

The French Revolution and the Clergy

The French Revolution took place in the 18th century and was the first example of the application of the enlightenment ideas that were gaining traction in Europe. The ideas included democracy, free speech, education; the principles that liberalism was built upon. Enlightenment philosophy was not anti-religion, however many of the thinkers (especially those involved in the French Revolution) believed the church was a major problem in society.

Underneath French revolutionary rule, there were drastic changes within the clergy, resulting in a religious system at the end of the revolution that was far different than the system that entered. Before discussing the changes throughout this tumultuous period, we must first establish what constitutes the “start” and “end” of the revolution. For the purposes of this paper, we will say that the “start” of the revolution was 1789, coinciding with beginning of public protests within Paris. As for the “end” (the more controversial date when establishing a timeline of the French revolution) we will say that when Napoleon Bonaparte came into power, the revolution ended (1799, when he became First Consul of France). It is important to note that although we are saying the revolution “ended” that year, revolutionary change continued under Napoleon, a fact that will be further emphasized in this paper.

1. Ancien Regime (Pre-revolution Clergy)

France before the revolution was later (during the revolution and after) referred to as the *Ancien Regime*, reflecting an outdated and “ancient” society. One of the main reasons that the French saw the time period this way was due to the power the clergy held in society. The privileged nature of the church during the *Ancien Regime* was a contributing factor to later anti-church attitudes.

Taxation and the Clergy

The taxation structure of the *Ancien Regime* was majorly imbalanced, dating back to the middle ages. The first two “Estates”, the clergy and the nobility, were exempt from taxation an immediate injustice in the eyes of the Third Estate, the working class. In the privilege oriented social structure of the *Ancien Regime*, property could not be taxed, the idea being that those who

worked hard (either themselves or previous generations) had a right to the land they owned. This policy dated back to the Middle Ages and as a thriving member of this system, the clergy (the First Estate), only served to gain more power as the years passed. The clergy made a “free gift” every year to the government, however, the amount was still subject to the church hierarchy¹. The idea of giving a gift gives us a glimpse into the power that the clergy held, even over the government. In reality the “gift” should have been owed to the government and much more valuable, boosted by the church’s considerable wealth.

The obvious question now is, if wealthy were not being taxed, who was? And the answer, of course, is the Third Estate, the peasants and the working class. Pennies were squeezed out of those who were poorest, a perverse solution to the ever-dwindling government funds. In fact, this obtuse taxation strategy was one of the reasons the government deficit grew so large and a revolution was necessary.

The Clergy as an Aristocracy

The clergy before the revolution was most certainly, aristocratic in nature, displaying ideas such as the exclusivity of the membership, property ownership, and exploitation of the lower classes. Firstly, only those of a certain standing in society, in other words: wealthy, could obtain a ranking position in the Church. This created a structure that kept power with those who already had it and removed the First and Second Estate even further from the Third. Of course, as a result of this policy, numbers of priests and clergy officials declined. Such was the entitlement of those within the system that when the General Assembly of the Clergy of France met, discussions centered around how to persuade clergymen to force their sons into service, rather than looking outward².

Land ownership was central to France’s social order, there were generally two groups of people, those who owned property and those who did not. We previously looked at how taxation surrounded the idea of property and the injustice of it. The clergy only stood to benefit from that policy of taxation and as such valued property extremely highly. The clergy owned much property throughout France before the Revolution and they only tried to gain more; some would

¹ Jocelyn Hunt, *The French Revolution* (Routledge, 1998), 3.

² Timothy Tackett, *Priest & Parish in Eighteenth-Century France* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), 41.

even pursue a career in the church just to attain a “benefice”. Being a member of the clergy granted you income, and most importantly land ownership. As soon as a member was sworn in, official documents were signed, and land was given to that member³. Again, this only kept property within the same set of people, because only members of the First and Second Estates were allowed to become clergymen. It took power away from the government and the Third Estate because this land was often given by the State and then the working class would live on it under the clergyman.

Lastly, being a member of the Clergy, entitled you to revenues from the Third Estate. These were gifts, sometimes paid in the form of money, given after baptisms, weddings, or other church officiated ceremonies. Giving offerings may appear as a simple thank you from those involved in the acts, however, the clergy expected to be paid for their efforts, establishing rates and publishing what or how much to give in return for certain Catholic ceremonies⁴. It was acts like this that displayed a pre-revolutionary clergy that had forgotten their faith to religion and were acting simply for personal gain, achieving it by exploiting those below them.

With policies and developments like these, enlightenment ideas of equality inevitably gained momentum throughout the latter stages of the *Ancien Régime* and contributed immensely to the revolution and the temporary downfall of the Church.

2. Revolutionary Clergy Changes

Initial Changes (1789)

Now that we have covered the relationship between the Clergy and the people of France under the *Ancien Régime*, we have chronologically reached the starting point of revolutionary changes regarding religion in France. There were waves of legislation that had resounding and lasting impact on the Clergy from the beginning to the end of the revolution.

The first changes to the Clergy began under the Estates General, a provisional government body, created to deal with the rising national deficit and hunger issues. The group consisted of the First, Second and Third estate⁵. Their initial actions stripped away the old

³ Ibid., 96.

⁴ Ibid., 130

⁵ Jocelyn Hunt, *The French Revolution* (Routledge, 1998), 3.

relationships between the Church and the people, much to the chagrin of the First Estate, who were outnumbered by Enlightenment thinkers. For a start, on August 4, 1789, the “feudal rights” of the Catholic Church were removed, taking one of their main sources of income with it, preventing further exploitation of the Third Estate. The worst was yet to come for those in charge however; on November 2, 1789, the Church was obliged to make up the Government’s deficit, fulfilling the very problem the Estates General and been created to fix⁶. This was a clear indication that those now in charge of France were no longer going to allow the Church to profit off of the French people and were going to punish them for the past exploitations, utilizing them without remorse.

Civil Constitution of the Clergy (1790)

With these initial persecutions of the Clergy, it seems inevitable that the revolutionary government would soon put official restrictions on them. The National Assembly (formed in 1789 from members of the Third Estate involved in the Estates General) did just that, passing the Civil Constitution of the Clergy in June 1790. It was later enforced in November that year with a decree requiring all members of the Church to swear oath to their new constitution⁷.

The original bill itself contained four titles. The first, sectioned France into eighty-three religions districts (*circonscriptions*), thus the number of bishoprics was reduced from the previous 103 to eighty-three. With this change, many ranks within church hierarchy were removed (tradition titles and offices such as prebendaries and canonries) in an attempt to force the organization to become more collegial rather than hierarchical. Section five of title one was intended to prevent the “new” clergy from being subject to previous hierarchies by announcing that the Church of France, was not subject to any foreign authority (including Rome).

Title two introduced democracy, replacing tradition procedures to fill open positions with an election process. Title three defined structured salaries for clerical employees, preventing them from chasing the fortune they had achieved under the *Ancien Régime*. Lastly, title four required clergymen to reside in the same districts they were serving⁸.

⁶ François Furet and Mona Ozouf, eds., *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1898), 449.

⁷ John McManners, *The French Revolution and the Church* (London: S.P.C.K., 1969), 38.

⁸ François Furet and Mona Ozouf, eds., *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1898), 452.

These drastic changes forced onto the Clergy were met with opposition from those saying that the government had no right to get involved with the Church and the reforms resulted in severe emigration. Emigration was a constant through revolutionary times, the official list of immigrants kept between 1792 and 1800 contained 145,000, of these, 25.2% were believed to be members of the Clergy⁹.

At first the legislation was met with silence from the Pope. However, on March 10, 1791, he officially condemned the piece of legislation. With the Pope predictably on the side of anti-constitution, Catholics in both France and foreign countries, started protesting, sometimes turning to violence. They instigated change, forcing small adjustments to ease the transition although no amount of change in the constitution could retract the clear signs of anti-Clergy intent from the National Assembly.

The Civil Constitution of the Clergy shook the organization to its core, uprooting tradition practices and distancing the Church from Rome. With the constitution in place, the de-Christianization process throughout France began to take effect.

Revolutionary Religion

It is abundantly clear that legislative steps were taken to curb clerical power in revolutionary France, however, what took the place of Christianity in French society? Armand-Gaston Camus, a representative of the Third Estate in the National Assembly said, “Surely we have the power to change religion”¹⁰. Change implies going from one state to another, what was result Camus and other Revolutionaries working toward?

In the absence of Religion, revolutionary cults took hold. They were used as a political weapon by some leaders to create unyielding support. The first of these bodies was the Cult of Reason. In response to the legislative action against the Clergy, people took matters into their own hands, pillaging churches, taking valuables for themselves and in some cases returning them to the State. It was the seizure of treasures from the churches of *Nièvre* by *Fouché*, that instigated the Cult of Reason. On November 7, 1793, after retrieving said treasures and official oaths of fealty from significant bishops, a civic festival of liberty was planned for the following Sunday. A masque was produced that celebrated “the triumph that Reason has just won over the

⁹ Ibid., 325.

¹⁰ Ibid., 560.

prejudices of eighteen centuries”¹¹. The play was at the heart of the Cult of Reason; its theatrical enactments of a woman fighting off shadows and monsters represented the dramatism that surrounded future festivals of Reason. Although referred to as a “Cult” it was not followed with the typical vigor that surrounds our view of the word, rather it was simply encompasses the festivals that were thrown to celebrate free thinking, liberty or nature. The legacy of the Cult of Reason is the theatrics of its celebrations and the plasticity of its followers in the face of perceived free thinking.

The succeeding cult to that of Reason was the cult of the Supreme Being, sounding almost as if the people were worshipping a God. Here we see a more typical cult following, with a distinct attachment to a revolutionary leader. Although Robespierre was a participant in the Cult of Reason, it was he that was at the forefront of the Supreme Being, and it was his downfall that coincided with its end. The Cult of the Supreme Being, more than that which proceeds it, brings about the question of if it was the invention of believers or political stratagem used to unite the people. It provided a way back for Catholicism with the involvement of priests and the reintroduction of the concept of morality. For Robespierre, debate rages over whether he was a true believer. There is no doubt that he used the cult to unite those beneath him, typifying an old enlightenment idea that religion holds people in check. The supreme being was also a tool of the terror, the mass violence that took place under Robespierre’s Committee of Public Safety. At many guillotine executions, bouquets were laid for the Supreme Being. Despite Robespierre’s attempt to placate the people, he was eventually overthrown, thus ending the Terror and the Supreme Being. The legacy of the Cult of the Supreme being was tarnished by its role in the senseless killings of the Terror, however it was clear that a divine power could be used to unite the French People, a theme that reappears years later.

Emigration and Foreign Response

Throughout all of these changes, France was dealing with other issues involving foreign powers and emigration. As previously noted, emigration numbers throughout the revolution were extremely large, potentially 150,000 to 160,000 left the country between 1792 and 1800. Among those who left, the clergy represented 25.2 percent, an understandable response based on the

¹¹ Ibid., 564.

changes that took place¹². Emigration was a constant throughout this period and was responsible for creating the word émigré, someone who has left their country for another, typically for political reasons. The Émigrés left for a variety of reasons; the clergy left in such large numbers because of the persecution they faced, the nobility (16.8 percent) left to demonstrate opposition to the revolution. It was the fear of this opposition leaking to foreign powers that drove the Legislative Assembly to attempt to curb the exodus. The bill of November 9, 1791 authorized the death penalty on any emigrant that did not return within the year. The bill was eventually stopped by royal veto, but official legislation was enacted on April 8, 1792. The law stated that property of any emigrant could be confiscated if they did not return within the month. The law applied to all that had left since 1789¹³. This contributed to the clergy losing much of their original power that came from land ownership.

It is interesting to consider how intense the treatment of the clergy was that these laws did not hinder their emigration. The biggest wave of clergy emigration was in 1792 (after the property confiscation law was enacted). The radicals in the National Assembly wanted to deport those priests who refused to take the oath of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy (refractory priests), but the king refused to approve these demands. However, when the monarchy fell in the summer of 1792, the refractory priests faced the choices of swearing oath, deportation or emigration. This is when the bulk of the 25.2 percent of clergy émigrés left, despite the knowledge that if they were to return to the country, they would no longer have a place to call home. This outlines just how severe the situation was for clergy members; they would leave their homes, knowing that to return one day would be nigh on impossible.

With large scale change and mass emigration, France became embroiled in foreign conflict. The beginning of the revolution (in some cases throughout) promised much for foreign enlightenment thinkers, eager to see a change in Europe. However, many neighboring countries feared revolutionary France because their new ideas could potentially usurp those in charge. The Austria-France conflict shows a country with their own *Ancien Regime* that was uncomfortable with the changes happening across the border. After the death of the Austrian-Hungarian Emperor, Leopold, his son, a young Francis II took the throne. Francis II was eager to defend the traditional structure and most importantly to our discussion, the rights of the Pope. Many of the

¹² Ibid., 325.

¹³ Ibid., 327.

émigrés fled to Austria and the revolutionary government attempted to force them to return. Inevitably, France declared war on April 20, 1792¹⁴. Defending the rights of the Pope, and by extension, Catholicism was central to many of the conflicts throughout this time. Just as there were those liberals in neighboring countries who were excited to see change imposed, there were also those who wanted power to remain in traditional hands and that included the clergy.

Perhaps the most impactful military campaign of the revolution was that of Italy; not just because of the victory but most importantly the strategic mastermind behind it: Napoleon Bonaparte. We will discuss Napoleon's impact on the legacy of the French Revolution in a future section, however it is important to note that it was this conquest that raised him to prominence within France. The Italian campaign was again, a conflict between the old world and the new, an allied coalition of Austria, parts of Italy, and Britain versus revolutionary France (led by Napoleon). As is typical of the many conflicts at the time, the opposition were wary of France's effect on their people and their church. Catholic parts of Italy did not like the treatment of the clergy within France and thus fought to defend the pope. Britain on the other hand fought out of fear of parallel peasant revolts back home from their equivalent of the third estate. The French Revolution was met with little support from foreign powers still aligned with the *Ancien Régime* ideas and attacks on the clergy did little to improve relations.

The Directory (1795)

The Directory succeeded Robespierre and the National Convention as the government leaders in 1795. It consisted of five elected members or "directors" who oversaw a bicameral legislation. They ruled for four years, and many of their accomplishments are dated in reference to the fall of the monarchy (Year I: 1792, Year II: 1793, etc.). France under The Directory was far less aggressive towards the Clergy, in fact, it even returned some of its power. Their constitution of Year III established changes throughout France including freedom of religion¹⁵. This represents a significant change from the governments of years before. To allow the people to choose a religion of their own is extraordinarily different from what occurred just a year before under Robespierre. Although leaders like him may consider it a step backwards from what they had been working to achieve, other enlightenment thinkers would consider it a step forward

¹⁴ Jocelyn Hunt, *The French Revolution* (Routledge, 1998), 39.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

from the *Ancien Regime*. A public statement allowing the people to worship whatever religion they like is drastically different from the state of affairs when the Catholic church was at the height of their power within France.

The main achievements of the Directory were in foreign affairs, where Napoleon led armies to many a victory throughout Europe and northern Africa. These victories resulted in peace treaties in some cases, ending years of war that had waged under previous leadership. The Directory did not enact direct legislation in respect to the Clergy, however they did introduce freedom of religion, a relatively novel idea that represented changes from both previous revolutionary leadership and the *Ancien Regime*.

3. Post-Revolution Resurgence

As explained at the beginning of this paper, the revolution ended (for our purposes) in 1799 when Napoleon became First Consul of France. This new role arose from the end of the Directory and was given to the man that had such military success under their leadership. The new constitution of Year VIII created the role as the leader of the government, advised by two others. The initial plan was for consuls to hold renewable terms of 10 years, however that was quickly ended with Napoleon declaring himself first consul for life in 1804. Napoleon's intentions to rule forever are of little interest to us; the impact he had on the Clergy and the reversal of revolutionary changes is what we will focus on.

Return of Catholicism under Napoleon

Although there was a definitive return of Catholicism under Napoleon, there was certainly still an element of mistrust and they were never given the same power they had held before the revolution. For instance, Napoleon held negotiations with the Pope that led to Catholicism becoming the majority religion of France, however he was not swayed into returning the pre-Revolutionary church property. They would not enjoy the same level of land ownership they did before. Similarly, they may have been the majority religion, but the First Consul was still the one who paid the clergy, and thus controlled them ¹⁶. Because of their recent lack of power, the clergy had during the revolution they were eager to accept anything from the new First

¹⁶ Ibid., 89.

Consul, and their restoration indebted them to him despite stricter laws than those they had been under during the *Anci n Regime*.

One of the most telling events to show the relationship between the church and Napoleon was his coronation as Emperor of France in 1804. Traditionally monarchs were crowned by the Pope, as had been the case throughout the *Anci n Regime* in France. The Pope was present at the coronation, a clear sign of Catholicism’s newfound station under Napoleon’s leadership. However, he was not the one to crown the new Emperor. Napoleon crowned himself, indicating that although the clergy had returned, it no longer operated separately from the state, nor enjoyed privileges over the Emperor ¹⁷. Napoleon could not be held back even by God’s authority; the man was the sole leader of post-revolutionary France.

If Napoleon was so committed to be the sole and permanent leader of his country, why did he allow the clergy to return, an organization that had proved troublesome for monarchs in the past? He was not a religious man, he spent time with many of the anticlerical philosophers, however, he had a broader vision of how to develop France than they. Napoleon, always the strategist, knew the value in uniting his people under religion, in fact, in 1805 one of his advisors said, “deprive the people of their faith and you will be left with nothing but highway robbers”¹⁸. He had a similar view to that of Robespierre ten years prior, religion was useful tool to control the masses, and he used it to its full effect.

Legacy of Revolutionary Religion

In the eyes of some enlightenment thinkers at the time, Napoleon’s changes to the clergy were counter-revolutionary and undid much of the work that came before. There is some truth to this statement, however if we are to compare religion before the revolution to religion after Napoleon there were still significant improvements in terms of limiting the churches power and freeing the people and the government from their grasp. The clergy was no longer a majority landowner in France, they did not operate separately from the jurisdiction of the government and they were now held to some standard by their own state. This is a definitive sign of progress in terms of enlightenment ideas of freedom and liberty.

¹⁷ Ibid., 91.

¹⁸ Fran ois Furet and Mona Ozouf, eds., *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1898), 282.

The changes and discussion of religion from the revolution left a lasting impact on the France. The idea of religious independence rose from the French revolution and became an intense topic throughout the world. The United States adopted the idea of separation of church and state. Within France itself, the topic continued to be debated. More minor revolutions continued within the country for the next century, each one bringing with it the topic of enlightenment ideas. France's continual colonization of other countries, particularly North African, Muslim ones brought the debate to prominence as well. By 1890 France was funding non-Catholic public schools, evidence of their own separation of church and state¹⁹. The legacy of the revolution in terms of religion did not stop after Napoleon, or even in the following century. Today, France is a multicultural society, with many different ethnicities and religions represented, pioneered by the changes of the clergy in the 1790s.

¹⁹ Patrick Boucheron and Stephane Gerson, eds., *France in TheWorld: A New Global History* (New York: Other Press, 2019), 613.