

Paul Johnson, A History of Christianity

Oddly enough, the changes were least marked in France, supposedly the centre of Europe's enlightened forces. As in Britain, though for different reasons, the French State Church escaped the reforming visitation from above. Not that it was in a regenerate condition. What Horace Walpole said of England applied *a fortiori* to France: the modes of Christianity were exhausted. The century of Jansenist-Jesuit struggle had left no legacy except indifference. The Enlightenment had spread to the Church in some ways, especially among the higher clergy. Bishops, if they were energetic, busied themselves building roads or canals, and if they had intellectual pretensions set up as *philosophes*. Forms of deism were common. Louis xv, no prude, refused Paris to Cardinal Lomenie de Brienne: 'No, the Archbishop of Paris must at least believe in God.' Chamfort sneered: 'A vicar-general may permit himself a smile when religion is attacked, a bishop may laugh outright, and a cardinal may give his cordial assent.' In most other respects the Church was still the same organization as in the early sixteenth century. It was huge (130,000 clerics) and enormously rich, especially in the north: it owned thirty per cent of the land in Picardy, over sixty per cent in the Cambrésis. But differentials in income, bad enough in England, were nearly ten times worse in France, ranging from the statutory 300 livres minimum for a priest up to 400,000 for leading bishops, a ratio of 1:1300. Virtually all the bishops were nobles and most non-resident.

Seen from a local level, the Church was an extraordinary mixture of idleness and industry. In Angers, for instance, which had a population of 34,000 in 1789, there were seventy-two canons and over forty parochial clergy, plus a huge number of clerical hangers-on (most of them priests) at the cathedral, and at the parish and collegiate churches, sixty monks, forty friars and over three hundred nuns. One in sixty of the citizens was a priest, and this did not include tonsured clerks and students at the seminary. There were an enormous number and variety of ecclesiastical institutions, most of which rang bells at all hours of the day and night; houses facing on the main square were said to be 'almost uninhabitable' in consequence. Some clerics, as in England, were well-educated and dabbled in local antiquarianism. Some were modern-minded. The Benedictines of St Aubin installed plaster busts of Voltaire and Rousseau; and Fr Cotellet de la Blandinière, the local orthodox theologian and writer of the *Diocesan Handbook*, submitted his maiden speech at the Angers Academy to Voltaire for his approval. But much of the routine and atmosphere can only be described as medieval. Relics were exposed twice a week in the cathedral; and on the second Sunday after the Epiphany wine was still dispensed from a stone jar supposedly used at the marriage-feast at Cana. There were almost daily religious processions, a hazard or a humiliation for unbelievers, particularly since relics were carried in them - a piece of the True Cross, the head of St Loup, the bones of Saints Serene and Godebert, the arm of St Julian, a scrap of the Blessed Virgin's clothing and a lock of her hair, the blood of St Maurice and the tooth of St Decent - plus twelve portable waxworks, each with fifteen lifesize figures. When a medieval tomb was opened in the cathedral in 1757, word got around that a new saint had been discovered, and a frenzied mob tore the remains to pieces, making off with bits of bones and rags.

The religious houses of Angers presented a sorry, though not exactly a scandalous, picture. There were no reports of fornicating nuns; but the Benedictine sisters (the richest) were allowed to go out, unescorted and without veils, in their carriages. Unmarried noble ladies were almost exclusively the beneficiaries of this, and other, wealthy institutions; indeed it was officially admitted they existed 'to provide decent and honourable retreats for that numerous portion of the nation which is too well-bred to degrade itself by doing the humble tasks to which lack of income seems to condemn it' (1770). The monks, too, usually came from privileged backgrounds. The 'best' monastery, St Aubin, had an income of 50,000 livres a year. Of this 11,000 went on upkeep, taxes, and so on, 20,000 to the non-resident noble abbot, and the rest to fifteen monks. They led a gentlemanly existence with horses and carriages, 120 livres a year pocket-money, a month's holiday, card-parties and a concert on Sundays. They had given up the habit, and adopted comfortable shoes and silk stockings. It is true they did not eat 'red' meat (except at the so-called 'infirmarium table', where the prior dined), but they had the best salt and fresh fish, hares, duck, teal, woodcocks and so forth. Many abbacies were now

Angers!
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held *in commendam* by under-endowed (or well-connected) bishops. In Angers, four Benedictine houses provided four high ecclesiastics (non-resident) with supplementary stipends, and an easy life for fewer than fifty monks, out of a total income of over 200,000 livres; at St Nicholas, the abbot pocketed two-thirds of its revenue of 25,000 and spent his time entirely at Versailles. The Augustine canons were no better. Of the friars, recruited from the non-noble classes, the Capuchins were really poor. The rest led comfortable lives. One observer noted: 'There are more coffee-pots and tea-sets, snuff boxes and knick-knacks on their tables than books of theology.' The Cordeliers ate from silver, had a hundred and sixty linen sheets and twenty-four pipes of wine; the Dominicans had their own furniture, clothing allowance and private possessions, and their menu included capons, partridges, rabbits and pigs' trotters ('extraordinary expediture').

Among progressive-minded people it was agreed that reforms were necessary and overdue but no one foresaw a complete smash-up. There was a fundamental division in the Church between the cathedral chapters and religious, who were over-endowed, unemployed and mainly aristocratic, and the parish clergy, who were plebeian and poor. It was generally agreed, among *philosophes*, that the latter were worthy and hard-working too. Indeed, it was among the parish clergy that the clamour for reform was loudest. Everyone agreed the monks would have to go. Plans had been set on foot before the Estates-General met in 1789, and the eventual decree of 1790, which dispersed and sold up all but educational and charitable establishments, was carried through with virtually no protest and no resistance whatever. The *curés*, indeed, were seen as a reformist force; as one of them put it, they were 'to the Church of France what the Third Estate is to the nation.' Bowing to this pressure, in 1788, Necker changed the electoral rules in favour of the *curés*, and against the cathedral chapters and monks, and thus out of 296 clerical deputies, 208 were *curés*. An analysis of the *cahiers* of grievances brought to Versailles by the Estates-General shows that Catholicism was not, in itself, unpopular. There was a general assumption that it would continue as the state Church, with a predominant role in education and state ceremonial. Even the National Assembly was not, initially, anti-clerical; it included only three Jansenists and fifteen Protestants. It was, rather, Erastian and Gallican, and regarded the Church as a necessary part of the nation's moral machinery: otherwise, who would prevent the servants stealing the spoons? In November 1788, Louis XVI had discussed the possibility of an approaching crisis with his reforming minister, Malesherbes, and the relevancy of the English Civil War. Malesherbes remarked: 'Fortunately, religious quarrels are not involved.' The king agreed: '*L'atrocité ne sera pas la même.*'

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