

**SECULAR MODERNITY AND CATHOLIC TRADITION:
Finding God in the Machinery of the Industrial Revolution**

By

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GRADUATE STUDIES

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Abstract

Much of the contemporary research on secular modernity versus Catholic tradition pits one against the other, a religion versus technology, or faithfulness versus secularism scenario, whereby religious thought, practice, and institutions lose their shared meaning in the face of rising technological obscurism. This dissertation examines the challenges that Catholic tradition faced in the countenance of secular modernity and how religious congregations worked to overcome these societal challenges. It is meant to question the concept that the onslaught of modernity at the beginning of the European Industrial Revolution signaled the demise of Catholicism in France. It shows, utilizing the letters and writings of Father Andre Coindre, founder of the Brothers of the Sacred Heart, that there were those working from within the Church who were re-Christianizing their native land while at the same time incorporating the burgeoning technology into both ministry and mission. This research illustrates how the establishment of educational institutions in Lyon by the Brothers was ordered so that their young charges could find God in the machinery of the Industrial Revolution. It is only through these connections with the modernisms of the past that we can learn how to re-engage with the sacred and give it a place amongst the clutter of the profane that we have thrown up around ourselves.

PREVIEW

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*This dissertation is dedicated to
my wife Delia and my sons Zacharey and Benjamin.
Without their love, patience, and support
I could never have completed this degree.*

And

*In memory of my sister
Monique Demers Dubois
1962-2008*

PREVIEW

Acknowledgments

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And finally, to my parents, Rene and Jeanne Demers, my first and still best teachers.

*What appears, what disappears,
none of it hangs in mid-air,
the present is embedded in the past,
the future in the present.*

WILLEM BILDERKIJK (1756-1831)

PREVIEW

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INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF QUESTION

This study is meant to challenge the contemporary concept that the onslaught of modernity at the beginning of the European Industrial Revolution signaled the demise of Catholicism in France and show that there were those who were working from within the Church who were re-Christianizing their native land. The research contained here-in utilizes the letters and writings of Father Andre Coindre, founder of the Brothers of the Sacred Heart, to challenge the major secondary sources of the past fifty years that have been written on the subject.

The dissertation's goal is to show the reader that though the majority of these works are exemplary in quality and breadth of research, they have, for the most part, ignored the role that technology played in the renewal of the French faith life in the early nineteenth century. While French post-Revolution education and the technological advancements of the Industrial Revolution have been covered admirably, as distinct topics, there

remains a lack of writing on the utilization of the burgeoning technology in the education of the young. This research is intended to contribute to the scholarly work in the area of Catholic tradition versus secular modernity as it pertains to the years immediately following the French Revolution. This involves a two thousand year old belief system versus a lay progression, whereby religious thought, practice, and institutions lose their shared meaning in the face of rising technological obscurism.

This modern challenge to the Roman Catholic Church began within the ideals of the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation which divided Europe by religions and sought religious toleration; an initiative which hardly anyone in power at the time thought right. Up to this point in Western European history,

The moral behavior of society was conditioned by two foundations; first, by inherited habit [Judaean-Christian tradition]; and second, by an attitude to the universe; or a belief, however hazy, about the way in which the universe was organized...¹

¹ Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the 19th Century* (Cambridge: Columbia University Press, 1975), 231.

When the civilizations of Western Europe began to discard the tenets of Christianity, the loss went beyond being merely an intellectual adjustment, the discarding of one proposition in favor of another; rather, it would prove to be as much an emotional change as a religious conversion - even though that conversion was to 'the religion' of modernity.²

The Church-State struggles of eighteenth-century France were to be contested within the relatively conventional manner; one Christian faction pitted against another for the hearts of adherents, each of these factions would find itself associated with a particular lay community. These lay populations could arise out of any populace; the conditions could be as diverse as nations, states, noble houses, or even intellectual groups (salons).

However, no matter the means or locations in which these religious conflicts arose there were many within the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, and for that matter within the French national governmental

² Andrew Norman Wilson, *God's Funeral: A Biography of Faith and Doubt in Western Civilization*, (London: Norton, 1999), 4.

structures, who believed that civilized society, at least as found in western Europe, could not cohere if differences in religious thought and tradition were permitted to subsist amongst the masses.³

Though much of the credit for the fomenting of this religious turmoil is given to the French philosophes of the Enlightenment, who were often found writing in favor of religious toleration, there is little historical evidence to support such an argument. By the time their voices were heard on the matter they had already become commentators on the outside of a de facto politico-social movement.⁴

Nonetheless, this open challenge to the authority of the Catholic Church, in all matters religious, social, and political, would pick up steam during the height of the Enlightenment. We see these challenges to the Church

³ Chadwick, 23.

⁴ S. J. Barnett, *The Enlightenment and Religion: The myths of modernity*, (New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), 154.

finally making inroads in the Lyon region where deism first finds its way into the written historical record.⁵

For many, society was changing, leaving behind the mores found in the western religious traditions, those tenets which had served to civilize society and unite countries.

Every bit of the great Jewish and Christian tradition, it seemed...had crumbled away, leaving only the appealing but fanatical figures of the prophets and saints of old, and the body of Christian ethic.⁶

However, according to British historian S. J. Barnett the deism movement, as a legitimate challenge to Catholicism, never truly existed as recorded in the annals of history. Rather, he sees deism as a construct of the modern historian who has insisted on locating the origins of secular modernity within the confines of the Enlightenment. "Amongst some historians there has been an

⁵ In 1563 Pierre Viret wrote the *Instruction Chretienne* in which he described various freethinkers who needed to be combated. Amongst them Viret mentioned those 'who call themselves deists, a completely new word' and his description of them heavily emphasized their lack of religion (Barnett, 11).

⁶ John Herman Randall, *The Making of the Modern Mind*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), 533.

obsessive iteration of modernity as a watchword for Enlightenment."⁷

Even American historian Timothy Tackett makes a strong case against the perceived influences that the Enlightenment is believed to have had on the demise of Catholicism and the inevitable rise of secularism. He states that,

Much of the problem stems from the very complexity, the inherent contradictions of the Enlightenment itself as it was actually experienced by eighteenth-century Frenchmen. It was a generation which had by no means abandoned Catholicism, at least at the superficial level of a social context for the rites of passage. Christianity was the predominant, usually the sole, frame of reference whenever a need was perceived to solemnify or consecrate an event.⁸

However, while the degree to which western Europe was able to move God out of the public square can possibly be argued, there was none-the-less a movement away from Catholicism as the sole point of reference at this time. Certain segments of Western civilization would endeavor to move even farther from God by following the

⁷ Barnett, 12.

⁸ Timothy Tackett, *Religion, Revolution, and Regional Culture in Eighteenth-Century France: The Ecclesiastical Oath of 1791*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 9.

economic ideals which were being espoused by the new capitalist doctrines. It is these new capitalist principles which would begin to serve as humanities point of reference.

These capitalistic values, which were purely secular, were following quickly on the heels of the technological revolution. Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor argues that it is these technological and capitalist activities, and not the centuries old religious mores, that would begin to dictate acceptable social behaviors. He maintains that,

The spreading doctrines of the harmony of interests reflect the shift in the idea of natural order...in which the economic dimension takes on greater importance, and 'economic' (that is ordered, peaceful, productive) activity is more and more the model for human behavior.⁹

This was originally espoused by the French philosophes through their writings. As a group the philosophes would continue to advance these new capitalistic ideals, ideals which supported their humanistic beliefs, by promoting the growing industrial attitudes. These anti-Catholic capitalistic attitudes

⁹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press, 2007), 229.

were continuing to gain strength with the rise of industrialism.

Yet, for many of the philosophes, there existed in their lives a tension between religion seen in the metaphysical sense and religion viewed as a social reality.¹⁰ The ultimate goal of the philosophes, at least in their writings, would be to sanctify ordinary life, replacing the doctrines of western religion with the burgeoning precepts of secularism.

However, according to historian Carl Becker, it must be remembered that,

Philosophes were not professional philosophers sitting in cool ivory towers for contemplative purposes only, but crusaders whose mission it was to recover the holy places of the religion of humanity from Christian philosophy and the infamous things that supported it. The directing impulse of their thought was that mankind had been corrupted by false doctrines.¹¹

The philosophes, while historically not in agreement on many issues, did agree on one thing, and that is, that the unrestricted use of reason was not to be advanced

¹⁰Tackett, 10.

¹¹ Carl L. Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers*, (New London: Yale University Press, 1932), 122.

with the lower classes because of the inherent threat they posed to social order.¹² However, in the Lyon region, France's first major urban area to industrialize, and where this study will be based, one must be careful in giving the philosophes too much credit for promoting secularism, credit for which they may not be truly deserving.

What we can say is that the philosophes, such as Voltaire and Diderot, while they were vocal opponents of the Catholic Church they were not necessarily enemies of religion. Rather, in this region of France,

It is difficult to assess the influence of the philosophes in Lyon as it is to know how deep Lyonnais mysticism went. The secularism of the Enlightenment clearly had some impact: fewer religious books were published and there was a decrease of more than a third in the recruitment of nuns. But apart from certain disenchantment with the regular clergy, there is little evidence that the Enlightenment made great inroads into traditional religious beliefs at any level of Lyonnais society, and there were few outspoken local exponents of rationalism.¹³

We find that it is these doctrinal ideals of secularism that relied upon a faith in nature and in what

¹² Barnett, 39.

¹³ W. D Edmonds, *Jacobinism and the Revolt of Lyon 1789-1793*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 29.

human reason was capable of approving of, which allowed the Christian conscience to act as the force that began to make Europe 'secular'. As the eighteenth century progressed French society perceived an increasing hostility toward monks and nuns, especially those who led a cloistered life. These types of religious congregations were recognized as being a standing affront to the Enlightenment doctrine of utility.¹⁴

For utility's proponents, such as the Lyonnais economist and philosopher, Jean-Baptiste Say (1767-1832), a disciple of Jeremy Bentham, it was the ideals to be found in utilitarianism, and not those in Catholicism, which would regulate social conduct and morals in an industrial, technological society. For Say and other Utilitarians the value of a religion could now only be found in the manner in which it promoted a peaceful social life amongst the masses.¹⁵

¹⁴ Ralph Gibson, *A Social History of French Catholicism 1789-1914* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 104.

¹⁵ Gilbert Faccarello and Philippe Steiner, "Religion and Political Economy in Early-Nineteenth Century France", in *Keeping Faith, Losing Faith: Religious Belief and Political Economy*, ed. Bradley Bateman and H. Spencer Banzhaf, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 29.

Accordingly, no longer would the confessional state have the influence to regulate the vocations of humanity.

The politico-religious struggles in France and England above all demonstrate that the increasingly broad and more complex intellectual world of that time could no longer easily be contained in the political, economic, religious and social corset of the confessional state.¹⁶

This equates to society no longer endorsing a single religion, such as Catholicism in France, but rather it would now allow a multitude of religions or even no religion at all within any particular political state or social strata.

At this time, the economy, as a replacement for religion, begins to play an even more central role in the daily lives of all people; however, it especially becomes the guiding force for the growing middle class. According to Charles Taylor, the idea, as espoused by the philosophes and new middle-class, that commerce could supplant religion as the arbiter of societal mores becomes paramount during the Enlightenment.

The notion becomes more and more accredited that commerce and economic activity is the path to peace and orderly existence. ... The more a society turns to commerce, the more "polished" and civilized

¹⁶ Barnett, 210.

it becomes... When it takes hold in a society, it can help to control and inhibit the violent passions.¹⁷

These Enlightenment principles would also repudiate any type of overt pressure upon the individual who rejected the accepted and inherited axioms, more specifically the Judeo-Christian ideals, of society.¹⁸ The means to compel the individual, if any were to be exerted, would now come in the form of either political or economic force. As stated earlier, these changes can be directly attributed to the politicization of religion and not the self-proclaimed influence of the French philosophes.

There is little evidence of religious change brought about the philosophes. ...it was the politicization of religion that was central to religious change in eighteenth century Europe. ...the politicization process needed to encompass far wider social strata and express significant elements of the political, economic and religious outlook of those strata.¹⁹

Yet is this truly the case? Do the Enlightenment principles or the doctrines of the Industrial Revolution require the complete repudiation of the dictates of

¹⁷ Charles Taylor, 180.

¹⁸ Chadwick, 24.

¹⁹ Barnett, 15.

religion? Did this new society require the politicization of religion in order to incorporate the dictates of industrialization?

Much of the contemporary research on secular modernity versus Catholic tradition seems to say "yes" and pit one against the other, a religion versus technology, or faithfulness versus secularism scenario. It appears to require all of one or the other, very black or white arguments for historian and philosopher alike.

Over the years it would seem that historians and social scientist have often overstated the "losing faith" concept in the throes of the French and Industrial Revolutions. In reviewing many of the works on the subject it would seem that many modern researchers have bought into the impression that in order for science and industrialization to succeed religion needed to be pushed from the public square.

Some have suggested that the incompatibility resided in the fact that the world of strict and universal laws which...science was discovering...had no place for the capricious interference of 'supernatural' beings.²⁰

²⁰ Vernon Pratt, *Religion and Secularization* (London: MacMillan and Company, 1970), 13.

Others would contend that it was not so much science and technology providing the answers to life's questions that drove religion out of the social conscience but rather that the Church was not able to adjust her ministries to account for the societal changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution. "The Church thinks and plans within the context of the Church instead of setting her mission and her obedience within the context of society and the world at large."²¹

Like we see so many times in history when there is a movement to an extreme, there is push-back from some quarter. We witness this type of push-back in early nineteenth century France when there arose a widespread resurgence of religious sentiment. This came on the heels of the chaos of the Revolution and the intellection assault on religion that had been such a fundamental characteristic of the Enlightenment. For some, this was an attempt to swing the pendulum back to a pre-Enlightenment ethos.

²¹ E. R. Wickham, *Church and People in an Industrial City*, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1957), 214.