Did the French Revolution start a new chapter in the history of Western Christianity and, if so, in what respects?

The French Revolution (1789-99) is often lauded as one of the most pivotal moments in the history of Western Christianity[1]; an event that precipitated a momentous religious transformation across Europe[2]. Indeed, these claims are not understatements. The actions of the Reign of Terror (1793-4) and the Directory (1795-99): regicide and the radical and devastating 'de-Christianization' of France, reverberated across the world and is often accredited for the rise of anticlerical and antireligious movements and an increasingly revolutionary Europe. Not only did the revolution spread Enlightenment ideals but encouraged the subversion of religious authority and sparked debate over secularisation and the relationship between liberty and equality, between collective and individual freedoms.

To determine whether the French Revolution truly started a new chapter in the history of Western Christianity, as Suzanne Desan, Bryan Banks, and Timothy Tackett suggest, our approach will be twofold. Firstly, we will engage with the idea of the French revolution as a 'new chapter' suggesting that the revolution ought not to be considered an inevitable continuation of Enlightenment thinking and the climate of eighteenth-century France (Michel Vovelle), but a truly novel and unexpected shift (John McManners). Secondly, we will consider the irreversible influence of the nascent French Republic in France, and across Western Europe to germinate Enlightenment ideals of religious tolerance, secularisation, and freedom of thought.

Before widening our scope to Western Europe, it is worth engaging in the debate over whether the French Revolution ought to be considered a 'new chapter' (that is, novel and unexpected), or simply the inevitable consequence of a growing anticlericalism in France. To do this we must assess the claim of Michel Vovelle that the Catholic Church was already in full decline, and that eighteenth century France was "marching towards disenchantment" by the time of the revolution[3]. There is certainly some credence to this suggestion. Vovelle remarks on the "secularisation of wills"[4] in France, evidenced by the decline of money gifted to the Church, the sharp decline in clerical recruitment, and the increasing popularity of secular literature in favour of religious tracts. France was not immune to the influences of the Enlightenment, and literature such as Voltaire's *Candide* (1759) and famous remark that "every

[1] Tackett, Timothy. "The French Revolution and Religion to 1794", Chapter 27 in *The Cambridge History of Christianity, Volume 7: Enlightenment, Reawakening and Revolution, 1660–1815*, pg. 536
[2] Suzanne Desan, 'The French Revolution and Religion 1795-1815', Chapter 28 in *Christianity: Enlightenment, Reawakening and Revolution 1660-1815,* pg. 556
[3] Bryan A. Banks, 'Religion and Revolution in Europe', in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Europe*, pg. 2
[4] Timothy Tackett, *ibid.* pg. 539

sensible man, every honourable man must hold Christian religion in horror" spread across elite circles and certainly disrupted the continuity of Catholic authority. However, we ought not 'read back' after the shocking anticlericalism of the revolution as an expected inevitability. Indeed, the Catholic Church was by no means crumbling and decrepit under secularist pressure. While John McManner's argument that the period constituted a "golden age of the French Church"[5], and the apogee of the Catholic Reformation[6] are perhaps overstated, the Catholic Church dominated the French kingdom up until the eve of the revolution. Not only did the Catholic Church own large portions of the country, but controlled the religious landscape with thousands of convents, monasteries, Churches, and schools. The Church had the power to issue sacramental fees, tithes, and seigneurial dues; it received tax exemptions, validated each kingly succession and its Bishops had significant influence in the Gallican government. Alexis de Tocqueville's suggestion that the Catholic Church would have slowly crumbled as a result of the "*longuee duree* secular shifts"[7] in France may well be accurate, but it was certainly not an inevitability in 1789. Indeed, the strength of the Catholic Counter-Enlightenment, and the popular religious revival under Napoleon Bonaparte indicated that Catholicism had by no means died out in France. Thus, the French Revolution was certainly a new and unexpected chapter in religious history rather than the inevitable consequence of Catholic decline and the logical conclusion of Enlightenment critique[8].

For a period of history to be regarded as a 'new chapter', it must be sufficiently disruptive and novel from what it preceded it. This is certainly case with the abandonment of the *ancien regime* and the creation of a French Republic, but also in the level of unprecedented anti-clericalism and 'dechristianisation' that took place. The National Assembly destroyed the authority and influence of the Church through radical reforms: monastic property was seized, tithe rights were suppressed, public practice was banned, 135 dioceses were reduced to 83, Church bells were melted, religious iconography whitewashed, and approximately 3,000 priests were killed, and 35,000 exiled or fled[9]. It was this radical and unprecedented de-Christianization that had such a profound impact on not only France, but the whole of Western Europe as we will later discuss. Not only was it the violence of the French Revolution that was unprecedented, but the ideas that it introduced relating to the position of religion in society. We are introduced to state-persecution of a majority religion with the clergy being forced to submit to the state by stating allegiance to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy (and all non-jurors being

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5 Tackett, Timothy. "The French Revolution and Religion to 1794", Chapter 27 in *The Cambridge History of Christianity, Volume 7: Enlightenment, Reawakening and Revolution, 1660–1815*, pg. 536
6 Bryan A. Banks, 'Religion and Revolution in Europe', in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Europe*, pg. 3
7 Banks, *ibid.*, pg. 4
8 It seems such a radical shift could only have emerged out of the 'Terror' of 1789-1799, the threat of starvation, and the scepticism of the Church as supportive and indicative of the *ancien regime*
9 Suzanne Desan, 'The French Revolution and Religion 1795-1815', Chapter 28 in *Christianity: Enlightenment, Reawakening and Revolution 1660-1815*, pg. 560
& Tackett, Timothy. "The French Revolution and Religion to 1794", Chapter 27 in *The Cambridge History of Christianity, Volume 7: Enlightenment, Reawakening and Revolution, 1660–1815,* pg. 550

imprisoned or exiled); the separation of Church and state is strikingly initiated by the Thermidorean Convention of 1795, and unprecedented levels of religious toleration are witnessed by the toleration decree of 1791 and the provision of full political rights to Protestants, Sephardic Jews, and Ashkenazim.

It is important to recognise that the French Revolution can only be regarded as a 'new chapter' in French Christian history if it had lasting influence. It could be suggested that failure of the initiated 'cults of reason' such as Maximilien Robespierre's' deistic cult of the Supreme Being and Director La Revelliere-Lepauz's Theophilanthropy[10] and republican festivals as replacements for Christianity demonstrate the limited impact of the French Revolution on the future of Western Christianity. However, while not all of the ideas of the French Revolution lasted, the precedent of subverting religious authority, secularisation, and religious tolerance continued to ripple throughout France, and all of Western Europe.

It could be argued that the counter-revolutionary resurgence of Catholicism under Bonaparte and Louis XVIII demonstrates that de-Christianisation of France was not really a 'new chapter', but a fleeting blip in French religious history. However, this argument ought to be fiercely rejected. Not only was the power of the Catholic Church under the *ancien regime* irrecoverable after its decimation under the Directory, but the very ideas with which counter-revolution occurred were indebted to the language of the revolution. As Suzanne Desan observes (2006)[11], Catholic revival was launched with the same revolutionary arguments of Rousseaian 'General Will' and an appeal to the 10th Article for religious freedom in the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Ctizen*. It seems as if pandora's box had been opened for the Catholic Church, and the ideals of secularisation, tolerance, and freedom of religion had been unleashed into the consciousness of France, and indeed, the whole globe.

The French Revolution had an irreversible and profound influence on the history of Western Christianity, encouraging and influencing both an increasingly anticlerical and anti-religious trend across Europe, as well as significant religious revival in response to the traumatic experience of the revolutionary decade. As Timothy Tackett summarises, the French Revolution "would leave a legacy of division and hostility between the Catholic Church and progressive politics, between clericalism and anticlericalism that would persist in France and in Europe into the twentieth century"[12]. Indeed, the reach and influence of the ideas of the French Revolution was in part due to the exile of 35,000 priests into the neighbouring European countries, and as Robert R. Palmer notes, the "charm of revolution"

[10] Tackett, Timothy. "The French Revolution and Religion to 1794", Chapter 27 in *The Cambridge History of Christianity, Volume 7: Enlightenment, Reawakening and Revolution, 1660–1815,* pg. 533-534
[11] Bryan A. Banks, 'Religion and Revolution in Europe', in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Europe*, pg. 5
[12] Timothy Tackett, *ibid.* pg. 554

even penetrated "deep into Siberia" (2016)[13]. The French Revolution posed an unavoidable question to the whole of Western Europe about the status of the Church in post-Enlightenment society.

Indeed, the French Revolution had a dual-legacy; one that incited both an increasing secularisation and one that sought to reinvigorate religion and counter anticlericalism. In the short term, the Bourbon Kingdom of Spain under Charles IV responded by reinvigorating a "trilogy of Religion-Fatherland-King" to sustain the religious power-structure and Monarchical status-quo, while the Dutch Netherlands and Switzerland replicated the French Revolution with their Batavian and Helvetic Republics that similarly confiscated Catholic lands, began to separate Church from state, and impose "equal rights independent of religion"[14]. Many countries saw a decline of monasticism including Italy and the German states followed a similar trajectory with reform in Hungary and Bavaria, seeking to attack the Church, make concessions to the serfs, and introduce religious tolerance. Therefore, the greatest motif of the 'new chapter' in the history of Western Christianity was the willingness to challenge existing power structures and reimagine the role of the Church in society.

Furthermore, the nineteenth century saw the rise of revolutions in Ireland, France, later in Russia and with the Risorgimento. While the influence of the French Revolution as a precedent and model for religious reforms is clear, the extent to which these revolutions can be regarded as the legacy of the 'new chapter' initiated by the French Revolution is historically contentious. Indeed, the Risorgimento appears to have been aided by the cultural cohesion of Catholicism rather than an acceptance of anticlericalism. However, this revolutionary energy was largely initiated by witness of the success of the French Revolution to overturn the *ancien regime,* as well as the success of the American revolution two decades prior.

In conclusion, we have argued that the French Revolution and Napoleonic era fundamentally transformed Western Europe by its radical and unprecedented 'de-Christianisation' and anticlericalism. This initiated and influenced the subsequent religious turmoil and revolutions witnessed by the 'long nineteenth century' which sought to respond to the secular dilemma first posited in the *Declaration.* The revolution continued to inspire both anticlerical and religious revival movements in response to its immense transformations of Catholic France, and eventually the French adoption of *Laïcité* in 1905. Even as late as the Bolshevik revolution do we "once again see the language of universal equality in opposition to religious corporatism"[15] first introduced so eloquently and passionately by France. We must remind ourselves that the French Revolution posits questions that are defining to the modern

[13] Bryan A. Banks, 'Religion and Revolution in Europe', in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Europe,* pg. 8
[14] Banks, *ibid.* pg.10
[15] Banks, *ibid.* pg. 17

world: how do we balance the tension between individual and collective rights and privileges? And how do we balance liberté with égalité?

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