

Philosophy, Politics, & the People: The History of Christianity in France

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ABSTRACT

Today in France approximately 83-88% of the population considers itself to be Christian but only around 21% attend church services on a regular basis. In my research I set out to examine the religious history of France and to see what role the religious views of various philosophers, from 1530 to 1917, played in connection to Christian belief and practice. Since philosophers wrote in response to the society in which they lived they reflected not only the views of the rich but also of the poor, who were illiterate and therefore did not leave records of their own. After much research I concluded that the philosophers did affect religious thought by influencing those who were in power and thereby indirectly affecting the entire society. I also discovered that throughout the tumultuous history of Christianity in France with its various persecutions, faith in God endured even when the Church was forced underground. People's inability to attend services did not destroy their faith. It was indeed much like it is today where we find a large portion of the French population clinging to Christianity but not to weekly church services.

DISCUSSION

Throughout the history of France Christianity has played a major role. It has been used both to legitimize governments and to overthrow them. It has been a source of comfort for peasants and the lower classes, and it has also been a basis of great outrage. Today in France one thing you can be assured of finding in any town or village you enter, regardless of how small it may be, is a cathedral. Approximately eighty-three to eighty-eight percent of the population consider themselves to be Christian.¹ However only around twenty-one percent attend church on a regular basis.² For the majority being Christian really only means that they were, or are going to be “baptized into and buried out of the church.”³ Church attendance is one of the few ways to evaluate the current religiosity of a society, however this can be misleading if historical events that affected attendance are not examined also. Is Christianity still alive and well in France? Why did the situation of church attendance come about? It is the thesis of this paper that by examining the history of religious thoughts in France, specifically the history of philosophical thoughts on religion, and comparing the reactions of society to these thoughts both in the philosophers' time and in the following generation(s), one can trace the development up through the current day and begin to answer the question of why.

This paper will discuss, after a brief overview of religion and French society leading up to the sixteenth century, Jean Bodin (1530-1596). It will then address René Descartes (1596-1650), Voltaire (1694-1778), Auguste Comte (1788-1857) and finally Emile Durkheim (1858-1917). These philosophers were chosen both for their prominence in French history and because their lives either overlap or come close enough to doing so that one need not fear missing an era of religious thought. While each philosopher formed some very advanced and complex ideas about what religion is, the principle focus will more directly concern the problem of what a person is to do in response to either his or her religious beliefs or the beliefs preeminent in his or her society. Immediately prior to the discussion of each man, there will be an overview of how his society had changed since that of the previous man and immediately following will be an analysis of how both his ideas, and those of the philosophers who came before him, found their way into French society. As much emphasis as possible will be given to the lower classes and their beliefs but for a large part of the time frame in question they were not the ones who were leaving written records and so the views of the middle and upper classes, including the ruling class will be addressed as well. Philosophers, by

¹ The World Factbook: France, n.d. <<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/fr.html>> (22 April 2004).

² World Values Survey. n.d. <<http://www.worldvaluessurvey.com>> (22 April 2004).

³ G. A. Rothrock, *The Huguenots: A Biography of a Minority* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1979), xii.

nature, write in response to the society in which they find themselves. Therefore, before jumping into the world as Jean Bodin knew it, a very brief history of religion in French society up through the early sixteenth century must be laid out.

Christianity was originally introduced by the Romans into the land that would become France. The Romans had been in the land since around the first century B.C., but it was not until around the first century A.D. that Christianity rapidly spread throughout the area. "Vigorous" Christian communities arose during this period. As the Roman Empire declined in the third century, the Germanic tribes invaded the land and these Christian communities became even more important as something familiar to which the people could cling.⁴ The Germanic people gradually began to convert, but most of them did so to Arian Christianity,⁵ which was viewed by the Roman Catholic Church as a heresy. However, the Franks chose to convert to "orthodox"⁶ Christianity, perhaps due to the benefits that could be derived from such an alliance with Rome.⁷ Progressively Roman Catholic Christianity came to dominate the land during the time of kings such as Clovis (481-511), who had himself and many of his warriors baptized in 496, and Pepin the Short, who proclaimed himself king in 751 and who permitted the Church to collect a tithe upon all produce grown.⁸ Although powerful people came to embrace Christianity due to the political benefits of being associated with Rome, it is dangerous to make assumptions about the religiosity of their subjects. Throughout this period most ordinary people were simply too busy trying to make a living and feed themselves to become literate, and thus they did not leave written records. It is probable that there were those who were indeed very pious as well as those who embraced it solely as a means of bettering their own position in life.

Another important religious institution we see arising in France around the fourth century was the monasteries. This was one of the most important developments for it brought Christianity into the countryside.⁹ As the centuries progressed, and particularly in the twelfth century, it was the call to reform which originated within the monasteries that would spill over into society at large and create changed expectations of religious experience and growing criticism of the Church's administrative personnel.¹⁰ Generally the king's enemies risked being damned by churchmen if they contested the king's legitimate authority, and the people themselves began to take issue with the Christian intellectuals who "fought their battle of interpretation...all in Latin" and by doing so had relegated the position of the common person to that of an observer looking in on the spiritual world.¹¹

The debate over such matters would continue on throughout the following centuries and as time passed it became more and more heated. Reformer after reformer tried to change the system and while many failed it was ultimately a man named Martin Luther who managed to succeed in 1517. However, the changes came through a splitting of the Roman Christian Church into Catholics and Protestants and shortly thereafter they proceeded to massacre each other in what came to be known as the Wars of Religion (1562-1578). Throughout the sixteenth century the persecution of religious dissenters spread. "All across France the religious establishment was consolidating to resist the challenge of reformers."¹² Despite this, by 1560 French Protestantism had cut across all classes with the nobility being the last to join and the first to abandon it since it was easier for the government and the Roman Catholic Church to watch them than it was to keep an eye on an ordinary peasant.¹³ Today people generally think of the Reformation as a "movement of the intellectually elite, of the nobility and the bourgeoisie, when in fact the popular classes were among the first to rally to its standards."¹⁴ It was onto this scene in that Jean Bodin emerged with his own ideas concerning religion.

Given the unsettled nature of the society in which Bodin grew up, it should not be surprising to learn that he believed it was necessary to be tolerant of everything except atheism. This he excluded since its goal is to bring

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Arian Christians believed that Jesus Christ was not of one substance with God. He was not God incarnate and therefore not equal in dignity. Also, since Jesus was not fully God and only God can forgive sins then Jesus dying on the cross did not complete the work of salvation for all who believe.

⁶ That is to say Roman Catholic.

⁷ Ibid., xiii.

⁸ Ibid., xiii, xv.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., xviii.

¹¹ Ibid., xxv, xix.

¹² Ibid., 19. B

¹³ Burdette C. Poland, *French Protestantism and the French Revolution: A Study in Church and State, Thought and Religion 1685-1815* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 15.

¹⁴ Ibid., 27.

about the demise and overthrow of all belief in God and therefore could not possibly be accepted by God.¹⁵ Bodin viewed true religion as a very personal matter that required no church and which could not be controlled by the government.¹⁶ In his work *The Colloquium of the Seven who have different Sentiments of things Hidden and things Revealed*, Jean Bodin utilized seven main characters, each with a different religious belief or background, and followed their imaginary conversations as they explored the supernatural world and how it manifested itself in society. Since his time, many scholars have debated which character represents Bodin's own views but a common interpretation is that Bodin speaks through each one of them at some time or another and by doing so quietly reiterates the need for toleration of diverse opinions.¹⁷ Bodin held that it was wrong to challenge anyone's religious beliefs unless one believed that they would persuade him of something better.¹⁸ Throughout his work Bodin had to confront many issues that were of great importance and under intense debate in his own time; the most important of these will now be dealt with.

Like many of the philosophers that would come after him, Jean Bodin held that one of the roles religion holds in society is to provide peace and stability because when the hope of rewards and fear of punishments are removed people cease to uphold morality and then society ceases to endure.¹⁹ Another commonality Bodin has with both philosophers who came before and those that came after him was the need to deal with the issue of science and to determine its role in relation to religion. Bodin felt that "Of all the errors that our scientists make, which are numerous, there is not one of heavier weight than to think that all things above men's power are due to natural causes."²⁰ He would go on to argue that if something is deemed true, then it is always true and, when attempting to answer a question concerning the nature of something, what is true for theologians cannot be false for scientists, or vice versa.²¹

Bodin also confronted the common argument that God, who was believed to be forever unchanging, could not be responsible for creating the earth and all the things in it, since they, by nature, do change. Bodin stated that, it "would be nothing more than ridiculous" to grant that a king has the right to change the laws as he wishes within his own republic but that God, who rules everything, should be a slave to his laws.²²

The correct method of biblical interpretation was also at the center of the debates as it had been within the Christian community since the third or fourth century. Issues such as whether or not women should be subordinate to men were often dependent upon whether one interpreted the Bible literally or allegorically. Bodin used one of his characters to state that it is very dangerous to use allegories to understand the mysteries of scripture because the real history the Bible provides us with might get lost amongst the fables. However, another character then demanded to know if the first one honestly believed that there was a conversation between the woman and the serpent in the Garden of Eden.²³ Bodin often utilized this sort of method to approach a controversial topic in a non-confrontational manner.

Perhaps his biggest hindrance to persuading society that his ideas were right was that he, as well as other intellectuals in the sixteenth century, wrote in Latin and thus his writings were accessible only to other intellectuals. It is evident that Bodin did not intend his audience to be the common man. Within a generation or so other philosophers would come along who would write in French and so throughout the Enlightenment the common people were so caught up in these more recent works that Bodin's writings still remained virtually unknown to all except the most educated men of society. It was these rich intellectuals whom Bodin influenced and whom over time would force the government to listen to their ideas if for no other reason than because they possessed the money that the government needed and desired.

Although men like Bodin called for toleration, the government was often anything but tolerant. The Protestants were not accepted initially because they challenged the authority of the Catholic Church. Since the Church and the

¹⁵ Jean Bodin, *Colloque Entre Sept Scavans qui sont de Differens Sentimens des Secrets Cachez et des Choses Revelees*, trans. Francois Berriot (Geneva: Librairie Droz S.A., 1984), 197.

¹⁶ Bodin, intro by Daniels Kuntz and Maria Leathers, xxix.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, xlv

¹⁸ Bodin, *Colloque Entre Sept Scavans...*, 199

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

²² *Ibid.*, 84.

²³ *Ibid.*, 123.

ancien régime were so closely tied, whatever displeased one of them displeased both.²⁴ It was not until 1598 that Henry

IV (1553-1610) issued the Edict of Nantes and thereby provided religious freedom and political security for the Protestants.

It was during this time of religious toleration and political protection that René Descartes (1596-1650) would both be born and die. While problems still existed between Protestants and Catholics the Edict of Nantes provided men like Descartes with an atmosphere that allowed him to explore matters of faith without fear of state persecution. Descartes did not see himself so much as a great theologian but instead as a man simply trying to find answers for himself. Instead of partaking in any great theological debate, Descartes spent his life searching for the knowledge of truth and falsehood. Unlike Bodin and the other philosophers who came before him, Descartes insisted upon doing so through the mediums of logic and reason.²⁵ Descartes had received much education as a boy, but as a young man he came to realize that he had merely accepted what was taught him without really ever questioning it. Descartes also believed that it was dangerous to spend too much time learning the ideas of past generations for “if one is too curious about things practiced in previous centuries, one generally remains very ignorant of those that are practiced in his own time.”²⁶

From the very beginning of his quest Descartes made himself many promises, one of which was to “...constantly retain the religion in which God was graceful enough to instruct me in my infancy.”²⁷ While Descartes would try to prove the existence of God to others by means that will be discussed in a moment, he himself vowed never to doubt God’s existence. It was also due to his faith in God that he felt qualified to search for truth for he said that, “Because God gave each of us a light of reason with which to discern the true from the false, I did not think that I should content myself with the opinions of others...”²⁸

By the end of his life Descartes had formed some very complex notions through his quest to use reason to identify truth and falsehood. However, when he first began he did so by discarding every notion that he felt he could not logically prove to be true. The most basic principle, and the only principle, that he felt he could retain was “I think, therefore I am.”²⁹ By virtue of his capability to think, Descartes decided that he must exist, and if he existed then he was a substance of some kind. Proceeding along this line he stated a substance had to come from something. Through his thinking, Descartes realized that he was not a perfect substance but only had some attributes of perfection and therefore whatever his substance came from had to be a more perfect substance than his own. Therefore Descartes felt confident in declaring that God existed, and that he had proved it by logic and reason.³⁰ Based on this, Descartes claimed that everything that is real was created or put in place by God. Descartes went on to argue that since God created everything, he created the rules that governed the earth and that it was these rules that science sought to discover. Indeed, “God even created the eternal truth of mathematics...”³¹ Descartes also stated that, “...bodies have the ability to cause changes in motion in virtue of God’s causing those changes in motion.”³²

It is in this way that René Descartes came to satisfy his desire to distinguish rationally what was true and what was false. While this was deemed acceptable by many of Descartes’ contemporaries, the next generation of philosophers, which included Voltaire, would come to reject his propositions completely and would introduce an entirely new way of looking at the world that continued to be accepted and expanded upon up through the time of Emile Durkheim. Before launching into the discussion of Voltaire however, there was a very important event that happened between the death of Descartes in 1650 and the birth of Voltaire in 1694.

In 1643 Louis XIV became king of France and the union between the monarchy and Catholicism was once again strengthened and came to be made manifest in many ways. Perhaps the most important of these was the repeal of the Edict of Nantes by Louis XIV in October 1685. This repeal meant that any government protection of

²⁴ “Ancien régime” is the name given by French revolutionaries in the 18th century to the old system of government where the feudal monarch was in power. It literally means “old regime”.

²⁵ René Descartes, *Discours de la Méthode*, ed. Laurence Renault (Paris: GF Flammarion, 2000), 39-40.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 55.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 60.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 69.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Dan Garrett, “Teleology in Spinoza and the Early Modern Rationalists” *New Essays on the Rationalists* ed. Rocco J. Gennaro and Charles Huenemann (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 328.

³² Michael Rocca, “If a Body Met a Body: Descartes on Body-Body Causation” *New Essays on the Rationalists* ed. Rocco J. Gennaro and Charles Huenemann (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 63.

Protestants was removed. However, prior to 1685 Louis had also been responsible for many other laws that took away other civil rights from the Protestants but which they ought to have had by virtue of being French citizens. For example, they were prohibited from holding public office or from becoming educators. Although these measures resulted in many conversions to Roman Catholicism the new converts rarely attended mass.³³ For the next hundred years or so “France was ostensibly a nation of Catholics and unbelievers.”³⁴

By the time Louis XIV died in 1715 there was no formal organization of Protestantism left in place. However, “with the passing of Louis XIV, the close alliance of the altar and the throne came to an end.”³⁵ It was followed by a time of indifference as Philippe II, the duc d’Orléans, ruled as a regent (1715-1723) for Louis XV (1715-1774). Unfortunately for the Protestants, however, indifference did not necessarily mean toleration.³⁶ Although by 1752 the government of France had renounced once and for all the policy of active persecution of Protestants, all this really meant was that as long as the Protestants did not disrupt state affairs the government would leave them alone.³⁷ It did not mean that the government was going to step in to protect the Protestants from the Catholic majority. All that remained of Protestantism at this time were isolated groups who had received no formal religious teachings due to the policies of Louis XIV, and so when a group of Protestant priests did begin to emerge once again, they not only had to battle the Catholics who were still hostile towards them, but they also had to battle what they deemed to be unorthodox “Protestant” teachings as well. This new group of Protestant clergy is said to have “sprang from the people themselves”, and so, despite their ignorance and lack of instruction, it is clear that Protestantism was not weeded out.³⁸ There is another interesting point to explore here though. The very fact though that the peasants and lower classes had enough faith not only to endure persecution but also to emerge from persecution and raise up a new clergy proves that their faith was not simply something they clung to for any societal benefit. If it had been then they would have abandoned it during the years of intense persecution and death.

Despite all their problems, the one thing that the Protestants had in their favor was the attitudes of the philosophes.³⁹ Around 1752 the assault of the philosophes upon the Catholic Church and its “citadels of superstition”, began to appear in the attitudes of the educated class.⁴⁰ The philosophes and their followers viewed the laws against the Protestants as “an insult to French society”.⁴¹ As will be discussed in a little bit, men like Voltaire (perhaps the most famous of the philosophes) believed that all religions ought to be tolerated. Voltaires’ sentiments however were not new, nor were those of the other philosophes, since there had been calls for toleration already in the time of Jean Bodin. Since the time of the Reformation (1517), the Protestants (at least the peasant class) had not sought special privileges but instead had argued that they ought to be tolerated and to have their basic civil rights, which were clearly being denied them by the Catholic Church and the ancien régime. It was this long history of demanding toleration, joined eventually by the fervor that the philosophes stirred up in the upper classes, which led to the monarchy to end its close ties to the Catholic Church.

Of all the philosophers throughout history who have called for toleration perhaps none have done so as loudly as Voltaire. According to Voltaire, Frenchmen at his time “viewed as monsters their brothers who were not of the same religion as themselves.”⁴² Once dehumanized, a person can be believed capable of any sort of horrendous feat, since by dehumanizing others a person is blinded from seeing them as they really are.⁴³ He went on to state that “...we have enough religions which hate and persecute, and we do not have enough of them to love and assist.”⁴⁴ Of all religions, Voltaire claimed that Christianity ought to be the most tolerant but throughout history Christians have been the most intolerant since, even during the time of the Roman Empire, the various Christian sects have persecuted and insulted each other.⁴⁵ Voltaire often argued that many other countries of his time had

³³ Poland, 27.

³⁴ Ibid., vii.

³⁵ Poland., 53-54.

³⁶ Ibid., 55.

³⁷ Ibid., 62.

³⁸ Ibid., 32.

³⁹ “Philosophes” is the French word for philosophers. Much like the phrase “ancien régime”, this word has come to be adopted by English speakers when referring to the French philosophers of the 18th century.

⁴⁰ Poland, 69.

⁴¹ Ibid., 74.

⁴² Voltaire, *Traité sur la Tolérance* (Paris: GF Flammarion, 1989), 33.

⁴³ Ibid., 34.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 41.

⁴⁵ *Dictionnaire Philosophique II*, ed. Christiane Mervaud. vol. 36 *Les Oeuvres Complètes de Voltaire*, ed. Ulla Kölving (Oxford: Alden Press, 1994), 558, 566.

adopted the practice of religious toleration and that they had not ceased to exist and thus the laws of intolerance were “absurd and barbarous”.⁴⁶ Finally Voltaire believed that “...it is for the gods alone to care about the offenses committed against the gods.”⁴⁷

Voltaire dealt not only with the issue of toleration however, but also with why toleration was needed. Voltaire, like so many that came before him, recognized that laws can only attend to known crimes but that it is religion that deals with secret or hidden crimes and therefore enforces morality in society.⁴⁸ However, Voltaire went one step further in arguing that “Morals are not in superstition, they are not in ceremonies, and they have nothing in common with dogmas. One can not reiterate enough that all dogmas are different, and that the morality is the same in all...”⁴⁹

However, also similar to those who came before him, Voltaire refused to carry the flag of toleration as far as atheism. Voltaire viewed atheism as a “pernicious monster” since he believed that almost all atheists lacked morality. He claimed that although atheism, “...is not as disastrous as fanaticism, it is almost always fatal to virtue.”⁵⁰ If a man could be both atheistic and moral, that was fine; however common man could not achieve this.

While there certainly seem to be many similarities between Voltaire and philosophers such as Jean Bodin and René Descartes, there is one key thing that set future philosophers, such as Auguste Comte and Emile Durkheim, apart from the previous three. Comte and Durkheim held all religion to be false, and did not believe in the existence of God. Therefore they would spend less time trying to prove the existence of God and more time figuring out what would be suitable to replace religious thought and provide stability for society, since religions had failed to do so. An intriguing point however is that the Comte’s and Durkheim’s attempt to find a replacement for religion proves that religious belief was still present in society. Despite the tumultuous history of religious persecution in France, faith in God endured. Society itself, however, was going through some major changes of a more political nature.

Just as the Protestants began to recover from two hundred years of persecution and to get organized, the Revolution broke out (1789) and with it a group came to power which wanted to destroy all religious belief, including Protestantism and Catholicism, since they deemed them all to be false. They attempted to replace religion with the cult of Reason, which including pledging loyalty to the government alone. Hence a great persecution broke out at this time and not only did Protestantism as an institution fall to pieces but Catholicism did as well. However, these two institutions did not fall because of disbelief or of people losing their faith. Instead they fell because they once again began to fight each other. The ancien régime was being threatened by revolutionaries and in a last ditch effort to save itself it aroused “nascent jealousies between Catholic and Protestant.”⁵¹ While differences of opinion still existed between Catholics and Protestants these “religious differences were no more than a force unscrupulously exploited by...the unbending defender of the ancien régime to intensify and facilitate their attack...”⁵² For once the Catholics were feeling the sting of persecution and were thereby reduced to an equal status with Protestants. Their feeling of superiority rendered the unification of Catholics and Protestants, in the face of intense persecution, impossible. Therefore both groups were driven underground and appear to have disappeared entirely. However, the history of Christianity in France did not end here, and will be picked up again a little later on in this paper.

Before moving on to our next philosopher though, one more thing of interest ought to be noted. When Notre Dame, a very important Catholic church in Paris, was turned into a “temple of reason” there were busts of Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Benjamin Franklin erected. This is intriguing because, as pointed out earlier, Voltaire not only believed in the need for religion as a source of social order but also that there ought to be religious toleration.⁵³ Essentially, Voltaire died in 1788 and by 1790 he was being used by the new powers to support their own views, which included a lack of religious tolerance, something he would not have agreed with at all. However another man who would come to agree with the Revolutionaries concerning the falsehood of all religions and the need to rid society of it was Auguste Comte. He was born in 1788, the year Voltaire died.

Like most educated Frenchmen of this time, Comte’s first thoughts concerning religion naturally sprang from the Revolution since he was only two years old in 1790.⁵⁴ Through the downfall of the ancien régime and the

⁴⁶ Voltaire, *Traité*, 50-51, 60.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁴⁹ *Dictionnaire Philosophique II*, 398.

⁵⁰ *Dictionnaire Philosophique I*, ed. Christiane Mervaud. vol. 35 *Les Oeuvres Completes de Voltaire*, ed. Ulla Kölving (Oxford: Alden Press, 1994), 391.

⁵¹ Poland, 112.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 133.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 200

⁵⁴ Edward Caird, *The Social Philosophy and Religion of Comte* (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1893), 3.

Catholic Church, Comte learned firsthand that “social enthusiasm” was possible without the institutions it had always depended upon.⁵⁵ Whereas earlier philosophes, such as Voltaire, felt that the Protestants deserved to be treated equally and that the fact that they were not reflected poorly on society, Comte viewed Protestantism as a very negative, even corrosive, thing since it upset the balance and peace of society. He did not support Catholicism either, since it had been practiced for centuries and had also failed to keep peace in society. However, the cult of Reason that replaced these previous systems after the Revolution in 1790 disturbed him as well because it once again failed to maintain social order. Frustrated by the failing systems of his time Comte began searching for a new system to “sustain the social order more securely, and satisfy the affections and spiritual aspiration of men more completely, than the fictions of theology.”⁵⁶ The question which remained was what this system ought to have looked like and this is precisely what he dedicated his whole life to developing.

By 1829 Comte was well on his way in the formation of his ideas and began publishing them in various magazines and encyclopedias. Comte’s main contribution was the theory of positivism. Comte argued that every branch of knowledge passes through three successive states of being: “the theological or fictitious, the metaphysical or abstract, and the scientific or positive.”⁵⁷ Primitive human minds were trapped in a vicious circle where they needed to observe things in order to form theories about them and yet it was only via theories that they could understand what they observed. Essentially, primitive man was so overwhelmed by this that the only way out of the circle was through “the spontaneous development of theological conceptions.”⁵⁸ For his purposes, the beliefs of men such as Jean Bodin would have been seen as still in this theological state. Eventually, the mind changed and began to entertain metaphysical beliefs. In this state “the supernatural agents are replaced by abstract forces” and this began to appear in the times of Rene Descartes.⁵⁹ While the metaphysical state is not important in and of itself but only as an intermediary between the theological state (the “necessary point of departure”) and the positive state (the “fixed and definitive state”), the metaphysical was viewed by Descartes as being crucial.⁶⁰ Speaking of this time of human development Comte said, “I chose that great movement imprinted in the human spirit, only two centuries ago, by the combined action of the precepts of Bacon, the conceptions of Descartes, and the discoveries of Galileo...” as the start of positive thinking.⁶¹

The positive state that Comte held so dear was defined by him as being attained when the human mind: recognizing the impossibility of attaining to absolute concepts, gives up the search for the origin and destiny of the universe, and the inner causes of phenomena, and confines itself to the discovery, through reason and observation combined, of the actual laws that govern the succession and similarity of phenomena.⁶²

Here we see that Comte was not interested in knowing the causes of the laws that govern nature. He deemed the pursuit of this knowledge worthless because one can never know for sure the true causes and the pursuit of such knowledge inevitably disrupts society. Comte went on to argue that since the time of Francis Bacon (1561-1626) no intelligent person had argued for knowledge that was not based on reason and facts.⁶³ Instead it was only necessary, in Comte’s view, to identify the laws themselves and follow them. Once society did this and social phenomena reached the positive state, Comte argued, people would be able to discard absurd theological beliefs and by doing so society would obtain the peace and unity that it lacked during the theological state.⁶⁴

Over the course of Comte’s life (1788-1857) the French political scene had changed drastically a number of times. In 1790 the people of France, under the new revolutionary government, were experiencing a time of religious persecution as the revolutionaries tried to suppress Christianity, which they feared, would lead to a reemergence of nostalgia and a yearning to return to the ancien régime and monarchy. The revolutionaries were attempting to replace religion with the new cult of Reason. By 1795 this ‘dechristianisation’ movement had gradually died away,

⁵⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 10.

⁵⁷ Auguste Comte, *Cours de Philosophie Positive I: leçons 1 à 45* (Paris: Hermann, Editeurs des Science et Des Arts, 1998), 21.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 23.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 21.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 27.

⁶² Ibid., 21-22.

⁶³ Ibid., 23.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 38.

but it was still viewed as important that the Republic be disassociated from religion.⁶⁵ However, just a few years later Napoleon Bonaparte realized once again the benefits that could be derived from a positive relationship with the Papacy, and so in 1801 he signed an agreement recognizing Catholicism as “the religion of the majority of Frenchmen”. This formula still made room for religious toleration, and yet at the same time appeased the Papal authorities.⁶⁶ This concordat laid the groundwork for the relation of the government and religion in France until the Third Republic came to power in the 1870s and brought with it the idea that Church and State should be separate, a feat that would be officially accomplished in 1905.⁶⁷ Comte died in 1857 and was thus prior to the time of the Third Republic’s rise to power and the subsequent effects concerning religion. Instead these were to happen during the life of Emile Durkheim and so it is now to his philosophy that we must turn.

Comte made great strides towards sociology as it is known today and is credited as being the founder of the field, but it was Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) who took the Comte’s ideas one step further. Whereas both agreed that science was superior to religion and that it was the job of science to provide the social stability in society that religion had failed to do, Comte, as previously discussed, desired to institute a “religion” that worshiped humanity, but Durkheim insisted that, “all religion is in a sense worship of the group by its members”.⁶⁸ For Durkheim, the origin and the object of religion were both society.

In order to understand what is behind religious thought, one must examine the most primitive religion possible, since it is here that all the rites and myths are reduced to what is indispensable or fundamental.⁶⁹ Even though Durkheim dismissed all religion as untrue, he deemed it important to study it because even the most bizarre rites or myths tell of some human need. Despite the fact that the believer’s justification was often wrong, science would discover the true origins because no human institution could endure if it was based completely on an error.⁷⁰ The true origins of religion could only be found, then, by examining the role that religion filled in primitive times.

At the very origin of religion we find primitive humans essentially believing that there are some type of forces that are more powerful than he themselves. Over time, primitive humans attributed to these forces the ability to control natural phenomenon and thus would perform rituals to appease them. However, by the very act of performing rituals, humans believed that they could control these forces, albeit indirectly. If they failed to do the rain dance the rain would not come since they did not appease the force in control of rain.⁷¹

The most primitive religion one can study is the indigenous beliefs of Australian tribes. Within this religious system we find a “totem.” This is usually an animal or a plant that the group believes its power derives from. There are thousands of different groups that consider themselves aligned with a specific totem. To identify which totem they align themselves with, this totem becomes part of their name. So essentially this totem represents both a group in the society and the symbol of the supernatural power they believe in. “How can the emblem of the group become the figure of a quasi-divinity, if the group and the divinity are two distinct realities?”⁷²

This idea of superior external forces was not believed by one person alone, but by every person within that particular society. When humans goes against this common view of society in any way, for example by saying that there are not supernatural forces, they risks being ostracized by society.⁷³ So really it is society that has all the power. Just as humans considers a god to be superior to themselves, they also views society as superior and therefore society has the power to create a god or religion that will in reality propagate the ideas that the society has created.⁷⁴ The power society holds is not even surpassed by science because when science goes against public opinion, it risks losing its credibility.⁷⁵

Another parallel between the power of a supernatural force and the power of society is that when humans are in harmony with the values and beliefs of their society they are more confident of their actions and courageous in all

⁶⁵ M.J. Sydenham, *The First French Republic 1792-1804* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974), 39-40.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 270.

⁶⁷ David Thomson, *France: Empire and Republic 1850-1940 Historical Documents* (New York: Walker and Company, 1968), 243.

⁶⁸ Stanislaw Andreski, ed., *The Essential Comte* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1974), 14.

⁶⁹ Emile Durkheim, *Les Formes Élémentaires de la Vie Religieuse: le Système Totémique en Australie* (Paris: Presse Universitaire de France, 1960), 8.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 294.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 295-96.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 298.

they do. This is very much the same feeling of confidence humans have when they believe that God is on their side.⁷⁶

Therefore, Durkheim concluded that the feeling that there is something greater than oneself was not and is not a mistaken one. However it is society and not a divine being or beings that is felt.⁷⁷ This feeling is not hard to mistake because it is so powerful. Durkheim points out that if a person eats something that their religion dictates not to eat they might feel sick and may even die despite the fact that there was nothing wrong with the food.⁷⁸ These ideas that Durkheim believed to be true are obviously very different from anything professed by Jean Bodin or René Descartes, and while the change might seem drastic the process was very gradual and took roughly four centuries.

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this paper it was proposed that by looking at the way philosophical thought developed throughout the history of France one would better be able to understand why a large portion of French citizens proclaim themselves Christian while only a small percentage attend church. Before stating the conclusion that has been attained a brief review is necessary for the purposes of clarification. In the sixteenth century the French monarchy was closely linked with the Catholic Church. Due to this connection, the Catholic Church was free to persecute the Protestants without government interference. Jean Bodin believed that the one of the main benefits of religion was that it upheld stability in society and therefore all religions ought to be tolerated. The monarchy did issue an Edict of Nantes, which provided toleration and which allowed the Protestants to come out of hiding, but when this edict was repealed the Protestants were forced underground once again. René Descartes was too busy during his lifetime trying to prove the existence of God and so he tended to stay out of the major debate over religious toleration or the lack thereof in his society. After Descartes came Voltaire who once again argued that all religions ought to be tolerated. A step towards this equality was taken by the revolutionaries but it was not exactly what Voltaire or the other philosophes of his time had in mind. Instead of toleration the government that took control after the fall of the monarchy simply did not discriminate in regards to persecuting religions. Catholics as well as Protestants suffered and were forced underground by this government. However this would not last forever either. Soon the Third Republic came to power and in 1905 its leaders declared an official separation of church and state, which allowed Christianity to resurface. In the meantime philosophers such as Auguste Comte and Emile Durkheim began searching for some method to uphold morality in society since they believed that both Christianity and the cult of Reason had failed to do so.

What was their effect on society though? Surely there are those in France today who would agree with them. Many people would certainly argue that Comte and Durkheim had been on the right path in searching for something to replace religion, but that their ideas failed simply because they were not quite the right replacement either. What is certain, however, is that their revolutionary ideas have indeed failed to replace religion in the eighty-seven years since Durkheim's death. Not only did their beliefs fail to become dominant, but also their claims concerning the falsity of all religions have certainly not caused religious thought to disappear from France.

Throughout the history of France these philosophers have had a large impact on society. By influencing the intellectual classes they influenced those who had the money and who supported those in power. At the same time, as the lower classes became literate they too had access to the ideas of the philosophers through newspapers and books. More importantly though is that by influencing those who had power, the philosophers' ideas affected those who were powerless. Throughout the twentieth century their influence on the lower classes was more direct since the state remained neutral.

The question remains why the religious situation in France is what it is today? Throughout history, the Christian church has faced many obstacles. It has been forced underground numerous times and yet each generation kept its faith in God intact and passed it down to the next generation. This is evidenced by the fact that when the political situation changed the Church reemerged. In other words, the existence of Christianity in France has not been dependent upon the existence of the Church or on the people's attendance at Church. An examination of French history shows the danger in insisting that there is a link between the two. Certainly the lack of religious education that results from not attending church would affect them to some degree although it is not really possible to measure the extent to which it affected them. This lack of religious education was seen in the case of the Protestants who reemerged after the Edict of Nantes in 1598 and who had to reestablish a clergy to teach them. Only time will tell

⁷⁶ Ibid., 302.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 322

⁷⁸ Ibid., 326.

for sure, but it is the argument of this paper that, while the views of philosophers such as Comte and Durkheim have trickled down and affected the religious views of a portion of French citizens, it is only a matter of time before the percentage of the French populace who proclaim Christianity will return, as their ancestors did, to the Church for their moral guidance.

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