous massacres began. These massacres came at a moment when Paris was in a state of panic. The city of Verdun, in the northeast of France and the only military fortress on the road to Paris, had fallen to Prussian forces. Among the sans-culottes of Paris there was a deeply rooted suspicion of treason by the refractory clergy, which paired with the fear of invasion led many of them to provide a violent solution.<sup>64</sup>

The internuncio wrote of the fate of these men who were slaughtered without examinations as they exited the carriages at their new prison. This incident, however, provides another example of a *patriote* who did not believe in the blind killing of all refractory priests. According to Salamon, one of the prisoners left behind in the Mairie was a man by the name of Abbé Sicard who taught the blind and the deaf. When his carriage was being emptied at the new prison, a "notorious patriot and a great revolutionist" by the name of Monotte threw himself between the Abbé and the killers and shouted for them to kill him rather than the priest. This outcry worked and the Abbé was briefly re-imprisoned but not killed.<sup>65</sup> Considering the blanket anti-Catholicism of *patriotes* such as Robespierre, it is easy to assume that all who followed him ascribed to these beliefs. Many *patriotes*, however, seem to have been anti-clerical to different extents and willing to sacrifice their own safety to protect members of the clergy whom they believed were truly virtuous.

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<sup>64</sup> Doyle, *The Oxford History*, 190-191.

<sup>65</sup> Monsignor de Salamon, *Unpublished Memoirs*, 33-34.

The sixty-three prisoners who were first sent to the Abbaye were both as lucky and as unlucky as the group which was left behind, particularly the internuncio. The 2nd of September, the first day of the massacres, was also a Sunday. Together in their new prison, the sixty-three men celebrated a sort of Mass in their room. Even the laymen who were imprisoned among the clergy joined in the devotions. Not long after this, it became clear that their lives were in danger as the mobs of the massacre came closer to the prison. Despite his earlier terror, the internuncio stayed fairly calm and even attempted to advise other prisoners on how they might avoid death at the hands of the mob.<sup>66</sup> Again the internuncio noted that he felt unwilling to prepare himself for death. A large number of the other inmates, however, confessed to each other and exchanged what were essentially the last rites. Eventually Salamon began to confess to a curé but was interrupted by the jailors. Upon receiving news from the jailor that a group of two thousand sans-culottes "in a greater rage than ever" were inside the prison, all the men in the cell prayed once again.<sup>67</sup> These men appear to have truly believed in their religious practice, and its necessity in preparing for their death. Without a belief in an afterlife or a deity, the act of absolving oneself is of little importance.

In the late hours of the night, Salamon and his fellow prisoners were brought before a group of men who were to examine them. The question asked was the same for each prisoner: have you taken the oath. Only one priest had, the rest were swiftly beheaded by the guardsmen.<sup>68</sup> By luck and by virtue of his former position as a magistrate, and his acquaintance with an influential constitutional priest, the Monsignor de Salamon was able to escape death in the massacres. Implored by the serving woman of the Monsignor, a former acquaintance named Abbé Torné, who was both constitutional clergyman and member of the Legislative was able to

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 51-52.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 54-56.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 73-78.

secure a note from the mayor Pétion ensuring Salamon's liberation from prison at three o'clock on September 2nd.<sup>69</sup> The irony was not lost on the Monsignor that the time given proved to be the start of the Massacres when so many others were liberated from their prison by death. Nevertheless, the note and its verification were enough to convince the committee to release him. The committee held him there overnight following his acquittal so that he might avoid being mistakenly killed by the mobs which were still killing their way through the city on September 3rd.<sup>70</sup> Prison, as would be true for the Duchess, had the effect of strengthening the religious belief of the Monsignor. After his release the only thing which was able to console him was a letter written to him by the pope.<sup>71</sup>

After his release, life did not become less dangerous. He decided not to leave Paris, and instead disguised himself as a peasant. In 1793 a warrant was issued for his arrest regarding a document he had signed in late 1789. The document, entitled "Protest of the Parlement," spoke out against the composition of the early National Assembly, its overthrow of the *noblesse*, and its violations against the Church. On hearing of his impending arrest the Monsignor went even deeper into hiding and was concealed with the help of a number of women in the city. He eventually took up residence in the inn of two *patriotes*, yet their dedication to the cause was easily undermined with money.<sup>72</sup> Another woman, ironically called Marianne, smuggled money and letters between the internuncio and a papal correspondent in Switzerland.<sup>73</sup>

Perhaps the most illuminating thing which the Monsignor de Salamon wrote in his memoirs concerned the ecclesiastical council he established with three other men. The internuncio felt responsible for the religious affairs of France due to the position which the pope

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 39-41.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 79-104.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 180-181.

had given him. The men met secretly in the Bois de Boulogne or in the apartments of one of their members and discussed the affairs of the Church. While nothing is mentioned of what they were able to accomplish, the Monsignor was adamant that they were able to do God's work. He ended the brief section by saying that "religion was better observed at that dangerous period than it is now."<sup>74</sup> The memoir is dated to approximately 1811, long after Napoleon reestablished the Catholic Church in France, yet Salamon seemed convinced that the Church was more pure during the height of the Terror. Unfortunately the Monsignor does not speak further to their activities, however one may assume from this description of their success that the council made some impact beyond their four man group.

Despite the fact that he was a highly ranked clergyman, the majority of the internuncio's memoirs are devoted to more secular matters. In Book II, "My Life During the Terror," the Monsignor focuses as a noble on the difficulty of avoiding arrest and exposure to the Committee of Public Safety. Book III, "My Trial Under the Directory," revolves around his arrest and trial in the late 1790s for treason. Nevertheless, the Monsignor's account of life during the September Massacres as well as his experience of being harbored during the Terror sheds light on the experiences of all refractory priests. Faced with persecution and death, the internuncio and his fellow prisoners did not abandon their faith or offer quick oaths to save their lives.

This refusal to give up Catholic practice was seen elsewhere in France from Lyon to the Vendée. In the department of Yonne, refractory clergymen hid themselves in large towns and forests. They performed clandestine services such as baptisms, Easter Mass, and celebrations of feast days.<sup>75</sup> Their continued determination to perform these services suggests an equally determined community of faithful Catholics demanding them.

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>75</sup> Suzanne Desan, *Reclaiming the Sacred* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 67-68.

Refractory priests played an important role in the continued practice of Catholicism in France. They represented for the faithful a continued connection with the pope despite the horrors surrounding them in their own country. They also became a symbol to the *patriotes* of the risk of counterrevolution. Over the course of the Terror hundreds of refractory clergymen were killed, yet many more survived because they were protected by the citizens of France.

## Chapter Two: The Convent of Lyon

Between February and May of 1793 nearly an entire order of Visitandine nuns relocated from their convent in France's second city, Lyon, to a newly established religious house and boarding school in the Italian city of Mantua. Requested by a count in Mantua and sponsored by the Emperor and Empress of Austria, the thirty-seven nuns chose to leave as France's policies towards religious men and women deteriorated into violence and their hope in a renewed tolerance died with the king. Their journey, as well as a chronicle of their experiences in the three years leading up to their emigration, was recorded by the head of the order Mère Marie-Jéronyme Vérot in a letter to a fellow nun in 1794. By that time the sisters were well established in their new home, but the effect of losing their own homeland can be seen in the way Mère Marie-Jéronyme writes about the experience in Lyon.<sup>76</sup> Analyzing her letter creates an image of the Revolution in France far from the assemblies of Paris and reveals the unique situation of the city of Lyon.

The Revolution was far from a coordinated overhaul of the *ancien régime*. Although the National Assembly, and its later counterparts, in Paris was comprised of delegates from around the country, the actual implementation of decrees and policies came at different times and to different degrees in the provinces. In some areas, such as the Vendée, popular opinion involved open denunciation of the Revolutionary government. Other areas, such as the Yonne region of central France, were eager to accept some of the Assembly's changes but struggled with others.<sup>77</sup> Such was the case of Lyon, whose citizens turned from hesitant *patriotes* to counter-revolutionary threat between the Estates General in 1789 and the autumn of 1793. A number of

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<sup>76</sup> Mère Marie-Jéronyme Vérot, *I Leave You My Heart: A Visitandine Chronicle of the French Revolution* (Philadelphia: Saint Joseph's University Press, 2000), 45-47.

<sup>77</sup> Suzanne Desan, *Reclaiming the Sacred* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 28.

factors including the city's socio-economic background created an environment for the Revolution very different from that of Paris. This meant that religion and those in religious life, while still encountering the antagonism and at times violence of the Revolution, experienced a dechristianization which was inconsistently enforced and progressed at a far slower rate than in the capital.

Lyon's population in the 1780s was around 150,000. Throughout the eighteenth century the city had grown largely as a result of immigration to the city from the surrounding countryside but also from other regions of southern France as well as abroad.<sup>78</sup> The major industry in the city was silk-weaving. Nearly forty percent of the population made a living in this industry, however it was unstable due to its reliance on foreign providers of raw silk. Whenever there was war in any country between France and the Levant, production in Lyon was interrupted. Such was the case of the late 1780s, meaning Lyon suffered many of the unemployment and financial issues which were prevalent in Paris.<sup>79</sup> There were a number of secondary industries which continued to run and even thrive during this downturn, but these did little to soften the strain on the city. This economic crisis, however, was not a catalyst for Revolution in the same way as it was in the capital largely as a result of its social climate.

In the late eighteenth century Lyon's social and political structure were somewhat odd for a city of such size and importance. It had no university and no *parlement*, but did have a number of administrative bodies as well as two colleges of medicine. The city also had a large and very old see, which included the city and many of its surrounding *departements*. This clerical presence was especially important considering the lack of a *parlement* as it meant a number of senior clergy members were at the top of the local hierarchy. Their effectiveness and influence

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<sup>78</sup> W.D. Edmonds, *Jacobinism and the Revolt of Lyon 1789-1793* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 9.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-13.

on the politics of the region were, it has been suggested, minimal, but they were still very visible in society.<sup>80</sup> This presence is perhaps responsible for the nominal impact the Enlightenment had on the religious practices of the city. While there was a decline in the number of religious books which were published in the late eighteenth century as well as fewer Lyonnais choosing to lead a cloistered religious life, there were very few instances in the 1780s of people speaking out in favor of rationalism or in opposition to the Church.<sup>81</sup>

Besides the presence of the Church in Lyonnais society, the social structure of wealth and nobility was somewhat different from the rest of France. Lyon's nobility was largely derived from service in the Consulat. Each year four councilors were elected by an assembly of notables. At the end of two years of service these councilors were ennobled. This suggests an ease in transitioning from wealthy bourgeois to noble, however there was a requirement of being extremely rich and having used that wealth in service to one of the hospitals. As a result there were few who could be elected.<sup>82</sup> Despite this, there was a vast amount of wealth held by non-nobles in Lyon. Bankers, the legal aristocracy, and merchants were often in possession of vast fortunes which afforded them influence on society if not on governmental affairs. In fact, Lyon was organized as an oligarchy and until the crises of the late 1780s very few outside of the upper echelon were even concerned with political life.<sup>83</sup>

The bourgeois of Lyon were hardly a united group on the eve of the Revolution, and these divisions played a role in the slow start of the Revolution in the city. While all members of this group felt their distinction from the poor who worked for them, they were separated by a variation of wealth as well as their cultural circles. Science academies and intellectual pursuits

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 20-21.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 24.

often captured the attention of professionals such as lawyers and bankers while failing to capture the interest of most merchants. At first this probably did not create much tension but the merchants were troubled when intellectuals sought to make economic changes within the silk industry. Merchants were unwilling to change their policies toward labor, and the continued writings of academicians in favor of the regulation of industry created a distrust between the groups. This preoccupation with economic issues does not mean that industry in Lyon was devoid of progress as masonic lodges flourished there in the eighteenth century.<sup>84</sup> It did, however, mean that the bourgeois of Lyon were focused at a more local level at the end of the 1780s.

When the Revolution began in 1789, Lyon was essentially uninvolved. One historian described the attitude of Lyon towards the National Assembly as ambivalent in this first year, which is not entirely surprising. Some of the intellectual bourgeois were staunch supporters of the new Assembly and welcomed the opportunity to become involved in national politics, yet they still held back in 1789. In large part this was due to the uncertainty about the outcome of the political upheavals happening in Paris. From so far away the would-be *patriotes* of Lyon recognized that the transformation of the monarchy might not in the end be successful and that forcing changes at a local level too early might have a negative effect on the city's already struggling economy.<sup>85</sup>

Slowly, the Revolution did come to Lyon. In July of 1789 following the King's acceptance of the union of orders, the artisan class of Lyon decided to act out against the indirect taxes which they blamed for high prices. They attacked customs posts and even killed a number of Swiss soldiers. Royal troops were brought in to restore order and essentially protect the

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 26-28.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 39.

interests of the bourgeois, which in Lyon meant in many ways protecting their wealth from the artisan class. A regiment known as the *volontaires* was also formed for this purpose.<sup>86</sup> *Patriotes* criticized the selective recruitment of the group but many also praised them "as saviours who had preserved the city from the threat of pillage."<sup>87</sup> This corps and the Consulat became increasingly unpopular and in February of 1790 elections were held which ended the oligarchy and created a new Municipal Council. The elections, however, did not go exactly as the *patriotes* had planned. The council, which had twenty-two members in total, was comprised of mostly conservative merchants and former political elites. Only two were *patriotes*.<sup>88</sup> As the year progressed there were more riots concerning taxes which led to renewed repression by the bourgeoisie. Continually, the importance of economics as well as the social barriers between the merchant bourgeoisie and the *menu peuple* slowed the progress of the Revolution.<sup>89</sup>

At the end of 1790 a movement began which brought the opportunities of the Revolution to the common people of Lyon and ended the bourgeois stalemate. Jacobinism was a growing movement that arose from the model of mesmerist and philanthropic societies as well as "*chambres littéraires*."<sup>90</sup> These clubs came to dominate Lyonnais society. Clubs were divided usually by *quartiers* and gave a political focus to communities. They were popular among the sections of the bourgeoisie which sought to challenge the feudalistic structure of *ancien régime* culture. They made engagement in politics accessible to citizens, though political life still included mostly better-off citizens.<sup>91</sup> This in turn led to an increase in the number of *patriotes*

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 38-46.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>90</sup> Michael L. Kennedy, "The Foundation of the Jacobin Clubs and the Development of the Jacobin Club Network, 1789-1791," *The Journal of Modern History* 51, no. 4 (1979), 704-705.

<sup>91</sup> Edmonds, *Jacobinism*, 87.

and artisans who held municipal office. Over the course of the next couple of years these men gained control of the municipal government and began to put Revolutionary policies into action.

Among Jacobin politicians in Paris there was a split between those who desired to create a Republic and those who hoped to establish a constitutional monarchy. The latter group became known as the Feuillants, after the former convent where they began to meet.<sup>92</sup> In 1792, partly as a result of the King's infamous and ill-fated Flight to Varennes, the clubs of Lyon experienced a similar schism. Due to the monarchist nature of the Feuillants, they were quickly rumored to be counter-revolutionary and added to the image of Lyon as a lax harbor for fleeing aristocrats.<sup>93</sup> This idea is perhaps overstated but it holds a bit of truth considering its proximity to the border and the longstanding reluctance of the mercantile bourgeoisie to embrace many of the Revolutionary changes.

These two sides competed for power throughout much of 1792 with the Jacobins eventually winning out in December of 1792. They held the municipality of Lyon until May 1793, however the radical policies of the Montagnards, the dominant political party in the National Convention and that which Robespierre belonged to, began to create discontent among the other political sects of Lyon. On the 29th of May 1793 royalists mounted all out rebellion and seized control of the municipality. The leaders of the rebellion were from the wealthy bourgeoisie but there was also fairly significant support from the *menu peuple*.<sup>94</sup> The new government established by this revolt fell under a category labeled by historians as "federalism."

In essence federalism was a question of legitimacy. It was a theory which came from the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen and its article allowing for resistance to oppression. Feeling that their rights had been betrayed by the radical policies of the Montagnards in Paris,

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<sup>92</sup> William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 154.

<sup>93</sup> Edmonds, *Jacobinism*, 108-111.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 186-196.

federalists sought to remedy the situation by setting up their own assemblies.<sup>95</sup> Lyon was one of the centers of what became known as the Federalist Revolts and was unique in that it was participated in by men from all levels of the bourgeois as well as supported by the lower classes. Unsurprisingly the royalist aspect of this movement struck Paris as particularly counter-revolutionary. In response to this threat, which Paris feared would evolve into a second Vendée, the National Guard was sent to the city to put a stop to the movement. The city was besieged for nine weeks in the summer and autumn of 1793, holding out longer than any other federalist city. This has been attributed to the active involvement of such a large portion of its citizens.<sup>96</sup> Eventually the city, which had failed to elicit outside help, gave up resistance as the fear of starvation led its citizens to call for surrender.<sup>97</sup> The long term result of this was retribution in the form of mass executions and a Lyon unlikely to openly rebel again.

The sisters of the Visitandine order left Lyon long before the city was besieged and ultimately defeated by the republican army. Despite this, they experienced firsthand the Revolutionary policies against the Church and religious peoples in the early years of the decade. Mère Marie-Jéronyme began her letter in 1789 after the state had begun to seize ecclesiastical goods. The abbess speaks of her willingness to give away her order's money and even many of the silver vessels from the sacristy of the convent's chapel in the hope that the nuns would be able to maintain their religious life afterward. Her hopes were, of course, disappointed when in November of 1789 the National Assembly suspended all religious vows. The abbess writes of how her own convent in conjunction with the other religious houses of the city petitioned the

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<sup>95</sup> Bill Edmonds, "'Federalism' and Urban Revolt in France in 1793," *The Journal of Modern History* 55, no.1 (1983), 27.

<sup>96</sup> Edmonds, *Jacobinism*, 247.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 270-271.

Assembly to allow them to maintain their religious houses.<sup>98</sup> While the answer to these petitions was one of repression, the act of petitioning suggests that prior to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy many religious people were not unwilling to utilize the opportunity for involvement in the national government.

Following the decree in February of 1790, which provided a stipend for those who chose to leave their religious houses in order to join the secular world, the sisters of the order were required to declare before a magistrate their intention to stay or leave the convent. In June of 1790 each sister in the order declared her desire to remain in the order. This first visit by the magistrate, described in a mere two paragraphs in the abbess's nearly one hundred page letter, illuminates the leniency of the first Revolutionary government in Lyon. There is a nun in the house whom the abbess describes as being about eighty years old and rather frail. She is described as being blind and half crippled but with the humor and enthusiasm of youth. For fear that the news would hasten her death, the abbess and the other sisters of the order had not yet told the aged nun about the suppression of religious life. When the magistrate arrived, he agreed to disobey his orders from the National Assembly and not read the decree aloud to the sister but instead to ask her simply if she was happy in her vocation.<sup>99</sup> While this does not suggest that the magistrate was either a Christian himself or against the emerging religious policies of the Revolutionary government, it does show a striking sympathy for those of religious vocation that does not seem to have existed at the municipal level in Paris. It is also unclear whether the magistrate is a *patriote*, however given the makeup of Lyon's council at the time he was most likely a bourgeois merchant. The convent's second visitation in early 1791, however, was attended by a proclaimed *patriote* and the outcome was much the same.

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<sup>98</sup> Mère Marie-Jéronyme, *I Leave You My Heart*, 45-47.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 48-49.

Roland de la Platière was an academician and the inspector of manufactures before the revolution. He was one of the first *patriotes* in Lyon and one of the intellectuals who had written out against the exploitation of labor during the economic crisis of the late 1780s.<sup>100</sup> It was this same Roland, described by Mère Marie-Jéronyme as "the most zealous promoter in Lyons of the revolutionary ideas," who came to the convent in January of 1791 in order to oversee a new election of a convent head as well as to interrogate the sisters again concerning their commitment to the religious life. When Soeur Marie-Anne Séraphique, the old nun, did not appear at the interrogation Roland berated Mère Marie-Jéronyme as being against the Revolution. At first he refused to keep the sister in the dark about the decrees of the Assembly, being "too serious a *citoyen* to be stopped by such scruples."<sup>101</sup> However, upon hearing the nun's laments that she did not yet love God as she wished, he praised her for her virtue and did not tell her of the changes. Upon leaving the convent Roland is quoted as saying that the nuns "could tame tigers."<sup>102</sup> It seems in Lyon even the most ardent supporters of the Revolution were not as radically opposed to religious life as their counterparts in Paris.

These magisterial visits reflect the precarious position in which early religious reforms placed women of religious vocation. When the National Assembly ended religious vows, they made allowances for those who served a social function such as schooling, helping the poor, and running hospitals. They viewed most convents in France as fitting into this category, however they failed to understand that these women had chosen this life because of a dedication to God. Instead, a stereotype existed of young, beautiful women forced into religious life by greedy families wishing to avoid the cost of a dowry. The National Assembly saw their policies as liberating nuns from their confinement and allowing them to fulfill their destiny of becoming

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<sup>100</sup> Edmonds, *Jacobinism*, 27.

<sup>101</sup> Mère Marie-Jéronyme, *I Leave You My Heart*, 52.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 51-53.

wives and mothers.<sup>103</sup> Their assumptions, however, misunderstood the makeup of religious houses as well as the commitment which is demonstrated by the abbess's letter.

It was not long after the visit of Roland that the sisters were first invited to relocate to Mantua. Given the new oath required under the Civil Constitution of the Clergy and the accelerated sale of Church land and property, the abbess and her order were anxious to accept the invitation immediately and emigrate. The archbishop, at that time still a non-juring clergyman, allowed that they would one day be able to make the move but asked that they remain in Lyon as long as they were allowed to stay in their convent.<sup>104</sup> Mère Marie-Jéronyme agreed to remain in Lyon, but her horror at the declining freedoms of religious men and women only continued to grow. After this disappointment, the abbess and her sisters attempted to maintain their religious practices in whatever way they could, and endeavored to avoid interaction with those members of the clergy who had taken the oath of allegiance. This included the new bishop of Lyon and a number of local priests.<sup>105</sup>

The juring clergy, despite being favored by the national government, were held in low regard by the clergy and parishioners of Lyon. The abbess describes how, after being evicted by non-juring priests from their own parishes, a few members of the Constitutional Clergy attempted to use the convent chapel to bless the palms for Palm Sunday of 1791. The nuns refused to allow them, yet the clergymen arrived with a large group of *clubistes* and headed for the sacristy to dress themselves for the blessing. In this incident, Mère Marie-Jéronyme's insight into the beliefs of the common people of Lyon derives from the actions of a man whom she names Navres. Navres, whose pseudonym plays on the French verb meaning to dismay and

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<sup>103</sup> Olwen H. Hufton, *Women and the Limits of Citizenship in the French Revolution* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 54-56.

<sup>104</sup> Mère Marie-Jéronyme Vérot, *I Leave You My Heart*, 53-58.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 58-59.

perhaps referencing her sadness at his later martyrdom, stood in front of the door and pushed back one of the priests. According to the abbess this persuaded the priests to go elsewhere for their blessing.<sup>106</sup> Navres appears several times in the letter, always in a context of coming to the aid of the sisters.

In the months following the imposition of the oath, the convent began taking in non-juring priests who had been driven out of their churches by the Constitutional Clergy. The abbess spoke of how the religious of the surrounding areas began to travel great distances to the convent in order to receive the sacraments from "legitimate pastors."<sup>107</sup> She also wrote that the demand was so great for the sacraments that she was forced to have more confessionals built in order to cater to all of the faithful. This is a far cry from the superficial, uncommitted Catholicism which the National Assembly believed was the norm in France. Clearly it was important for the common people of Lyon to be able not only to practice their religion but to practice it in a context that was still very much connected with Rome.

By the summer of 1791 the municipal government in Lyon had closed all churches connected to religious houses as a way to discourage religious vows and limit the effectiveness of non-juring clergy members. Despite the barricade set up at the front door to their church, however, the sisters received as many visitors to the chapel as they had before its closure. Mass was still said every day and the number of young women boarding and being educated at the convent increased dramatically. Mère Marie-Jéronyme claimed that such was the case at other religious houses around the city. The undeterred worshippers had such an effect that the *département* decided to reopen the churches in November of 1791.<sup>108</sup> Once again the municipal authorities, which were by now largely *patriotes*, show a lack of conviction in carrying out the

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 63-64.

religious policies of Paris. Considering that the government in Paris viewed the established Church as one of the enemies of the Revolution, this disconnect calls into question the relationship between political power and Catholicism. The leaders in Lyon do not seem to have viewed the Catholic Church as a particular threat to their political advancement. Instead, prior to the siege they did what they were required to do by the National Assembly but little more.

The vast number of Lyonnais who still sought traditional religious practice continued to reassure the abbess of the persistence of religious faith in the city, at least through Lent of 1792. In January on the feast day of Saint Francis de Sales, whose heart the convent was in possession of, enough Catholics came to venerate the relic to fill the church, the courtyard, and the street beyond.<sup>109</sup> Despite their number, the worshippers who came to the church were frequently the targets of insult and attack by "troops of brigands."<sup>110</sup> Women in particular were targeted, a fact which the municipal government used as an excuse, according to the abbess, to reclose the churches. Because of the increased violence the nuns were wary of smuggling people into the church. In addition the chapel was filled with barrels of vinegar which essentially made the space unusable. Once again, however, the abbess was able to extract some concessions from the municipality. The convent was able to keep the sanctuary within the convent as a worship space and thus they continued to allow a small number of people in to receive communion.<sup>111</sup>

For the most part from 1789 through the middle of 1792 the Visitandine sisters were able to continue living and worshipping in a relatively normal way. They experienced the loss of a good deal of physical property but the municipal authorities were not interested in completely obliterating their way of life. This all changed when the monarchy fell on the 10th of August, 1792. The deep connection between the former monarchy and the Church meant that Louis

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 66.

XVI's defeat added fuel to the anti-Catholic fervor of the *patriotes*. Despite the previously minimalist compliance to religious policies within Lyon, the September Massacres of the capital were repeated in the city a few days afterwards. The convent was across the street from one prison where a number of non-juring priests were murdered and the sounds were enough to convince their confessor to flee France.<sup>112</sup>

At the end of that September the nuns were forced to leave the convent as it officially became state property. They separated and stayed in the homes of their relatives and friends, and the abbess began preparing to relocate the sisters to their new convent in Mantua. The last few months of their time in Lyon were not without conflict though. As mentioned before the convent had been home to the heart of Saint Francis de Sales. The relic was housed in a magnificent gold reliquary and was a huge draw for both those of religious vocation and lay Catholics. At this time the situation of juring clergy members was still unthreatened in Lyon so a number of Constitutional priests sought to relocate the relic to their own parishes in hopes of boosting their abysmally low attendance rates. In order to obtain the heart a constitutional pastor from Ainay arranged to be at the municipal offices when the nuns were forced to hand over the "state property." Fortunately, Navres learned of the plot and was able to whisk the nuns and the relic away between presenting it and having it confiscated.<sup>113</sup> After this Mère Marie-Jéronyme left the relic in the care of a Catholic woman in town who would give it to a messenger to bring to Italy once it was safe.

Plans were already being set to leave Lyon when Louis XVI was executed in January of 1793, but they were sped up following this act. The most dangerous part of the journey to Mantua was getting out of France, however the nuns managed this with the help of both a guide

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 66-67.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 73.

and many townspeople along the way. The nuns divided into groups of about half a dozen sisters in order to make their travel less noticeable. Dressed in lay clothing, the abbess and her group passed through a number of small villages on the first day of the journey. Despite their attempts to respond to passersby with the appropriate "*bonjour citoyens*," the abbess wrote that many people quickly recognized that they were nuns. Even so they were never heckled by anyone nor reported.<sup>114</sup> When they arrived in the town of Nantua, located to the northwest of Lyon about fifteen miles from the modern border with Switzerland, they received assistance from an innkeeper who informed them of the best time to leave and where to cross to avoid the guardsmen who would surely know that they were nuns. The mayor of another town wrote the sisters a letter of recommendation to aid their passage past the National Guard post at the French border.<sup>115</sup>

From Geneva the nuns were able to travel to Mantua without fear of imprisonment or death. The rest of the nuns followed by May of 1793 with few problems. Before the last sisters left Lyon, Navres came to their aid one final time. As the nuns disappeared news of their establishment in Mantua began to spread through the city. The municipal government was suspicious and arrested one of the young nuns who had not yet emigrated. Upon seeing her in prison a national guardsman called Navres to come to her aid. He gave her advice on how to answer during her interrogation. Paired with her lack of resistance to capture, this led to her quick release.<sup>116</sup> The guardsman played as much a role in her safe release as Navres did, and shows that even among the army of the Republic not everybody felt as the National Convention did about religious policies.

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 86-88.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 111-115.

It would be easy to dismiss Mère Marie-Jéronyme as an example of continued religious practice in France because of the fact that she left the country before the height of the terror. However, even though she did not continue to practice her religion within the country her chronicle shows examples of the number of Lyonnais who did. The abbess's letter ends in early 1794, but even then French families were sending their daughters to join the sisters.<sup>117</sup> To risk sending their children on such a dangerous journey highlights the importance which non-noble Frenchmen continued to place on religion.

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 133.

### Chapter Three: The Duchess in Prison

In a speech before the National Convention on the twenty-first of November 1793, revolutionary leader Maximilien Robespierre declared "*l'athéisme est aristocrate*" or "atheism is aristocratic."<sup>118</sup> It is surprising to read such words from the man who led France during the most ardent dechristianization movements and the bloody Reign of Terror, though perhaps they are the words of a man willing to do anything to maintain control of the Revolution. While rebellion against the revolutionary government of Paris rose up throughout many of the provinces, the cult of the Supreme Being sought to reestablish a sense of order and moral authority in the country. At the same time, this speech reestablishes an enemy which Robespierre must have hoped would be able to unite the country against: the nobility. This assertion, however, was not entirely related to the actual religious feelings of the aristocracy. While some aristocrats, as well as many men and women of Robespierre's class, were no doubt atheist the history and revolutionary experiences would suggest that the nobility of France were in fact very closely linked to Catholicism.

The disconnect between the claim of atheism and the reality of the noble class speaks to Robespierre's desire to maintain control of the Revolution. Religiously motivated counterrevolution from the far right was creating disorder in the provinces while in the capital the far left elements of the atheistic *sans culottes* led riots which were in some ways equally disruptive to progress of the Revolution. By saying that atheism was aristocratic Robespierre connected the far right and the far left into one enemy of the Revolution. While the *sans culottes* were a problem, the greater threat was not what atheistic chaos would do to the country but

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<sup>118</sup> Michael J. Sydenham, *Léonard Bourdon, The Career of a Revolutionary 1754-1807* (Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1999), 209-210

rather how Catholics would respond to their oppression. The most violent response to dechristianization, and the one which was most directly linked to the nobility was the revolt in the Vendée.

The Vendée is a department in west-central France within the region of the Pays-de-la-Loire. It lies along the Atlantic Coast just south of the Loire River and the city of Nantes. Its organized revolt against the Revolutionary government reached its peak and ultimate demise in 1793, yet guerilla fighting continued in the area through 1794 and beyond.<sup>119</sup> The revolt was one of the largest local uprisings of the Revolution, yet it was not the only region of the West to defy Paris. In regions of Normandy and Brittany the Chouans, a word meaning royalist, also resisted and at times collaborated with the resistance in the Vendée. Both movements were tied to Catholicism and royalism as well as the unique socioeconomic background of the West, and both grew out of the rural peasantry.

Western France at the outbreak of the Revolution was a region of tremendous economic variation. Normandy was one of the wealthiest areas of the country while neighboring Brittany was one of the poorest. These differences were reflected in the revenues of local dioceses, however, the region as a whole had some of the wealthiest curates of the entire country. Rural clerics in particular enjoyed an easy collection of revenue and a very comfortable lifestyle. This wealth among parish priests, unlike other clergy members, was not resented by the rural community of the west. Instead the wealth of the country priest added to his prestige. In addition, the priest was deeply connected to his parish. There was throughout the entire western region at least one rector and one curate for each parish. Such density of priests mean that religious

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<sup>119</sup> William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 288-289.

services were readily available unlike in other regions of the country.<sup>120</sup> This does not mean that there were no grievances concerning the Church in the region's *cahiers*. On the contrary they exhibited many of the grievances which other regions posited such as access to offices and the diminution of tax privileges.<sup>121</sup> What the rural peasants of the Vendée and the west did not take kindly to was the oath associated with the Civil Constitution of the Clergy.

The towns of western France experienced a very different reality from the surrounding countryside. During the years leading up to the Revolution there had been a marked drop in townspeople joining the clergy. Clergymen in these towns often collected less revenue and the attitude towards the wealth was more negative than in the country.<sup>122</sup> It was these townspeople who welcomed in the new Revolutionary changes, bought up Church land when it went on the market, and forced out non-juring priests in the wake of the oath.<sup>123</sup> It was this last action which particularly angered the rural peasants of the region. Their connection to their local priests as well as their devotion to the Church meant that the constitutional clergy which came in were viewed as outsiders and intrusive. The rural peasants resented the bourgeois from the local towns for imposing such changes on them and tensions began to grow.<sup>124</sup>

The tipping point for the Vendéan peasantry came in the form of a conscription levied in February of 1793. Peasants in the region saw no reason why their young men should be taken off to fight in foreign countries for a government which they saw as intrusive to their formerly calm way of life. They felt as if the townspeople were doing well out of the Revolution at the expense of the rural peasantry and they were no longer willing to accept it. The clashes between the

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<sup>120</sup> Timothy Tackett, "The West in France in 1789: The Religious Factor in the Origins of the Counterrevolution," *The Journal of Modern History* 54, no. 4 (1982), 719-722.

<sup>121</sup> Gilbert Shapiro and John Markoff, *Revolutionary Demands: A Content Analysis of the Cahiers de Doléances of 1789* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 258.

<sup>122</sup> Tackett, "The West in France," 729.

<sup>123</sup> Doyle, *The Oxford History*, 224.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

peasantry and local authorities in the towns became a violent, open rebellion by March. The rallying cry of these peasants was a call for a return to the old ways: "We want our king, our priests and the old regime."<sup>125</sup> In the eyes of the *patriotes*, this made the Vendéans as aristocratic as the nobles whose place in society they were in essence fighting to save; yet at the beginning of the Vendéan Revolt there were no nobles in their ranks.

The peasants of the Vendée were not altogether inexperienced when it came to fighting. Service in the local militia was mandatory when the king required additional military. The militias were organized by parish and drew from the bachelor population aged between eighteen and forty.<sup>126</sup> The public was generally unhappy with the forced militia service yet in the context of the revolt, this training was no doubt useful. The peasants were zealous, and skilled, but they were not military leaders. In 1793 they brought a new group of Frenchmen into the fold of their revolt to remedy this problem: the nobility.<sup>127</sup>

During the time of the militia under the *ancien régime*, the nobility had played an important role in helping to limit abuses of administration when it came to duties of the militia and the *corvée*. For example, they made decisions about the digging of wells but also spent much of their own money on such projects. The result of this spending was that the vast majority of nobles in the Vendée had become very poor by the time the Revolution broke out.<sup>128</sup> This poverty meant that the feudal-like system which existed elsewhere in the country was a much less monetarily divided system in the west. The peasants of the Vendée could likely relate to the nobles of their region much more easily because they shared not only a closer lifestyle to

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 226.

<sup>126</sup> Reynald Secher, *A French Genocide* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 10-14.

<sup>127</sup> Doyle, *The Oxford History*, 226.

<sup>128</sup> Secher, *A French Genocide*, 13-14.

themselves but also their loyalty to the king and the Church. It is not surprising then that the peasantry and the nobles were able to unite so easily in the fight against the *patriotes*.

The most prominent noble to join the cause of the Vendée was the retired naval officer François-Athanase Charette de la Contrie.<sup>129</sup> Charette, as he was more commonly known, quickly became the head of the Vendéan troops which they had begun to call the *armée catholique et royale*. Many of its soldiers wore the symbol of the Sacred Heart into battle, reinforcing the religious motivations of the rebels.<sup>130</sup> Charette led the army on a successful drive north throughout June of 1793 which began with the retaking of Machecoul and continued across the Loire River into Angers. As the army headed toward Nantes, they sent out a call for the city to surrender. Despite the fact that the city supported the Girondin revolutionaries against the Montagnards and their government in Paris, the leaders of Nantes were not interested in surrendering to the Vendéans. The army was uncoordinated, however, and the siege of the city lasted only two days before they withdrew.<sup>131</sup>

By the end of 1793, the Revolutionary army had beaten down the Vendéans to a fraction of their original size. With the Terror now fully in swing, the Revolutionary government was merciless in their attack on the Vendéans and retribution in the region was immense. According to records, approximately forty-two percent of death sentence during the Terror were given in the areas which had been involved in the revolt. In these reprisals the religious undertones of the revolt and its participants were once again highlighted. Over a six week period beginning in November of 1793, a campaign known as the *noyades* left 1,800 dead in the waters of the Loire. The majority of the victims were priests, especially non-juring, who were hog-tied and placed in

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<sup>129</sup> Edward J. Woell, *Small-town Martyrs & Murderers: Religious Revolution & Counterrevolution in Western France, 1794-1914* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2006), 150.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>131</sup> Doyle, *The Oxford History*, 243.

a holed barge to sink into the Loire.<sup>132</sup> Many of the "rebels" were shot but this seems infinitely more humane than the fate of the priests. These merciless executions no doubt became one of the rallying points for the guerilla warfare which continued in the Vendée until 1796, long after the organized revolt had been put down.

Outside of the Vendée the link between nobility, religion, and dissent was equally as prominent. France's Second Estate, or noble class, enjoyed a number of privileges under the rulers of the *ancien régime*. Although their power in the provinces had in many ways been decreased by the craftily constructed court of Louis XIV, by the late eighteenth century they still enjoyed a large number of advantages in areas such as taxation and access to positions. One area of society which the nobility was given almost exclusive access to was the higher offices of the Church. Through the sale of offices, sons of elite Frenchmen came to dominate the offices of bishops and cardinals. Considering the Gallican nature of the French Church, these positions afforded their holders an extraordinary amount of power over the activities of the lower clergy.

The faithful of France, particularly within the bourgeoisie, were not particularly happy with the rampant simony in the Church. Men of the Third Estate who desired to join the clergy were for the most part barred from ascending to any office higher than parish priest. This lack of access was something brought up repeatedly within the *cahiers de doléances* of 1789.<sup>133</sup> Given the power and wealth associated with the higher clerical offices, as well as some of the local ones, it is not too far a stretch to understand why men like Robespierre would have questioned the sincerity of religious belief. If this were the case, however, one would expect these insincere priests to have readily taken the oath of allegiance in an attempt to save both themselves and some portion of their wealth. While some did, about half of religious men and women chose to

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<sup>132</sup> Doyle, *The Oxford History*, 257.

<sup>133</sup> Shapiro and Markoff, *Revolutionary Demands*, 250.

refuse the oath and go into hiding or, if money or family connection allowed, emigrated. This struck a blow to the functional practice of Catholicism in France and yet both peasants and noblemen alike found ways to maintain their faith. The maintenance of Catholicism and the values associated with it was largely carried out by women, both noble and of the peasant and merchant classes.<sup>134</sup> This phenomenon is exemplified in the prison diaries of the Duchesse de Duras, a high ranking lady at court during the last years of the *ancien régime*.

Louise Henriette Charlotte Phillipine de Noailles de Durfort, Duchesse de Duras was born in 1745 to the House of Noailles. She was the only daughter of Phillippe de Noailles, the fourth Duke of Noailles, who earned distinction beyond his numerous hereditary titles during his career in the military. He was named *maréchal de France* by King Louis XVI and, according to the answers he gave to the Committee of General Security in 1794, was living on an income of more than one hundred thousand livres.<sup>135</sup> The Duchess herself was equally wealthy and perhaps even more prominent than her father in the last years of the *ancien régime*. In 1760 she married the Duke of Duras, Emmanuel-Céleste-Augustin de Durfort, and the couple lived largely at court. The Duchess served as *dame du palais* to Marie Antoinette and the Duke became first gentleman of the King's chambers shortly before the outbreak of the revolution.<sup>136</sup> This intimate position in the courtly dance suggests the power which the Duke and Duchess held at court as well as the precarious position the pair were placed in as the monarchy began to crumble.

In a country whose leadership was becoming increasingly hostile toward the aristocracy it was dangerous to be as close to the monarchy as the Duke and Duchess of Duras were. The Duke

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<sup>134</sup> Olwen Hufton, *Women and the Limits of Citizenship in the French Revolution* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 53-88.

<sup>135</sup> Madame Latour, "Madame Latour's Memoir" in *Prison Journals During the French Revolution* by the Duchesse de Duras née Noailles (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1891), 175.

<sup>136</sup> Monsieur le Chevalier de Courcelles, *Histoires généalogique et héraldique des pairs de France, des grands dignitaires de la couronne, des principales familles nobles du royaume, et des maisons princières de l'Europe, précédée de la généalogie de la maison de France*, vol (Paris: chez l'auteur, 1826), 294.

eventually emigrated to Germany where he joined the escaped French princes.<sup>137</sup> The Duchess, however, did not emigrate and instead decided to remain in France with her aging parents. At first the three remained at their home in Paris on the rue de l'Université, but in September of 1792, presumably after seeing the horror of the September Massacres, they retired to the estate of Phillipe de Noailles at Mouchy-le-Châtel in the Oise. They remained at the estate for just under a year before being arrested on August 23, 1793.<sup>138</sup> The Duchess was imprisoned separately from her parents, both of whom were beheaded in 1794 along with the Duchess's sister-in-law Louise de Noailles. The Duchess managed to avoid death and was released at the end of the Terror. In 1801 she wrote a memoir of her time in prison as well as collecting other documents and accounts relating to the imprisonment of her parents and sister-in-law. This memoir illuminates the persistence of religious belief and practice both within her own family and among the other nobles with whom they were confined.

From the beginning of the memoir it is clear that the Duchess and her parents were very devout Catholics. During their sojourn at Mouchy-le-Châtel, Madame de Duras spoke of her sadness at not being able to go to a church to worship due to the fact that the curate of the local parish had taken the oath required by the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. She said that instead they heard Mass from a refractory Catholic priest up until the time of their arrest.<sup>139</sup> This distinction serves to highlight a commitment to what many across France considered to be the true Church. Since the pope had condemned the oath in April of 1791, clergy who took it were no longer considered to be associated with Rome. By refusing to attend a church in which the curate had broken from Rome, the Noailles and the Duchess are representative of a continued

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Duchesse de Duras née Noailles, *Prison Journals During the French Revolution* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1891), 6-7.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 14.

devotion to the institutions and practices of traditional Catholicism. The Duchess did not indicate whether or not her family was housing the priest; it seems improbable, however, as he would likely have been found once the Duchess and her parents were placed under house arrest and guarded constantly. It is more likely that the priest was hidden by one of the locals in the commune and provided religious services to other members of the area. This practice was fairly common during the Terror. Women in particular were involved in hiding clerical vestments, sheltering priests who had not taken the oath, and organizing religious services.<sup>140</sup>

The importance of priests who refused to take the oath over those who belonged to the Constitutional Church is a theme which appears several times throughout the memoir. After the Duchess was arrested, her first prison became a convent which had formerly housed an order of nuns from the third order of Saint Francis. She described her fellow prisoners at the convent as a mix of ecclesiastics and a few nobles. Madame de Duras noted these priests as being "venerable priests, who set us an example of perfect submission to the will of Providence."<sup>141</sup> Just before this the Duchess laments at the state of the convent saying that "formerly the walls of this sacred place echoed only the praises of God, and now within them soldiers blasphemed undisturbed."<sup>142</sup> Given this disdain for the actors of the Revolution compared to her praise of the non-juring clergy, it is unlikely that the Duchess would have had affable words to say about a Constitutional clergyman.

When the Duchess was moved to her second prison at the chateau of Chantilly she was again housed with a collection of religious people, nobles, merchants, and soldiers as well as peasants. Her chamber was very near to one which housed a curate. This curate, whom the Duchess immediately describes as venerable performed services for his cellmates, an action

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<sup>140</sup> Hufton, *Women and the Limits of Citizenship*, 76-77.

<sup>141</sup> Duchesse de Duras, *Prison Journals*, 21.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

which very much impressed her. He was among the priests whom the Duchess describes as "real confessors of Jesus Christ, to be revered on account of their patience and charity."<sup>143</sup> This praise is contrasted with her comments about the priests who renounced the pope by taking the oath, a group which she describes as unprincipled. She describes one in particular who was allegedly a Revolutionary through and through as "he wore habitually the national uniform" and "when the civic festivals were given in the village of Chantilly he had been the composer of couplets."<sup>144</sup> Her disdain for him individually could be construed as simply an antipathy for the Revolution itself, yet in the context of her continued praise of refractory, or abjuring, priests it serves to highlight her commitment to pre-Revolutionary Catholicism and its institution.

The Duchess's abhorrence of the religious policies of the Revolution did not end with her aversion to the Constitutional clergy. She viewed the Revolutionaries and in particular her jailers as ridiculous as well as hypocrites. This especially can be seen during the Feast of the Supreme Being, the celebration of the cult which Robespierre had created in that famous speech. The festival took place on the 8th of June 1794 and was created as the first state festival to celebrate the official rest-days of the new Revolutionary calendar.<sup>145</sup> By this time the Duchess was being housed in a prison in Paris, a situation which placed her close to the guillotine and in fear of a transfer to the infamous Conciergerie. The day before the festival the prison guards placed a large number of branches and leaves in the courtyard where the prisoners would occasionally be allowed to walk. They were then set to the task of creating decorations, which hint towards a very Greco-Roman element to the celebration. The Duchess refused the work and returned to her quarters. The next day during the festivities the Duchess listened to the jailers dancing and celebrating below and noted that the festival occurred on what traditionally was Pentecost. Her

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 276.

judgment of the feast is a single sharply cutting sentence: "it was [a] day...on which Robespierre permitted God to be adored provided He should not be called by that name."<sup>146</sup> Madame de Duras, viewed the feast and likely the cult itself as a mockery of her Catholic faith. She also illuminates the inconsistencies within the implementation of Revolutionary policies. In one story the Duchess relates the troubles of Madame de Pons, a fellow prisoner who had been a Vicomtesse during the *ancien régime*. Madame de Pons had been separated from her young daughter who was being transferred to the Luxembourg prison in Paris. The Vicomtesse fell to her knees begging the prison commissioner, known as Citizen Martin, to allow her to go with her daughter. The daughter was brought before the commissioner by two gendarmes and questioned. When asked her name the daughter simply responded that it was Pons. Citizen Martin then responded by asking Mademoiselle de Pons for her *noms de baptême*, or Christian name.<sup>147</sup> Given the ardent dechristianization enacted by the Revolutionary government it seems odd that the head of a prison should still use such a term. His use of it hints to disharmony between the religious doctrines of the National Assembly and the actual feelings of the *patriotes*.

There are several indications in the day to day life of the Duchess during her imprisonment which further indicate her knowledge of and devotion to Catholicism. The first indication of this is in prayer. At her first prison in the convent, she and most of the other prisoners ventured into the chapel frequently to say their prayers.<sup>148</sup> Once transferred to Chantilly the Duchess met a captain of the French Guards, the military regiment of the kings of France. This captain, Monsieur de Boury, was imprisoned with his wife and their ten children. The Duchess praised the family as being truly religious and resigned to the will of God. This

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<sup>146</sup> Duchesse de Duras, *Prison Journals*, 96-97.

<sup>147</sup> Louise Henriette Charlotte Philippine de Noailles de Durfort, duchesse de Duras, *Journal des prisons de mon père de ma mère et des miennes* (Paris: Plon, 1889), 73.

<sup>148</sup> Duchesse de Duras, *Prison Journals*, 21.

resignation to the will of God is something which the Duchess sought for much of her imprisonment, and eventually seemed to find. She along with other "pious prisoners" gathered in the apartment of Monsieur de Boury and prayed together.<sup>149</sup> The Duchess always seems to have found a wealth of other prisoners with whom she was able to practice her religious beliefs. This can partly be attributed to the demography of those who were being arrested during the Terror, but it also speaks to how widespread religious belief was within the nobility. To risk the potentially deadly backlash of their jailers or the Tribunal also shows its depth.

The Duchess continued to pray daily in each prison she was moved to. Her language also shows her intense admiration for those who maintain their Catholic values and practices despite their confinement. At Chantilly she praised a group of nuns, whom she lovingly refers to as "holy virgins," for enduring their situation and "never [failing] to read their office as though they were in their convent."<sup>150</sup> The Duchess spoke of finding the most peace in the cells of the faithful and how over time her prayer helped her to come to terms with what she believed was her impending death. After the death of her parents, in particular, Madame de Duras longed to be able to die for her faith. During her time in prison her faith became stronger and she wished that her death could be that of a martyr rather than the result of her birth into the aristocracy.<sup>151</sup> By imprisoning her, the Revolutionary government unintentionally strengthened the Duchess's existing Catholicism rather than stripping it away. It is unlikely that she was the only survivor, or even fatality, of imprisonment during the Terror who experienced this deepened religiousness.

When the Terror ended in late July of 1794 and the Duchess was released, she continued to practice her religion in secret. She dressed herself as a servant and each morning before dawn left the house where she roomed to attend clandestine Masses in secret places of worship. Once

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 42-43.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 51-52.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 116-117.

the Church was reestablished in 1801 she had a Mass said for her parents, who had received no funeral or even a grave after their execution.<sup>152</sup> That same year when she wrote her memoir of the Terror she also compiled a number of letters and official documents relating to her parents and her sister-in-law Louise. The Duchess was able to procure the will which Louise had written in early April of 1794. The structure of the will is very reminiscent of a prayer. She begins with "in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" and continues with two paragraphs proclaiming her devotion to Catholicism.<sup>153</sup> Her diction calls to mind the Nicene Creed by referring to the institution multiple times as the Roman Catholic Apostolic Church. This shows a knowledge of Church tradition and text beyond that of merely childhood exposure to the ideas and suggests a continued practice.

The Duchess wrote in her memoir what she intended to do when it came time for her to face the Revolutionary Tribunal. She had planned to refuse to answer any of the questions put to her and upon sentencing, which she presumed would be the guillotine, she would say to them: "You are condemning an innocent person; as a Christian I forgive you, but the God of vengeance will judge you."<sup>154</sup> She intended to use her faith as both rallying point and weapon, a situation which came to pass in the Revolt in the Vendée.

When Robespierre gave his speech the armies of the Vendée were already being pushed back by the Revolutionary forces. Despite this, however, the revolt had been a major hurdle to republican efforts both in western France and in the war with Europe since the conflict diverted military force from the outward campaign. It was also an important example to the Revolutionary government of the depth of religious devotion among the provincial people of France, both noble and peasant. Religious policy in France began to change after the war of the

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 132-133.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 116-117.

Vendée ended in late 1793. The Cult of the Supreme Being and its return to a deity was the first step on a path that would after the Revolution result in the reestablishment of open religious practice in the country. The nobility, whom Robespierre accused of being atheistic, were as much involved in the persistence and restoration of Catholic practice as any other group: both in prison and in war.

## Conclusion

After the fall of Robespierre and the end of the Terror in the summer of 1794, there was a marked shift in the Revolution. The National Convention, in an attempt to stabilize the country and prevent the revival of both royalism and the terrorism of Thermidor, gave way to the Directory in November of 1795.<sup>155</sup> This new government, while less openly aggressive toward the Catholic Church, was still highly anti-clerical in its final years. Most in Paris believed that the Church had lost its battle for the piety of France and that the institution, especially following the death of Pius VI in 1799, would crumble.<sup>156</sup> Outside of Paris, however, the Directory meant an opportunity for a return to traditional religious belief, and everyday Catholic practice was revived on a massive scale. This revival and his experiences with the military led Napoleon Bonaparte to reconsider the Directory's attitude toward the Church when he assumed control of the Directory in 1799.<sup>157</sup>

Napoleon saw that the Church was an incredibly resilient institution and that religion was still a powerful force within French society. By January of 1800, the First Consul was making efforts to reestablish the relationship between France and the pope in Rome. Negotiations over the specifics of a reconciliation lasted for over a year, but the final result was a Concordat which officially reestablished the Catholic Church of France. In essence this document was very similar to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy as it provided for election to clerical office and gave the government the powers such as the ability to nominate bishops and to have a role in the division of French diocese. It also implemented an oath of loyalty to both God and the government, though its emphasis was largely on the maintenance of public tranquility. Where the Concordat

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<sup>155</sup> William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 318.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 385.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 385-386.

differed from the Civil Constitution of the Clergy was in the renewal of papal say concerning the confirmation of appointments.<sup>158</sup> The act of reestablishing the Catholic Church in France was not an act of little consequence; many politicians and military men felt that Napoleon was renouncing the Revolution itself by doing so. As a result, many people began to fear for his safety.<sup>159</sup> If the act was so dangerous, why would Napoleon bother?

Napoleon's Concordat serves to confirm what the writings of Monsignor de Salamon, Mère Marie-Jéronyme, and the Duchess of Duras illuminated about religion during the French Revolution: it persisted in a very strong way. If Catholicism was not so deeply rooted in the culture, and such a powerful source of public dissention during the Revolution, there would have been no need to risk the backlash of reestablishing the Church. The stories of the internuncio, the abbess, and the Duchess are individual examples of a broader theme within the country of France. They were persecuted to a greater extent than the average French Catholic due to their positions in society prior to the Revolution, yet each spoke to the common struggle between state and Church.

Within the history of France the Revolution was exceptional both in terms of political advancement and religious suppression. For many *patriotes* there was an idea that one could be either for France or for the Church, however the men and women described in the primary sources suggest otherwise. Perhaps if the Revolution had been able to reconcile the Catholic Church with the progressive politics of the time, the First Republic would not have been so short-lived. Either way, it is clear that despite their efforts the Revolutionary governments were never able to drive Catholicism out of France.

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<sup>158</sup> Philip G. Dwyer and Peter McPhee, ed., *The French Revolution and Napoleon: A sourcebook* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 149-152.

<sup>159</sup> Doyle, *The Oxford History*, 389-390.

Napoleon believed in 1800 that the majority of French people were still Catholic, and he was right. Religion had persisted during the Radical Phase of the French Revolution through small acts of defiance to the government's policies. It persisted in the refusal of oaths by refractory priests imprisoned with the Monsignor de Salamon, in the character of Navres blocking the entrance to the convent sacristy from Constitutional clergymen, and in the clandestine masses attended by the Duchess before dawn every morning. In these little moments the faithful of France were able to keep their religion alive in a vibrant, albeit non-traditional, way.

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