

"Why was there a 'war of two Frances' in the late nineteenth century?"

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During the late nineteenth century many people's lives were less orientated around religion than they had been in the past. Many saw the relationship between the Church and the State as a hindrance in their quest for social change. Although Catholicism was by no means a spent force, the Catholic Church was identified as Right by the growing Centre-Left faction, and the Church's associations with the Monarchy only exacerbated this problem. The reaction against the clergy became known as *anticlericalism* and it is in this sense that some authors (e.g. McMillan, 2003) have talked of the period of Church-State conflict as *la guerre des deux Frances* – the war of the two Frances.

McMillan argues that this conflict between the Republican governments and the Church was greatest in the period 1879-1905, and has also referred to it as a "*French Kulturkampf*" (McMillan, 2003), and a "'cold war that periodically erupted into a 'hot' war'" (ibid). When authors refer to the Church in this context they are specifically referring to the Catholic Church. Protestants did not oppose secularisation with the same fervour as Catholics partly because they did not have a doctrinal unity, as the Catholics did (Larkin, 1995, p. 5). Furthermore, Catholics had fought for their own religious schools for over a century, and so they did not want to see their efforts come to nothing (McMillan, 2003). Larkin argues that it was France's lack of religious pluralism (even in 1890 there were well under a million baptised Protestants), unlike her neighbours, that prevented a softening of Church-State relations (Larkin, 1995, p. 5). Buckler argues how "*cross currents of French politics*" were caused by "*the Concordat and Organic Articles of 1876*" (Buckler, 1942).

The late nineteenth century must also be considered in the context of the preceding episodes that ultimately led to the laic laws (1879-1889). Firstly, the Concordat of 1801 was seen as an obstacle to progress in the eyes of the anticlerical Republicans as it required that the State pay for the wages of priests and nominated bishops. If the State was to become secular such ties with the Church were out of the question.

Scientific and medical breakthroughs had also offended those with religious sensibilities, with Darwin's *Origin of the Species* (1859) being the ultimate travesty. Marcellin Berthelot said of his artificial synthesis of organic compounds that it had "removed all mystery from living organisms" (Brooke, 1998). The religious unsurprisingly took exception to this dismissal of a divine being, and some – such as Bentley – tried to use show off their understanding of science by attempting to prove scientifically that a divine being *did* exist (ibid). Those opposed to the Republic were generally the same people that felt nothing positive came from the French Revolution, and held the political regime in contempt (Curtis, 1959, p. 3).

Although the Republican governments often had great victory margins in elections, it was not because Catholics in France were a minority that the Republican secularisation policies were so popular. Indeed, the majority of the French population were christened as Catholics (some 90% in 1890) and Catholicism was experiencing something of a revival in Europe. However, there were not many *catholiques avant tout* - those who allowed their lives to be strongly influenced by religion. Furthermore, many *catholiques tout court* (those with little religious sensibility) were not opposed to the governments of the Republic, despite them being openly anticlerical in many cases. In this sense there was not a "war of two Frances" as such. There was certainly not a "war" in the sense of widespread violence, but more in conflicting ideologies, anti-Republican, and anti-Catholic/anti-religion literature (from authors such as Sorel, Barrès, and Maurras). This conflict of ideologies was again largely the result of the so called "New Catholicism" under Pius X and Veillot (McMillan, 2003). Laski argued that "the attack on the Third Republic came from men of letters rather than from political figures" (Curtis, 1959, p. 3) and this is a valid point considering the numerous intellectuals, such as Bloy and Jacob, that converted to Catholicism.

Larkin has emphasised the meagre influence of religion on the lives of most Catholics: "on reaching adolescence, the great majority ceased to go to Mass; and their subsequent visits to Church were largely restricted to the rites de passage of marriage, christenings, communions solennelles and burial" (Larkin, 1995, p. 5). This fact disturbed *les catholiques avant tout* deeply as they were taught that unnecessary absence from Sunday Mass was a major sin. In 1900 only 20-25% of Catholics in

France could be regarded as practising (Larkin, 1995, p. 6). Upon becoming Pope, Pius X indicated that he would make religion a more prominent part of French life, in direct contrast to the secularisation goals of the Republicans. Whilst Leo XIII had introduced the policy of a *ralliement* to the Republic (in February 1892 he had advised French Catholics to accept the Republican regime), Pius X effectively severed this tie between Church and State.

Republican Premiers such as Jules Ferry (1880-1881) and Léon Gambetta (1881-1882) rallied the support of the masses to oppose clericalism in a period of change that was primarily political in nature (Larkin, 1995, p. 3). The conflict between Church and State was very much one of ideologies, particularly the battle for the control of education (Mosse, 1974, p. 92). There was fear of two younger generations opposing each other. In 1877 Gambetta remarked “*Clericalism? That’s the enemy!*” (McMillan, 2003). Republicans, like the Catholics, sought a uniform education system across France. However, the Republicans did not see any place for Catholic schools and this caused outrage amongst Catholics (as described in McMillan’s case study of a school) when the laic laws were finally implemented. Brittany remained a strongly Catholic region and there were hostilities when Jesuit schools were closed down by Ferry from 1879 (ibid). McMillan states that Rennes was “*unquestionably one of the hottest spots in the French culture war*” where clerical resistance to the laic laws was found across the school system (ibid). This became known as the “*guerre scolaire*” - the “*battle of the schools*” (ibid). Some Republican Premiers, such as Dupuy, Ribot, and Méline were not entirely anticlerical, however, as they preferred to have the Catholic support against the Left (Larkin, 1995, p. 7).

The era of the Third Republic was not a welcoming one for practising Catholics. J.E.C. Bodley wrote in 1898 of how Catholics risked their future employment prospects if they openly admitted they were practising (Larkin, 1995, p. 71). This issue was at its most contentious from 1890, during “*la Belle Epoque*” (Larkin, 1995, p. ix). Larkin states however, that a Catholic that supported the government and kept a low profile “*had no difficulty in obtaining entry or advancement*” (ibid).

The Boulangist movement (the *Boulangier Affair*), which between 1886 and 1889 was at the forefront of French political life (Irvine, 1989, p. 3) and rekindled

patriotism and political awareness amongst the peasantry akin to that during the Revolution a century before. Boulanger's popularity was immense and observers everywhere "*were predicting an imminent Boulangist dictatorship*" (Irvine, 1989, p.4). He was a figure that would defend "*the 'exploited' against the 'exploiters'*" (ibid).

Around 1895 the Catholic Ralliés (Republicans intent of defending the interests of the Church) and the moderate Republicans were still united in the Chamber of Deputies against the Radicals and Socialists as together they were able to hold a large majority (Larkin, 1995, p. 7). Still, at the same time as the so-called *esprit nouveau* between Church and government there were a significant number of Catholics that "*resented the Pope's advice to accept the Republic; and of those who ostensibly followed it, many did so merely to stand on firmer ground in their fight against Republican ideals*" (Larkin, 1995, p. 8). The *esprit nouveau* was eclipsed with the events of the Dreyfus Affair in the late 1890s. In October 1894 Dreyfus (the highest ranking *Jewish* artillery officer in the French Army) was arrested on a charge of high treason. The Army had very little evidence but a quick conviction was forced, in fear of an attack by the anti-Semitic press (Cahm, 1996, pp. 195-198). The events of the Dreyfus Affair allowed religious issues to return to the forefront of French politics (Larkin, 1995, p. 8) and brought Socialists to the ballot box to defend against injustice (Curtis, 1959, p. 179). Larkin talks of how the Dreyfus Affair was used "*as a stick to beat the Republic*" and that it was the Catholic participation in this anti-Republican movement that caused the following closures of Catholic schools to undermine Catholics in the public services (Larkin, 1995, pp. 8-9). Larkin states he is unsure as to whether or not the vigour of the Republican backlash was entirely justified (ibid). However, Curtis puts forward an extensive list of charges the Catholic Church made against the Republicans, including the "*increase of social evils*", "*financial scandals*", and the subsidising of the venomous press (Curtis, 1959, pp. 3-4) that might justify the quick implementation of the laic laws.

Under Pope Leo XIII (the *White Pope*) the Church made an effort to keep on good terms with the French government. However, in 1903 after twenty five years as head of the Catholic Church, Leo XIII died and was replaced by Pius X. Larkin describes the change of Pope as "*something of a diplomatic revolution*" (Larkin, 1995, p. 58) in

that Pius X adapted Catholic policy to be on better terms with the Italian, rather than French, government (ibid). Larkin argues how the Catholic Church then saw the Monarchy “*as a bulwark against the secular ideals of the more militant Republicans*” (Larkin, 1995, p. 5). Even French Socialists “*frequently resorted to the political imagery of ‘les deux Frances’*” (Larkin, 1995, p. 3), leaving the Catholic Church and the Monarchists against everyone else. In December 1905 the Church and the State were formally separated, stating that the Republic “*neither recognises, nor salarises, nor subsidises any religion.*” This final episode before secularisation followed a decade of accusations that the Catholic Church had been plotting to overthrow the government.

Recently, authors such as Hazareesingh emphasised the diversity of opinion between Republicans on a number of issues other than religion. Hazareesingh argues that Catholic-Republic relations already looked hopeless in the 1840s “*with the likes of Michelet and Quinet, two canonical Republican thinkers, [who] were already alarmed by the threat to public life posed by the Society of Jesus*” (McMillan, 2003). McMillan too argues that by the 1860s “*intransigence was often more in evidence than a willingness to compromise*” (ibid). In light of this, Gambetta’s “*culture war*” should be looked at in a broader context; possibly from the French Revolution - especially 1792-94 when the initial attempt was made in the First Republic to remove Christianity.

Carsten also recognises political and ideological conflicts in France not exclusively between the Church and the state - although he does not use the term “*the war of two Frances*” (Carsten, 1967, pp. 11-17). Antisemitism was a significant factor in causing various conflicts in France before 1900. In 1886 Edouard Drumont published “*La France Juive*”, which sold thousands of copies and appealed to the economic fears of the middle classes (ibid). Drumont also attacked leading politicians and businessmen, the Pope, the Catholic Church, noblemen, the royal family, who all in his opinion supported the Jews. Carsten also argues that those who did not look kindly on the French Revolution and the Enlightenment, or on rationalism and liberalism were all united in their opposition of the Republic (ibid). The conviction of Dreyfus was followed by Zola's *J'Accuse* in defence of him, and then by the foundation of the *Ligue des Droits de l'Homme - a Comité d'Action française* - in response to the appeal

(ibid). One of the founders, Maurice Pujo (a French nationalist), published an article entitled *L'Action française* which attacked parliamentarianism and individualism (ibid). The *Comité d'Action française* however, "*remained the movement of a small minority*" (ibid). If one is using the term "*the war of two Frances*" in this broader context then one must also acknowledge the significance of the French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War and the socialist government of the Paris Commune that followed.

To conclude, the "*war of the two Frances*" occurred in a period of massive, but primarily political, change. The transition from close-knit Church-State relations to the secular state we see today was accelerated by the Dreyfus Affair, the struggle for control of the education system, and the new Papal policies, amongst a number of other complicated factors. Renouvier accounted for the friction between Church and State succinctly when he said "*there are no longer virtually any ideas in common between the two groups*" (McMillan, 2003). Finally, it should be noted that whilst some authors reject the notion of an "*ongoing war of religion*" the description of a "*war of two Frances*" remains mostly valid.

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