

Secularizing the Sacred: The Effort to Dechristianize France During the French Revolution

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In September 1793, Joseph Fouché, a representative of the National Convention, arrived in the district of Nièvre. Though many regions of France were in open revolt, Nièvre was relatively docile; certainly no one believed that the quiet district just south of Paris would be the focal point of one of the Revolution's most radical and controversial movements. Upon his arrival, Fouché implemented a number of "reforms" aimed at dismantling the power of the clergy in the region.

A former priest himself, Fouché was well aware of the power his prior vocation held over the hearts and minds of the French citizenry. This made his decision to leave the Church all the more difficult, but he had recently returned from the Vendée, a region where a mixture of volatile religious grievances exploded into a rebellion that lasted years and resulted in over one hundred thousand deaths.¹ Fouché had seen first-hand the dangers inherent in having a powerful clergy that appealed to the faith of the people. In Nièvre he encouraged priests to renounce their vows of celibacy and if they refused to marry, revolutionary leaders expected them to adopt and care for a child or elderly member of the community. Fouché and his disciples removed religious symbols from all public buildings and the words *Death is an eternal sleep* were inscribed on the stone gates at the entrance of every cemetery.² This stark denial of an afterlife went further than destroying Church property or forbidding clerical celibacy; it assaulted the fundamental religious convictions of an entire nation. Similar actions were being repeated in numerous cities and towns across France and were part of a larger movement known as dechristianization.

Within weeks, the zeal of Fouché spread to Paris and throughout the rest of France. Radicals within the National Convention, such as Jacques Hébert, became the most vocal leaders of the movement, and they used their power and influence to expand the effort to remove Catholicism, and eventually all of Christianity, from French society. Revolutionary Armies marched across the land, leaving "pillaged and closed churches, and smouldering bonfires of ornaments, vestments, and holy pictures all along their route."³ In one district, a Revolutionary Army burned crosses and other holy relics in a bonfire that grew eighty feet high.⁴ However, many French citizens, especially in the rural areas of the country, did not quietly assent to this assault on their religion. Thousands of peasants in Brie attacked the local Jacobin club in mid-December, shouting, "*Long live the Catholic Religion, we want our priests, we want the Mass on Sundays, and Holy Days.*"⁵ Similar scenes on smaller and larger scales played out across France during and after the dechristianization movement. Such examples show that this radical experiment was one in which a small group of revolutionaries – whose ideas were, in many ways, more zealous and fanatical than those they attempted to suppress – largely imposed their views on an unwilling populace. It also calls into question how successful such a movement could have been. While the resistance to the dechristianization movement led to many setbacks and failures in the short-term, the long-term outcomes confuse the issue. The dechristianization movement was a secularizing force imposed upon a people entrenched in tradition, yet despite this it was ultimately successful.

In order to understand why so many people in France were unwilling to abide by this attack on religious life, it is necessary to examine the role religion played under the Old Regime. Christianity, specifically Catholicism, had always played a significant role in French society. There was no separation of church and state; priests functioned as much as administrators and record-keepers as they did guardians of their parishioners' souls. The Catholic Church also "held the monopoly on primary and secondary education...It maintained registers of births, marriages, and deaths and ran the hospital system...under the old regime."⁶ In rural villages, the power and importance of the Church in everyday life was even greater:

In rural areas, not only was the village church the center for the spiritual care of the locals but also it served as the hub of administrative affairs. The church put order into every aspect of country life: the tolling of the church bells ordained the rhythm of the daily cycle, resounding throughout the village when it was time to rise, at noon when it was the hour for a break, and at vespers, in the evening, when it was appropriate to pause and say a prayer. The sound of the bell was also the alarm alerting

¹ James Maxwell Anderson, *Daily Life During the French Revolution* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2007), 149.

² William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 259.

³ *Ibid.*, 260.

⁴ Frank Tallett, "Dechristianizing France: The Year II and the Revolutionary Experience," in *Religion, Society and Politics in France Since 1789*, ed. Frank Tallett and Nicholas Atkin (London: The Hambledon Press, 1991), 6.

⁵ Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 261.

⁶ Anderson, *Daily Life During the French Revolution*, 143.

the populace of a fire or warning of mischief in the village.⁷

The fact that the most ardent resistance toward dechristianization came from these outlying small towns and villages is, therefore, no coincidence.

However, the influence of the Church extended well beyond the minutiae of maintaining a village's daily schedule. Bishops and priests held a great amount of political and economic power as well. The wealth possessed by individual priests in Old Regime France varied wildly. The archbishop of Paris, for instance, could boast of an annual salary of half a million livre. Some village priests, however, were lucky if they received enough to support their modest lifestyles. The Church as a whole was extremely wealthy, no doubt due in part to the fact that none of its wealth had to go toward paying taxes. The Catholic Church was exempt and even had its own form of taxation in the tithe, which could lay claim to up to twenty-five percent of a person's income in some regions.⁸ Although the tithe was meant to help maintain clerical buildings and fund charitable orders, oftentimes a portion of it went to pay for the extravagant lifestyles of the wealthiest Church leaders. The clergy also made up the entirety of the First Estate in the French parliamentary system, which granted them a number of advantages in a society based heavily on hierarchy and social status. Despite these issues, many people in France trusted and depended upon their local priest as both a leader of the community and as a spiritual guide.

The level of trust that most people placed in their local priest and the Catholic Church is what makes dechristianization such a fascinating topic. European society was intrinsically bound up with Christian dogma and had been since it was made the official religion of the ailing Roman Empire. Religion permeated nearly every aspect of life: it gave hope to the poor, helped spur numerous wars and conflicts but also valuable social reforms, and served as a foundation for the monarchies of many nations. But by 1792, something in France had changed dramatically. That year, Charles Michel, Marquis de Villette, a protégé of Voltaire and writer for the revolutionary newspaper the *Chronique de Paris*, wrote, "it would be worthy of [those] appointed to look after the interests of the Saints, not to forget the interests of the People."⁹ This was a transformational statement. First, it implied that what was in the best interests of the saints – and by extension, the Church that honored and worshiped them – differed from what was in the best interests of the people. Next, it argued that the clergy who were meant to care for the people were failing to do so. Finally, this sentiment was remarkable in that it appeared in a public newspaper, which would have been unthinkable even a few decades prior. Such sentiments were merely the beginning, however. As mentioned previously, Jacques Hébert was a leader and outspoken supporter of the dechristianization movement. He also published his own Revolutionary periodical entitled *Le Père Duchesne*. These colorfully-worded pamphlets were a favorite of firebrands and radical sans-culottes. In one issue, Hébert cursed the Pope and accused his bishops of conspiring to overthrow the government of France.¹⁰ Clearly, something had happened in France that had desacralized the Church to the point that it could be attacked openly and viciously by the press in a public forum. The mindset that informed both Villette and Hébert's attitudes towards the Catholic faith were the same ones that eventually spawned the dechristianization movement.

Dechristianization was merely the most radical and ultimate permutation of the anti-clerical mentality that was bound up with the French Revolution from its very beginning. Ironically, the clergy themselves were responsible for much of the early erosion of Church power. This was especially true for those priests who stood on the lower end of the financial spectrum. Breaking away from the First Estate, a coalition of local parish priests who desired a more democratic Church formed the National Assembly with the Third Estate on June 17, 1789. This body ended the tithe less than a month later. It was the first salvo in a rapid-fire barrage aimed at crippling the Church's influence in France. The government began nationalizing Church property in November and selling it to private landowners in December. Finally, on February 13, 1790, "all monasteries and convents not dedicated to charitable or educational work were closed and new religious vows were forbidden."¹¹ These early efforts weakened the Church, but subsequent acts by the National Assembly would seek to control it.

Church and state had never been truly separate in France, but the relationship was one that usually favored the Catholic Church. This was not the case after July 12, 1790, when the Assembly drafted the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. This document, for all intents and purposes, nationalized the Catholic Church and made it an arm of the state. Priests' salaries were regulated, formalized, and paid by the government based on how many people lived in their area

⁷ Anderson, *Daily Life During the French Revolution*, 143.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁹ Charles Michel, Marquis de Villette, *Lettres choisies sur les principaux événements de la Révolution*, trans. Google Translator (Paris: Clousier, 1792), 170.

¹⁰ Jacques Hébert, "Le Père Duchesne no. 44," in *Le Père Duchesne d'Hébert ou Notice Historique et Bibliographique sur ce Journal*, ed. Charles Brunet, trans. Google Translate (Paris: Librairie de France, 1859), 80.

¹¹ Anderson, *Daily Life During the French Revolution*, 148.

of responsibility.¹² Moreover, bishops would be chosen not by the pope, but by popular elections in which non-Catholics could participate.¹³ The Civil Constitution of the Clergy proved a divisive document. The subsequent forceful imposition of its edicts – and the outcry against them – was one of the primary factors that motivated the dechristianization movement.

The Civil Constitution of the Clergy divided public sentiment in regard to religion and its role in society more than almost anything else in French history. After their appeals to the pope went unanswered, many bishops and local priests refused to consent to the document. When, in early 1791, the Assembly mandated that all priests swear an oath of loyalty to the Constitution and state or be dismissed, almost half of the clergy refused. The situation grew more heated when the pope finally issued a condemnation of the Civil Constitution. Some priests who had previously sworn the oath renounced it, and in November 1791 the Assembly deemed all refractory priests, those who refused to swear the loyalty oath, to be counterrevolutionaries. By the summer of 1792, all dissident clergy were ordered to leave the country or face imprisonment or exile. Resistance grew violent in some regions; bands of sans-culottes, led and organized by government officials like Joseph Fouché, roamed the countryside and city streets, arresting and intimidating priests and destroying Church property.¹⁴ Despite this, many people stood behind their local clergy and “encouraged [them] to resist the government and refuse to take the oath.”¹⁵ The resistance to anti-clericalism was linked with anti-republicanism in the minds of many revolutionary leaders and thus necessitated a harsher response. The dechristianization movement had begun in earnest.

Dechristianization is one of the most controversial and least understood aspects of the French Revolution. Historians have argued about its origins, the motivations behind it, and the enduring legacy it has had on French political and religious life.¹⁶ Despite its relative obscurity, the process of dechristianization is an exceedingly important piece of the puzzle for anyone who wishes to study the French Revolution. The bitter divide between the revolutionaries and those opposed to their aims was exacerbated by the movement. Royalists, opponents of the Revolution’s methods, and devout Catholics all found unity under the umbrella of religious persecution; in effect, one of the movement’s unintended consequences was the tying together of these disparate groups who otherwise would not have been as likely to cooperate with one another. Other historians go further still, suggesting that the dechristianization movement was one of the chief causes of the Terror, the most famous episode of the Revolution:

If any single factor was capable of making the Terror an unavoidable development, it would seem to be the rupture between the Catholic Church and the revolution beginning in 1791, adding the ideologically empowering cause of persecuted religion to the motley collection seigniorial complaints and courtly grievances that had gone into making the counter-revolution until that point.¹⁷

In spite of its importance, the success of the dechristianization movement is still fiercely debated in some academic circles. For instance, historian Frank Tallett argued that dechristianization failed in its immediate goals and was largely not supported by the majority of the French people. A strong amount of evidence supports this position and reveals the amazing levels of resistance the movement faced, from rural farmers all the way up to Maximilien Robespierre, the head of the Committee of Public Safety.

Perhaps the movement’s greatest failure was its attempt to replace Catholicism with cults of reason dedicated to republican virtues. Parents refused to send their children to be instructed in the new civic religion; attendance for civil services and government festivals was chronically low. Beyond these practical matters, psychological issues kept the cults of reason from being implemented successfully. Such institutions “brought no magic to assist with the grizzly business of living, and no consolation to the act of dying.”¹⁸ To an eighteenth-century French peasant, faced with back-breaking labor, barren living conditions, and deadly diseases, Catholicism promised a better life after death, something which the various republican cults were sorely lacking. These shortcomings were not from a lack of trying; historian Mona Ozouf claims that the festivals of reason and virtue hosted by the Revolutionary government were attempts at sacralizing and normalizing the tenets of the new cults, thereby instilling them with the same weight as Catholic holidays. They failed, she argues, because instead of promoting a positive agenda, the movement focused on an “enterprise of subtraction and purification,” directed at diluting Catholicism and robbing it of its real value.¹⁹ In

¹² The Civil Constitution of the Clergy (1790), quoted in *Readings in European History*, vol. 2, ed. J.H. Robinson (Boston: Ginn, 1906), 426.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 425.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Tallett, “Dechristianizing France,” 2.

¹⁷ Dale K. Van Kley, “Christianity as Casualty and Chrysalis of Modernity: The Problem of Dechristianization in the French Revolution,” *The American Historical Review* 108, no. 4 (2003): 1088.

¹⁸ Tallett, “Dechristianizing France,” 4.

¹⁹ Mona Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 269.

truth, many of the cults' functions and festivals were very similar to the Catholic faith they were so diligently trying to destroy. Even the most ardent supporters of dechristianization within the government seemed to recognize the need for a set of spiritual guidelines intended to maintain unity and cohesion within society:

The new religion, like the old, had to have its sacred center, the altar of the fatherland, a place that was both religious and civic, on which one might...expose the bread of fraternity....There would have to be the sacralizing presence of a book, the sole receptacle of all moral precepts. This book would be the Declaration of Rights....And there would be a civic Lent, during which people would fast for the sake of liberty. There would be priests, who would be...family men....They would perform exactly the same functions as Catholic priests, presiding at weddings, witnessing births, comforting the sick.²⁰

At least in regard to the establishment of cults, the dechristianization movement seemed less about doing away with the Christian faith than with resetting it. In a very real sense, some dechristianizers could be called primitive Christians. Even the most supportive members of the constitutional clergy – those willing to swear an oath to the Civil Constitution – seemed to see their actions as purifying rather than destroying the Catholic Church. In regard to the Mass, many priests hated that it had become “overladen with baroque additions, weighed down by hateful dogmas, [and] disfigured by a doctrine of tyrannies, persecutions, torture, and blood.”²¹ They condemned it in principle, but continued to hold services all the same. To an historian, these distinctions may seem interesting, but to the average French citizen of the time, they produced confusion and irritation; when faced with the choice between Catholicism and a new institution which resembled it in so many important ways but required a reordering of their world, it is not surprising that many chose the former.

While Ozouf claims that the dechristianization movement was largely a process of dilution and simplification, others like Suzanne Desan see it as “rhetoric of opposition.”²² She argues that “radical revolutionaries had come to view Christianity as the rival cosmological and moral system that had provided the frame and underpinning of the monarchy and the traditional hierarchical order.”²³ Revolutionary leaders saw Catholicism as promoting inequality and servitude in opposition to the republican ideals of liberty and fraternity; they decried it as mysterious superstition arrayed against the Revolution's goals of reason and clarity. Either theory – dilution or opposition – could explain the French government's efforts during the height of the dechristianization movement. To be successful, the dechristianizers would have to confront the immense power Christianity had over the minds and daily routines of the people. By choosing to go about their daily routines as usual, the lower orders of French society inherently protested the dechristianization movement.

Two major efforts on the part of the government were directed at reshaping society. The new calendar and the push to name everything from streets to newborns after revolutionary heroes and virtues both held a great deal of religious importance. The old calendar was consecrated with holy days and festivals, and enshrined Sunday as a day of rest and worship; people often named their children after Biblical heroes and saints. In large part, most French citizens simply ignored the new calendar and many shopkeepers refused to keep their businesses open on Sundays. The new calendar upended centuries of religious meaning, but also cut through and rearranged routine patterns of daily life.

More telling is the failure of the revolutionary government in its effort to encourage republican names. Records from the district of Poitiers indicate that of the nearly six hundred children born there in 1794, only sixty-two were given accepted republican names. Similar statistics are to be found across the country, and the renaming of streets, buildings, and towns fared just as poorly. Eventually, even the Committee of Public Safety requested that all documents include original names in addition to “official” republican names.²⁴ However, acts of resistance on the part of the common people of France extended beyond passive non-interaction.

Villagers sometimes actively defended the assault on their faith, as was the case in the Vendée and elsewhere. Threats of physical violence toward revolutionary officers and mass protests of governmental policy in regards to dechristianization were not uncommon, nor were they isolated to areas that generally resisted the Revolution, as one may expect. The department of the Yonne was located in north-central France, in the heart of the district of Burgundy. In the early years of the Revolution, many in Yonne supported the new government and its policies. Throughout the Revolution, there was no serious counterrevolutionary movement in the region. Even during the anti-clerical phase of the Revolution, Yonne remained stable and un-combative, with ninety percent of the department's clergy swearing the

²⁰ Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution*, 268.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 270.

²² Suzanne Desan, “Redefining Revolutionary Liberty: The Rhetoric of Religious Revival During the French Revolution,” *The Journal of Modern History* 60, no. 1 (1988): 4.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Tallett, “Dechristianizing France,” 6.

oath to the Civil Constitution.²⁵ But in 1794, when officers tried to close the local church in the town of St. Bris in the Yonne, villagers assembled and demanded that they be allowed to attend services. The officer barred the doors only to return the next morning and find that the people had torn them off their hinges entirely. The doors were replaced and locked a second time. Once again, the villagers broke through and began singing psalms with no priest present to guide them.²⁶ In another village in the Yonne, parishioners took holy relics from their church and buried them in the ground to keep the Revolutionary Armies from confiscating or destroying them. This included a massive bell from the church's steeple. The locals also disfigured and burned the statues of liberty that had replaced the crucifixes on their church altars.²⁷ Such actions show that even supporters of the Revolution did not always support dechristianization.

As time passed and the movement grew increasingly radical, even some within the government tried to moderate its excesses. Maximilien Robespierre, shocked and appalled by the actions of the dechristianizers, decried the movement on November 21, 1793. He condemned the effort, saying that it created more fanaticism than it cured. "Atheism," he said in a speech given to a Jacobin club, "is aristocratic; the idea of a great Being that watches over oppressed innocence and punishes triumphant crime is altogether popular."²⁸ The Being that Robespierre spoke of was of his own design. A genuine deist, Robespierre believed in a higher power that ordered the natural workings of the universe. He called this entity the Supreme Being. The Supreme Being was compassionate and embodied the ideal virtues of the new French Republic. In many ways, this Supreme Being was much like the Christian conception of God, but it was free of what Robespierre saw as the excess ceremony of Catholicism:

He [the Supreme Being] did not create kings to devour the human species. Neither did he create priests to harness us like brute beasts to the carriages of kings, and to give the world the example of baseness, pride, perfidy, avarice, debauchery, and falsehood. But he created the universe to celebrate his power; he created men to help and to love one another, and to attain happiness through the path of virtue.²⁹

Robespierre was more in line with the so-called primitive Christians described earlier. He was by no means an atheist. Therefore, the transition towards atheism that the dechristianization movement experienced was very unsettling to him on both a political and spiritual level.

Fearing what dechristianization could do if left unchecked, Robespierre pressed the National Convention to find some way to rein in the more dangerous elements of the movement. They eventually relented and on December 6 issued a proclamation formally reiterating the right of the French people to practice their faith of choice.³⁰ Robespierre was not alone in his disdain for the dechristianization movement. Other powerful members of the Committee of Public Safety as well several prominent revolutionary leaders like Georges Danton feared that the radicalism of the movement was alienating France's neighbors and driving people into the arms of counterrevolutionary organizations.³¹ The dechristianization movement was thus resisted throughout its existence by inhabitants of small villages and by the highest echelons of political power. People struggled against its programs in rebellious regions like the Vendée as well as in docile and otherwise pro-revolutionary areas such as the department of the Yonne. In the short-term, it is difficult to argue that the movement attained the desired outcome of those who led it. Catholicism – or religion in general – was not snuffed out, nor was a cult of reason or allegiance to a Supreme Being ever widespread or more than nominally supported by the people. Despite this, the movement was at least partially successful in other ways, and its long-term consequences proved profound.

The most resounding success of the dechristianization movement was the demolition of the clergy. The anti-clerical movement made this victory possible. Many priests earned their living from state-provided funds and salaries and many of the Church's functions were subject to governmental oversight. Thus, in terms of the Constitutional Church, "the state had created it, and the state could destroy it."³² By Year II of the Revolution (1794), an estimated eighteen to twenty-two thousand priests had abdicated either by choice or against their will. Interestingly, those areas of France which had not been subject to much dechristianization suffered the most abdications. This is more telling than confounding; areas which were less likely to resist the movement were more likely to be led by priests who had

²⁵ Desan, "Redefining Revolutionary Liberty," 2.

²⁶ Ibid., 1.

²⁷ Tallett, "Dechristianizing France," 9.

²⁸ Maximilien Robespierre, quoted in Sylvia Neely, *A Concise History of the French Revolution* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2008), 199.

²⁹ Maximilien Robespierre, quoted in Jack R. Censer and Lynn Hunt, *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity: Exploring the French Revolution* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 92.

³⁰ Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 262.

³¹ Anderson, *Daily Life During the French Revolution*, 151.

³² Tallett, "Dechristianizing France," 10.

taken the oath to the Civil Constitution. The more constitutional priests a district or department had, the easier it was for the government to forcibly remove them.³³ Efforts to force priests to marry were slightly less successful, though it is believed that up to six thousand took marital vows at the behest of the government.³⁴ These abdications, combined with the furious hunting down of refractory priests by Revolutionary Armies and sans-culottes as well as the closure of most churches throughout France, meant that many villages had no local priest at all. These vacancies led to the direst ramifications for the Christian faith in France in the long-term.

It is difficult to argue that any tangible blow superseded that of the seizure of Church property; denied their principle source of prestige and wealth, the clergy were crippled and the Church never fully recovered. However, in matters of religion, it can be argued that intangible and spiritual consequences of actions are just as important in terms of understanding historical phenomena. The vacuum created by the absence of so many local priests had immediate as well as long-term consequences. John McManners put it most succinctly when he wrote, “the lethargical mystique of popular conformity, which made the ancient regime church appear all embracing and so powerful,” was destroyed when priests could no longer hold regular services.³⁵ The psychological hold that the Christian faith and its leaders held over the populace was greatly weakened. People continued to go about their routine, but found that life went on, regardless of whether or not they attended their priest’s sermons at the church. More importantly, many began to realize that they could do themselves what had previously been the sole purview of the clergy. Without priests, simple farmers or artisans began burying the dead, marrying couples, and even hosting church services. Midwives began baptizing newborns in addition to delivering them.³⁶ In many districts, the awe that the Church normally inspired was largely forgotten. This disconnect between the laypeople and their clerical leaders is the single greatest victory of the dechristianization movement.

The results of this victory are clearly evident in modern France, which stands as one of the most secular nations in the world. The dechristianization movement has done centuries afterward what it could not seem to accomplish during the high tide of its power; it has separated Church power from political power and weakened the Church’s ability to play a leading role in society. As Ozouf wrote, “Rights, liberty, the dawn of the modern, secular, liberal world... [and] the transfer of sacrality onto political and social values [has been] accomplished.”³⁷ It has not necessarily been an easy or flawless transition. There are still lingering tensions within France as to the ultimate cost and validity of the dechristianization movement, and it remains a difficult subject to broach in French classrooms. At a public Mass held in August 1989, a Catholic mother of seven was questioned about her family’s beliefs regarding the Revolution and dechristianization. Her answer is indicative of the problematic issues still simmering within the Catholic community in France:

My children fully understand that it was necessary to publicly repair the crimes that were committed during the Terror. Of course, they learned their history of France and the Revolution at school. But it was their father who taught them what the teachers never say and that is that the Revolution was primarily directed against the Catholics.³⁸

This quote places disproportionate importance on the dechristianization movement, equating it with the Revolution in its entirety. Fair or not, some French citizens associate the radicalism of the dechristianization movement with other Revolutionary programs. It shows that in modern-day France, the effort to secularize society in the eighteenth century still has lingering consequences. Clearly, several issues raised by the French Revolution and the dechristianization movement it spawned remain unsettled, making the historiographical debates surrounding them all the more relevant and important.

What conclusions can be drawn from the study of the dechristianization movement? This essay began by posing two questions: first, was dechristianization a popular movement or one imposed upon the people at large by a small but powerful group and second, was it successful? The answer to the first lies in examining the words and actions of the French people. They signed petitions demanding the freedom to worship as they pleased, they stood by their priests and continued to attend Mass even when no clergy were present, they threatened violence against dechristianizers and sometimes carried out those threats, and they struggled to maintain some semblance of normalcy in their lives. Catholicism proved to be the stabilizing element that many segments of society could cling to amidst the storm of upheaval and change that was the French Revolution. When religion began to be cast aside, the people could not

³³ Michel Vovelle, *The Revolution Against the Church: From Reason to the Supreme Being*, trans. Alan José (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1991), 37.

³⁴ Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 262.

³⁵ John McManners, *The French Revolution and the Church* (London: The Church Historical Society, 1969), 105.

³⁶ Tallett, “Dechristianizing France,” 17.

³⁷ Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution*, 282.

³⁸ Tallett, “Dechristianizing France,” 28.

bear it. Even people such as those residing in the Yonne who supported the Revolution's greater goals showed active forms of resistance to dechristianization. The fact that revolutionary alternatives such as the cults of reason or Robespierre's Supreme Being did not seem to differ from Christianity in many important respects did not help the movement gain traction or legitimacy with the people. Thus, it can be argued that the movement was largely imposed upon the vast majority of people who did not desire to abandon Catholicism.

Despite this, the effort to dechristianize France seems to have achieved success long after its own time. It cannot be said that the leaders of the dechristianization movement succeeded in their original goals, but they did lay the foundation for all future secularist thought in France. Catholicism and religion in general had been brought down to a level where it could be critically analyzed and even refuted. Authors lambasted religious doctrine and destroyed the might of the Church in both practical and abstract terms. The floodgates were open; people in France would never again accept religious dogma wholly without reason or doubt. While the fact that people continued to go about their daily lives, including attending church, if no priest was present indicates that they were resistant to the push to dechristianize society, it also showed them that they could survive without a member of the clergy. The anti-clerical movement and subsequent Civil Constitution of the Clergy divided and weakened the Church, both practically and in the minds of the people. Church lands had been seized, robbing the institution of much of its wealth and government offices moved to fill the void left by their absences. The Catholic Church would never be the same in France, even after it was re-recognized as the quasi-official religion of the state under Napoleon. Therefore, while the dechristianization movement was by no means a popular one and an effort that failed in the short-term, it was ultimately successful in that it desacralized the Christian faith in France and forever crippled the power of the Church.

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