



EDITED BY JAN HANSEN, JOCHEN HUNG, JAROSLAV IRA,
JUDIT KLEMENT, SYLVAIN LESAGE, JUAN LUIS SIMAL, AND
ANDREW TOMPKINS

THE EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE

A Multi-Perspective History
of Modern Europe, 1500-2000



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6.1.2 Religions in Modern History (ca. 1800–1900)

Laszlo Csorba, Sylvain Lesage, and Thomas Schad

Introduction

The French Revolution and its exportation had a profound effect on the religious history of Europe in the nineteenth century. From the emancipation of the Jews and Protestants to the attempt to create a civic religion, or from the abolition of Catholicism as a state religion to the schism between the constitutional clergy and the refractory (non-swearing) clergy, this revolutionary episode encapsulates the upheavals in European religious practice throughout the nineteenth century.

But this century was first and foremost the century of industrialisation and the affirmation of science. The affirmation of a rationalist stance on these developments was thus decisive in the evolution of religious thought and practice. On the one hand, the progress of science favoured a scientific reading of the world, one of the major points of which was the theory of evolution, which denied divine creationism. However, the expansion of knowledge was only one of the factors in the decline of religious practice. The progress of industrialisation, increasing urbanisation, and the widening gap between the working classes and the churches are certainly more decisive factors. In return, the fragmentation of religious practice gave birth to new religious movements and favoured the rise of new forms of piety.

Thus, the nineteenth century was marked by an intense philosophical, artistic, and scientific effervescence alongside debates on dogmas and religious institutions. The affirmation of modernity and the aspiration to freedom born of the French Revolution forced governments and religious authorities to redefine their respective positions within a changing society and to compete for control over education, thus laying the foundations of contemporary Europe. Analysing religions in Europe in the nineteenth century therefore raises two series of questions. First, from an institutional point of view, how

did churches adapt to modern states and how did they maintain religious control over secularised populations? The second question is situated at a more personal level: what did it mean to be religious in modern times? How are faiths challenged and reconfigured by modernity, in its scientific, industrial, political, and social forms?

Churches and Revolutions

The French Revolution annihilated the tradition of monarchic rule by divine right and paved the way for the creation of society and state on the basis of human rights. A second revolutionary power—the Industrial Revolution—transformed the economy and society of much of Europe during the nineteenth century. Industry attracted the bourgeoisie and working people to the growing urban centres. The result, combined with the influence of the French Revolution, gave rise not only to the first period of prosperity in modern urban culture, but also to many new social problems and injustices on the dark side of metropolitan life. During the nineteenth century, the churches had to adapt themselves to the many developments occurring around them.

The absolutist government of France under the last Bourbons was extremely unjust. Thinkers of the Enlightenment helped precipitate revolutionary changes by suggesting new visions of human rights, civil society and the modern constitutional monarchy. On 14 July 1789, French civilian revolutionaries attacked the Bastille in Paris, capturing the fortress that symbolised the *ancien régime* and freeing its prisoners; soon after, it was demolished. In August, the old feudal absolutism was brought to an end when a *Declaration of the Rights of Man* was published by the National Constituent Assembly. The church lands were taken into public ownership, in an attempt to finance the revolutionary changes taking place. The Church was dealt with in the *Civil Constitution of the Clergy*, enacted in 1790. Many went along with this, others refused, and the Church split over the issue. In practice, the power of the papacy was abolished in France.

The Jacobin regime (1793–1794) persecuted the resistant Catholic priests, but instead of an atheist regime the Cult of the Supreme Being was established. When General Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821) came to power, he decided to restore normal relations with Pope Pius VII (1740–1823). According to a new concordat in 1801, the French clergy were to receive a regular income from the state. Although the Pope was to appoint bishops, the state could veto his appointments. Protestants were granted freedom of religion. Religion was thus at the heart of the revolutionary turmoil that France experienced in the years that followed 1789, with repercussions throughout the nineteenth century.

Many important elements in the modernisation of society and public administration have spread through much of Europe via the Napoleonic Code. This preserved the enlightened, absolutist practice of excluding churches as institutions from state administration. The application of human rights resisted the prescription of state religion, because all are born with the freedom to follow any religion. The modern bourgeois state is thus neutral in matters of faith and regards churches as private societies supported by their faithful. Citizens, on the other hand, are free to form political organisations, parties, associations, advertise them in the press, and so on.

The success of this model is evidenced by the history of Belgium. When the Dutch Protestants oppressed the Belgian Catholics, they teamed up with the Belgian Liberals (*unio*) to fight for universal religious freedom—because if all religions were free, the Catholic religion would be free too. Thus, the unionism of the Belgian Revolution in 1830 liberated the Catholics and brought about the modern freedom of religions. In the first half of the nineteenth century, however, the papacy rejected the political cooperation of liberals and Catholics. The popes supported the Holy Alliance (1815), in which the armies of the absolutist powers—Russia, Austria and Prussia—oppressed the national and liberal movements. It was for this reason that the pope did not protest when Orthodox Russia defeated the Catholic Poles during the November Uprising in 1831.

This Catholic restoration was also aided by the new religious sensibilities intertwined with romanticism (new waves of the cult of Virgin Mary, new regulated companies and orders of monks, etc.) that emerged in the first half of the nineteenth century, against the prevailing rationalism of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. François-René de Chateaubriand (1768–1848), the immensely popular romantic writer, presented in *The Genius of Christianity* (1802) a powerful argument for Christianity based on the aesthetic values of past Christian centuries; it supported, for example, the Gothic Revival in architecture and the Nazarene School in painting. On the basis of the restoration of the Roman Papal State there arose a new political ideology called *Ultramontanism* (literally, “beyond the mountains”). Its believers generally refused the compromise with the liberal states and were militantly loyal to the pope as the supreme authority in matters of faith and practice.

The inspiring encounter of romanticism and religion strengthened restoration efforts. Liberal thinkers did not accept that the idea of liberating individuals and peoples would be hostile to the Christian tradition. Félicité Robert de Lamennais (1782–1854) gradually moved away from his earlier hopes for an alliance between Ultramontanism and royalism. When in 1830 he founded the newspaper *L’Avenir*, the forum of liberal Catholics, his cause was to promote liberty for the Church from the state. Lamennais and his followers

rejected the divine right of kings and advocated popular sovereignty. Pope Gregory XVI (1765–1846) condemned the teachings of Lamennais and *L'Avenir* in the encyclical *Mirari Vos* (1832).

Struggles for human rights and the freedom of oppressed nations also drew strength from biblical narratives and messianic faith—with devotees praying to the ‘God of Freedom’. The popes steadfastly opposed the *Risorgimento* (national movement for the unification of Italy), for they feared the loss of temporal power in the Papal States. Meanwhile, the ‘prophet’ of Italian nationalism Giuseppe Mazzini (1805–1872) and his compatriots dedicated their flag with the motto “God and the people” against the tyrants of the Italian Peninsula. When General Giuseppe Garibaldi (1807–1882) defended the short-lived Roman Republic against the French troops in 1849, he was dubbed “The Nazarene of Trastevere” by the enthusiastic crowds.

Religions and National Identities

Europe in the nineteenth century was a continent in constant turmoil, far from uniform with regards to concepts, developments, treatments, or even the given range of existing religions and denominations. In France and in many of the territories conquered by Napoleon, traditional religions and their institutions underwent the process of weakening described above, yet the situation in the continent’s eastern and southeastern stretches was significantly different, as the case of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans shows.

In contemporary terminology, the Ottoman Empire was a multiethnic, multireligious, pre-national and feudal empire. It was dominated by a Muslim Emperor, the Sultan (or *padişah*), who simultaneously claimed the status of the Caliph: the spiritual leader of the global Muslim community (*ummah*). Given that the sultan’s palace was on the European shore of the Bosphorus, Europe was the seat of the most influential spiritual-political Islamic commonwealth of the time.

Although Muslims enjoyed significant privileges when compared to the other groups, the European lands of the Ottoman Empire (Rumelia) were characterised and inhabited by a multitude of religious communities. Most numerous were the Orthodox Christians (Rum), spread across Rumelia and originally bound to the religious authority of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. The second largest group were Sunni Muslims, often settling with a high concentration in the urban centres of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Thrace, and among Albanian speakers. The Sephardic Jews were another important group, originally from Andalusia, with centres in Thessaloniki, Istanbul, Skopje, and Sarajevo, among other cities. There were also Catholic Christians, Armenians, and heterodox or syncretic groups like the Bektashi.

The fact that these different groups settled together in the Balkans is one of the reasons, up to the present day, why nationalist tensions regularly occurred with the rise of the nation-state—a political framework that generally leans on the idea of a homogeneous population.

Notably from the mid-nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire was often referred to as the ‘sick man of Europe’, as it lost more and more of its former territories and power. In 1821, the Greeks declared their independence, followed by the Principality of Serbia in 1833. Up until the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913, the Ottomans would lose all of their Rumelian lands. The religious institutions of the Balkans were transforming, but remained important—though the continuous significance of religion as such does not necessarily correspond to the actual practice of religion or spirituality. Instead, religion transformed into one of the key markers of national identity.

The notion of the ‘millet’ system is used, often with critical discussion, to describe the multireligious venture of the Ottoman Empire’s Balkan nations—as well as the younger Turkish nation, where the term is still in use, meaning “people”, “nation”, or “nationality”. Millet, in that sense, denotes a proto-national group whose main authority beyond the sultan was the respective head of the religious community; in the nineteenth century, there were millets for each of the Catholic, Orthodox, Jewish, and Armenian communities in the Ottoman Empire. The Orthodox millet was headed by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. In the long run, the decline of the patriarch’s position is the most important transformation regarding religious institutions in the nineteenth-century Balkans: Orthodox adherents from Serbia, Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, and elsewhere became detached from this very old institution. They became autocephalous—a term hailing from the Greek word *αὐτοκεφαλία*, meaning “being self-headed”.

A New Religious Sensibility?

The middle of the nineteenth century was marked, in Western Catholic countries and particularly in France, by a new religious impetus that strengthened traditional faith in the face of the doubts inherited from the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, the rise of the twin threats of liberalism and rationalism, and the acceleration of the rural exodus and urbanisation, which expedited the uprooting and decline of religious practices.

The nineteenth century saw the appearance of the first episcopal surveys, studying this phenomenon through the decline in the number of people attending Sunday Mass and Easter Mass. This laid the groundwork for a sociology of religion that emerged in the work of the Frenchman Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), descendant of a line of rabbis and a founding figure

of French sociology, who took an interest in the secularisation of European societies from his thesis in 1893 to the *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912). This radiography of religious practices culminated in the mid-twentieth century with the surveys conducted jointly by the French sociologists Gabriel Le Bras and Abbé Boulard. Their research highlighted the fact that the decline in religious practice was very clearly differentiated by gender: a sexual dimorphism in religious practice had increased throughout the nineteenth century—to the extent that in France the 1905 separation of church and state was voted for by men and imposed on women.

The difference in religious practices (mass attendance, confession) between men and women continued to widen. Women were then considered to be the privileged agents of the conversion of men and children, through their influence in the family as mothers and wives. The clergy then developed forms of spirituality deemed more suitable for a female audience. To raise awareness among the crowds, the Church favoured a demonstrative devotion fuelled by the splendour of liturgical festivals and a climate of miracles (for example, Marian apparitions at La Salette in 1846, or Lourdes in 1858).



Fig. 1: A postcard depicting the apparition of the Blessed Virgin in Lourdes on 11 February 1858 (1900s), <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10570952k.r=miracle%20lourdes?rk=85837;2#>.

The Church also relied on women's associations to consolidate its position in the social and spiritual fields. This was the great century of women's congregations for care and teaching, but also of Catholic women's associations that defended social and spiritual motherhood by caring for children and the most destitute. Thus, in the field of mission, education, and care, religious authority was

increasingly embodied by women over the century. This configuration led women to occupy unprecedented positions; entering religious institutions could enable them to escape the authority of their fathers and husbands, to exercise responsibilities, and to build real professional ‘careers’.

Catholicism in the nineteenth century took on a less severe, more indulgent, and more sentimental face than before. The “pastoral care of fear” (Jean Delumeau), inherited from the Middle Ages, gradually gave way in the middle of the century, thanks to the spread of the more flexible moral theology of Alphonsus Liguori (1696–1787; proclaimed a Doctor of the Church in 1871). The priestly generations were being renewed and Roman and anti-Jansenist ideas progressed among the clergy—the tone had changed markedly. The preaching of hell receded and that of purgatory returned to the forefront. The clergy became more prudent, prompted by their awareness of the importance of voluntary abstention from the sacraments, particularly among men, and the problems posed by the spread of contraceptive practices among the population (the moralists’ “Crime of Onan”). Some authors and preachers began to argue in favour of frequent communion. Henri-Dominique Lacordaire (1802–1861), in 1851 at Notre-Dame de Paris, publicly attacked the thesis of the “small number of the chosen” that had long been dominant in theology. The multiplication and spread of particular devotions testify to the continuing movement towards the individualisation of belief, which lent itself to a more affective and warm-hearted kind of piety.

This change in religious sensibilities went far beyond the borders of the Catholic world. Throughout Europe, in reaction to the Enlightenment and the coldness of reason, romanticism emphasised the exaltation of feeling and nature. First taking shape in Germany and England, this romanticism spread throughout Europe and was expressed in literature, painting, and religion. After the French Revolution, the romantics regretted the loss of belief at a time when the rise of science was promoting scepticism, or even a generalised atheism. These plural romanticisms nourished different Protestant revivalist movements, defending a more existential and sentimental piety, ‘awakened’ from a faith judged to be stale or mundane. The revivals aimed to bring about a more existential and demonstrative piety, based on personal experience rather than on adherence to a teaching. The revelations were a protest against a predominantly intellectualist religion, with a strong emphasis on feeling, in line with the romantic sensibility and the definition of faith *as* feeling by the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher. Launched in the mid-eighteenth century by Anglican preachers George Whitefield and John Wesley in the United Kingdom and then in America, the revivals reached French-speaking countries in the 1820s to 1850s.

At the same time, Methodism took a clear liberal turn in the face of the challenges of industrialised society, in line with its engagement with the working classes. Interdenominational societies promoted the dissemination of the Bible and religious treatises as well as the development of education (the development by an Anglican and a Quaker of the pedagogy known as mutual education). Under the impetus of female figures—Josephine Butler, Elizabeth Fry and Florence Nightingale—the defence of prostitutes, the improvement of prison conditions, and the improvement of health care were also important concerns. Thus, far from being merely an “opium of the people”, as Marx famously put it, religion was at the heart of the debates and conflicts that shook nineteenth-century European societies. A force for conservatism, or even reaction, but also a force for progress and social reform, religion adapted its messages and structures to the new context sketched out by urbanisation and industrialisation.

Conclusion

As it entered industrial and political modernity, Europe saw the rise of new approaches to religion. For Marx, religion was an “opium of the people” in the sense that religion was used by those in power to oppress workers, and that it brought spiritual comfort that distracted the proletariat from the revolution. In the struggle between conservatism and liberalism, churches have, more often than not, weighed in on the side of the status quo. But churches have also been on the side of emancipation and social progress, fighting for human dignity, building school systems, and providing assistance to the poor.

After a century of political turmoil, of economic and social change, religious practices were radically transformed. Challenged by the affirmation of scientific and rationalist understanding of the world, religions were also weakened by industrialisation and urbanisation. In response, new forms of piety have tried to adapt to a changing context.

Discussion questions

1. What role did religion play in the development of nationalism in nineteenth-century Europe?
2. “The French Revolution ended the dominant position of religion in European society.” Discuss this statement.
3. Describe the situation of religious minorities in nineteenth-century Europe. How does it differ from their situation today?

Suggested reading

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