

Introductory remarks from a study of French Catholicism

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it may be considered that religion can be recognised as 'the' exemplar of an ideological force, institutionalised into material structures. A study of the religion of a country must surely therefore go some way in the direction of identifying major forces of sociological change. It is not suggested that religion forms a microcosm of society, but simply that major social trends are, actively or passively, reflected in it.

Within the context of the present study, a major period in the evolution of French Catholicism has been taken as a focus. However, the 1930's were not just a turning point for Catholics, as they marked "la grande crise" of French society as a whole; the open manifestation of contradictory forces carried over from the nineteenth century.

Initially therefore, this study is concerned to show the state of the country. During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, pockets of intense industrial activity developed within France. What then were the consequences of these developments for the Catholic Church? Many writers have been primarily concerned to show how industrialisation has been the main cause of increased dechristianisation in the modern world. Although this is certainly true, it is hoped that this study will in some ways show how the process is not linear; it is not simply a question of secularisation as a result of industrialisation. Other factors are of crucial importance.

Secondly, this study intends to demonstrate what has been called the Catholic "prise de conscience"; by this we mean the realisation on the part of some catholics that many of the Churches views and ideas were now outmoded in the modern world. In this our main concern will be to show exactly what made up this "prise de conscience"; in particular, the developments in social catholicism, and catholic intellectual thought. However, this evolution did not come about in isolation, as it arose from a gradual process that can be traced back to the Revolution. The historical setting therefore seems of paramount importance in understanding the events of the 1930's.

Thirdly, and as a consequence of the above, it is hoped that this study may go part of the way towards synthesising some of the main issues raised into a broader conceptual framework. That is to say that our ultimate intention is to highlight certain key characteristics of French society as a whole, so that the problems to be found therein may be more readily understood.

Finally, in support of the claim that this is a 'scientific' study, the importance of the footnotes should be emphasised as a source of documentary evidence for the opinions expressed and the conclusions made.



A Brief History - The Church and the State(3)

Before the Great Revolution of 1789, French society had been dominated by the spirit of Catholic religion. Social structures were believed to have been created by the will of God, and upheld by the spiritual activity of the Church. Considered philosophically, such an idea of sacred representation in the temporal was crucial for legitimizing religious acts, and for the Church's claim to validity in influencing social and political events.

However, dating from the middle ages and encouraged by 'Renaissance' and 'Réforme', a new spirit of reason slowly permeated through intellectual life. The clearest representations of this spirit can be found in the works of the encyclopaedists of the 'Age of Reason', and in the writings of Voltaire. Briefly, these intellectuals found the old theology outmoded, and so sought new socio-economic forms to express the importance of Man as the measure of human life. Their views were notably anti-christian in character, and spread throughout the 'salons' and 'sociétés de pensées' of the day, where cultivated members of the Nobility and Bourgeoisie met to discuss. Significantly, these men were the most mobile, and active members of the population(4).

Within the Church too, there were signs of growing liberalism amongst the clergy, some of whom were well educated and far

from obscuratist. The Revolution killed this spirit dead.

One recent writer on France has called the early split between the Revolution and the Church "a series of historical accidents"(5). How far the events of the time can be called an accident is a moot question. Clearly, the Church was to some extent forced into an anti-revolutionary position, with the confiscation of its land, and the demolition of the old Gallican Church. Equally, it may be argued that revolutionary principles of liberty and fraternity were in fact Christian values(6). The overwhelming spirit of the Revolution, however, was rational and atheist, feeding directly on the social and economic theories of the previous century(7). This double revolt against King and Church was therefore more than an accident, as it implied a total duality in how men regarded their relationships with the State and society. On occasions, this duality was reconciled somewhat, as a result of men and events(8), but for most of the nineteenth century, principles of the Church and the Revolution showed no sympathy for each other.

Following the Revolution, a curious thing occurred. Nobility, having suffered with the Church, tried, particularly under the Restoration, to strengthen its position by siding with Catholics against republican values. Similarly, the Bourgeoisie, still completely Voltairian up until the July monarchy, began to fear social subversion during the June days of 1849, and so became increasingly pro-clergy, to whom it accorded the Falloux law

in 1850(9). Slowly, an important part of the Bourgeoisie became Christian, which fragmented this class. No longer, therefore, was it possible to speak of 'the' Bourgeoisie, as it now existed in various forms.

During the second republic, Louis Napoleon sustained the Pope's independence in such a way that voting for the Emperor meant helping the Pope. The Pope in turn attacked the principals of the Revolution by supporting the Syllabus(10), criticising representative government and warning against liberty of the Press.

In sum, contradictory experiences during the nineteenth century had deposited a layer of devout Catholicism in the French Bourgeoisie, all whilst maintaining a large percentage of unrepentant Voltairianism. Even more significant perhaps was the fact that Church institutions had slowly become infiltrated with a spirit of bourgeois conservatism. This was an important factor in the way the Church was encouraged to hold on to its traditional structures and beliefs against forces of modernity.

The next major crisis came in the Spring of 1871. After the Paris Commune, and the massacre of hostages, the Catholic Church was able to claim that the Pope's resistance to the Revolution had been fully justified. Justice and modern liberty were opposites. As a result, the French political right moved further to the right, the left to the left. The political right though was Catholic.



It seems, therefore, that the anti-Catholic measures implemented during the first half of the Third Republic were not part of some sort of complex conspiracy, but were in many ways symptomatic of the anti-republican attitudes that the Church had taken up. The result of all this was an increased laicization of French institutions(11). The Catholic Church consequently saw modern values based on the quality of individual life, as simply a profane crime against God.

This duality of traditionalism and modernism was further made possible by the unsatisfactory way in which France was evolving socio-economically. The two opposites were therefore able to be presented as powerful alternatives.

It may be argued that the State only concerned religion indirectly, and that by past and present experience the Church could get along with King or Parliament. Representative government, however, posed a new problem. There had been less conflict between the Church and the State, in the past(12), because government had based part of its legitimation on Christian values. French republican government, however, was not able to be openly Christian in the old way; nowhere is there reference to God in any of the republican constitutions, no prayer at official functions, no 'In God We Trust' on coins, and certainly no religious oaths for office holders. In sum, a State basing its principles on rationalism had to be impartial to religion. The Church, however, saw a non-Catholic State as an anti-Catholic

State(13), which in turn reinforced its hostility and alienation, in the modern world.

It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that the development of modern French society and the growth of the new industrial population was able to take place away from the influence of the Church.

#### Dechristianisation - Industrialisation

The intellectual evolution of the eighteenth century, the political revolution of 1789, and the erosion of Catholic representation in State affairs should not, however, be allowed to eclipse the industrial revolution, as a major factor of dechristianisation.

In a major work on French Catholicism the author presents two pictures of French society(14). The first is taken 700 years ago, and shows religion at the centre of social life. Its building is in the centre of the community from whence it directs its message to a largely practising population. In such a way, most of cultural and family life is instructed in Catholic values. The woeful second picture represents the shattering of this insularity. Taken from a twentieth century account of a typical industrial town(15), it shows that 70% of the population now have to leave their district to work, while town life consists of a whole range of cultural alter-

natives, largely profane in character. In this climate, there is competition with the Church for mans leisure time, a competition that the Church, now geographically and morally distanced from the individual, is hardly prepared, in spirit or structure, to enter into.

It may be supposed that a Christian comparing these two pictures, will simply conclude that men are less virtuous in modern times. This sort of conclusion, however, is largely false. Religious practice is not necessarily a sign of faith. Certainly, it seems that the habitual church-goer may have little in the way of personal faith, while many that consider themselves 'practising Christians' rarely attend church services(16). The point is that here we are studying religious practice as a social phenomenon and not as a question of faith. It will be argued that for the majority, church attendance is a social habit, governed by customs and local State/religious controls, rather than an act of personal belief. So let us ask, in terms of church attendance to what extent can France be considered a dechristianised country?

Until quite recently, knowledge of the process and progress of dechristianisation in France came solely from the clergy, as they observed dwindling numbers in church attendance. During the 1930's and 40's, however, evidence of actual religious practice was meticulously gathered, tabulated, and commented upon by Boulard, and Le Bras. The results were outstanding.



By grouping the religious observance of the population into three main categories(17), Boulard was able to construct a national map(18) on which he was able to distinguish three principal 'blocks' of major(19) and minor(20) observance. Much work has been done in comparing and contrasting different areas, but his broad conclusions are distinct.

The new spirit, the technical, rational spirit develops initially in large towns, where it is accompanied by the growth of liberal capitalism. The chief characteristic of this new system is that it is industrial, and so by nature, humanist and positivist, if not openly anti-clerical. Clearly, it is necessary to emphasise that this development does not occur in isolation, but is rather part of a complex series of changes of an economic, social and ideological nature. Most significant, is that to the individual, this represents a change in daily routine; habits, leisure and language. The old traditional life style is fragmented, 'paysan' becomes 'worker'. Such changes in behaviour are naturally reflected in human psychology. Just as the old socio-economic structures give way, so must their ideas. The old spirit is outmoded, the new spirit forms. The Church, however, is represented in that old spirit, and there remains as new attitudes form; attitudes that emanate from the factory and not the Church. Dechristianisation, therefore, proceeds as a symptom of man's changing social environment; it does not necessarily represent hostility to Christianity.



If this is true, and indeed it is a gross oversimplification, we would expect to see the spread of dechristianisation accompanying the progress of industrialisation. To a certain extent, within recognised limits this process is demonstrable. Industrialisation proper got underway in France with the construction of the railways between 1850 and 1860. In 1846 75% of the population was rural, whilst by 1872 it had fallen to 68.9% and 47.6% by 1936(21). During a similar period of time, taking the number of priests ordained, a marked decline in the number of individuals entering the priesthood is noticeable(22). This is significant, because it shows that a proportion of the population was making a positive move away from Christian values.

However, the relationship between dechristianisation and industrialisation is not linear. It is not sufficient to say that industrialisation alone is the cause of the steady decline in religious observance. There are enough examples of industrial, yet Catholic areas, to make this conclusion presumptive. Similarly, a large proportion of dechristianised areas is rural. It is therefore necessary to broaden the analysis in such a way as to show that the mechanism of religious observance is a social habit, governed by customs. Like all customs, religion is best preserved when it has strong roots, a favourable environment, and a protective structural framework in which to fix itself.

In this way, by studying their past history, we can see that

loyal regions of the west have generally been inhabited by stable populations whose geographical extremity and lack of communication with the rest of France have protected them somewhat from the experience of social and economic revolution(23). In these regions the clergy are still numerous, and old feudal structures remain. Each parish, for example, has its own priest; the château often supporting the presbytery. As for the Press, it is often controlled, even directed by the Rector, thus ensuring the propagation of orthodox documents.

Within dechristianised zones, however, practically the whole of the area has a history of religious turbulence. The central areas of France, for example, have nearly all undergone cultural infiltration from other regions; most notably Paris, Limoges, and Toulouse. Therefore, as a result of the movement of migrants, and the effects of action from the State, and Press, social habits and customs have been significantly modified. As for the clergy, Nobility, and Bourgeoisie, they are noticeably less numerous; one priest often administering several parishes, independent of economic aid from leading citizens. As a consequence of this, children in these areas have been brought up in State rather than private schools; the representation of Catholicism remaining obscure, as laïc rather than religious institutions form(24).

This does seem to suggest that religious practice is in some way linked to other social habits. From a study of local traditions, it appears that the two are of uppermost importance;



the land owning hierarchy, and family solidarity(25). Of these, the first is most marked in the West, and the second in the regions of the North and East. However, in Central and Southern regions of France, these traditions have slowly been eroded. Therefore, in such traditional, industrial, Catholic areas of the North and East, forces of authority preserve subordination to cultural institutions that modern individualism ignores. Putting it succinctly, when superiority in the family or the village no longer holds the individual within a strong socio-structural framework of habits and beliefs, he will tend to free himself from cultural practices, most notably religious ones, as he is enticed away by new ideological products.

To summarise, therefore, we have made three important conclusions: firstly, that religious practice can be considered as a social phenomenon, and so studied as such; geographical and cultural environment being of primary significance in determining religious observance(26); secondly, that the process of industrialisation forms centres of non-christian values in large towns, most noticeably amongst the proletarian classes(27); and finally, that this secular spirit tends to spread to other areas by what is known as 'a fermentation of rationalist values'; initially to those areas whose cultural traditions have been weakened by the infiltration of 'modern' individuals and their ideas(28).

However, although all this goes some way in elucidating the process of dechristianisation, it does not fully explain why the Church was so unable to resist it. There are three points

to be made here.

Firstly, to reiterate the historical position of the Church, it is true that towards the end of the nineteenth century, when industrialisation was well under way most catholics were pre-occupied with defending their faith against the recent trends in intellectual thought. Similarly, they had the open hostility of Third Republic politicians to fight. In this climate, the Catholic Church retreated into traditional institutions as a way of preserving its heritage and doctrine. This conservative attitude allowed a whole new culture to form outside of religious values. It is perhaps a good point to make that the so-called dechristianisation of the working class is somewhat of a misnomer as it never was Christian to begin with. As has been suggested, it in fact grew independently, having little actual contact with Catholicism.

Secondly, it should be emphasised that all this was made all the more possible by the imbalanced way in which French society was evolving; so that if France was industrialising, modernising, it was doing so unsatisfactorily. Despite significant areas of intense modern activity, therefore, large residues of tradition remained in an ideological, and socio-structural sense.

Thirdly, it can be seen that not only did the Church fail to modernise its doctrine, it repeatedly underestimated the importance of its institutional representation in urban life. For example, in the XII<sup>e</sup> and XX<sup>e</sup> arrondissements (peripheral)



of Paris, the population between 1877 and 1906 rose from 840,000 to 1,525,000; in other words, an increase of 90%. During the same period of time, however, the number of parish priests in these areas went up by only 30%; that is three times less than the population(29).

The social and religious situation was therefore complex. The Church had become increasingly alienated from the ideas and structures of the modern world; whilst the industrial working class was forming in an environment lacking in social institutions, particularly religious ones. Dansette(30) describes this situation as a "misère institutionelle", and cites Toynbee as seeing the proletarian condition as characterised by a sense of belonging to a society to which it did not feel 'organically' linked. Proletarian values, forming in this climate, therefore tended to base themselves around common experience of work and urban life. The working class therefore progressively developed a 'demystified' attitude to the world, particularly with regard to its future. As a consequence of such a phenomenon, socialism adopted a religious role, complete with evangel, dogma, theologians and saints.

Having therefore demonstrated the mechanism and extent of dechristianisation in France it is now proposed to study in more detail, how certain Catholics responded. In this, it is possible to trace the development of different strands of thought within Catholicism, to understand their differences and similarities,

and then to examine the significance of certain key issues in broader sociological terms. In order to do this it is necessary to give a general historical description of the phenomenon of 'Social Catholicism' and then to show how its evolution led to significant developments in Catholic youth movements during the 1930's.

### Social Catholicism

As far back as 1830, some Catholics adopted separate attitudes in response to the suppression of the corporate system, and the rise of industrial society. Principally, these can be understood as two tendencies: the first, nostalgic for the past, expressed faith in traditional institutions, and the ruling classes (especially the aristocracy); the second was concerned with reconciling the Church to modern society, was democratic, and believed in popular freedom. The first is associated with Villeneuve-Bargemont, and later Le Play; whilst the second was important in Laménais' L'Avenir, L'Atelier of Buchez, and L'Ere Nouvelle of Maret and Ozanam(31).

The real growth of social Catholicism, however, took place during the first thirty years of the Third Republic, and came initially from the work of the Count de Mun and de la Tour du Pin. Under the influence of German Catholics(32), these men urged the Church to adopt a more social attitude to workers. Opinions of such piety, however, amounting to little more than patriarchal welfare efforts, brought little response from the working class,

who remained suspicious of their bourgeois leaders. Nevertheless, the initiative was taken one step further with the work of Abbé Henri de Tourville, a disciple of Le Play(33), who recognized the importance of worker autonomy. Tourville was the first to demand that worker independence and initiative should be developed into a positive corporative system.

The two tendencies of liberalism, and conservatism, therefore, intermixed somewhat to produce a 'social corporatism'.

Following these developments, de Mun, who had previously advocated 'syndicat mixte' gave his support to a law permitting the formation of trade unions, and so alienated himself from traditional right wing Catholics(34). Perhaps more significantly, in 1886 he went on to found L'Association Catholique de la Jeunesse Française (ACJF), whose members concerned themselves with the 'rapprochement' of spiritual values to the modern world.

One of the most important developments at this time, however, was the formation of 'Le Sillon' movement of Marc Sangnier(35). Basing political equality on the replacement of charity by State social policies, 'Le Sillon' movement was the first to actually put principles of worker initiative into practice. To do this, work centres were formed in which individual workers could consult books, and discuss problems with fellow workers and sillonists(36). It was basically seen as a place for the



popular education of the working class through the expression of its own rather than bourgeois needs. At first claiming to be non-political(37), Sangnier went on, when faced with obvious need for social reform, to encourage workers to join the CGT and to fight for better factory conditions against "la monarchie à l'usine".

Its success was modest but significant. By 1908, membership was claimed to be up to 85% proletarian. It is true that in actual numbers its membership was only about half that of the ACJF(38) but then the Catholic youth movement was formed mainly from university youths, and so was predominantly bourgeois in character.

By 1910, with the publication of its own newspaper, Le Sillon policies began to threaten traditional catholic views, so that, carefully orchestrated by the right wing, it was forced to stop activity with the publication of the encyclical, 'Notre Charge Apostolique'.

Nevertheless, Le Sillon was significant for at least two important reasons: firstly, inspired by a romantic notion of man, it took the revolutionary principles of individual liberty, into its Catholic beliefs(39); secondly, it demonstrated the early problem of social catholicism, that is how spiritually inspired action leads 'naturally' to political action with all the dangerous recriminations that such a move entails. Both these points are early examples of issues that became more sig-

nificant in later years; especially the relationship between mysticism and politics. However, for the moment it is clear that this word 'social' included several definitions, from corporatism to socialism. Again the significance of these issues will become more apparent as we proceed.

To some extent, of course, encouragement had been given to social reform with the publication of the papal encyclical 'Rerum Novarum'(40). Yet for the most part, economically liberal but politically conservative catholics fought against this tendency; whilst many of the clergy, intent on preserving political unity looked on 'Christian democracy' as simply a contradiction in terms. The social encyclical was, after all, also a 'corporative' encyclical and was interpreted as such by many Catholics, often linking their ideas with those of the 'Action Française', who succeeded in persuading du Pin to support them in their corporative policy.

It may be difficult to understand today, how it was that a movement such as the 'Action Française', led by a self-proclaimed agnostic(41), could attract such a sympathetic response from so many Catholics; but, faced with the abstract idealism of the 'left', the concrete policies of the right, by advocating social stability, often seemed to make most sense. Appealing for 'order' (of the Ancien Régime in this case) this shows how a large fraction of traditionalism still remained at the heart of French Catholic beliefs. To some extent, with the condemning of modernists in 1910, the disestablishment laws of 1905, and the

Dreyfus Affair, this attitude was reinforced, whilst progress in social catholicism did not really advance again until the 1920's.

Finally it should be emphasised that, significant though these developments were for the evolution of Catholic thought, the majority of the working class found the language, coming from a bourgeois culture, alien to its own. Similarly, for the younger generation, these new ideas were often simply too intellectual.

In the context of the present study, it is impossible to trace out the complex links between these early developments in social Catholicism, and the Action Catholique youth movements. They are in the same tradition, although both quite distinct. If these issues are not examined in more detail, therefore, it is not to underestimate their importance. Instead it is proposed to demonstrate how these specialised youth movements were founded, then to show how they distinguished themselves from other catholic groups, and finally to examine the reasons for their success and failure.

### Action Catholique

Following the first world war, a tendency towards specialisation amongst the Catholic youth was noticeable with the



formation of a 'worker' and 'agrarian' branch of the ACJF. It was from outside of France, however, that the impetus for a fully specialised Catholic action movement came.

In 1925 a Belgian priest named Cardign founded a working class Christian youth movement, as a consequence of his own concern with the apparent non-christianity of the proletarian class of his country. From his enquiries, he came to three important conclusions.

Firstly, he observed that the religiously educated youth of his country gave up their faith and practice as soon as they enter an industrial environment(42). He therefore concluded that a particular social environment will affect individual habits and beliefs; so that generally, an individual entering an atmosphere where there is an apparent lack of Catholic values will tend to respond in the direction of other non-religious values, by the natural process of socialisation.

Secondly, he realised how inaccessible this 'profane' environment was for the clergy(43).

Thirdly, he concluded that the rechristianisation of the working class was not going to come from the outside, as socially concerned Catholics were usually bourgeois in character(44); the working class was therefore unlikely to be sympathetic to their ideas because of the culture that was necessarily expressed in them. The working class therefore had to be rechristianised

from within through the apostolic work of its members. The major innovation of Cardijn's was therefore that Christian values could not be carried from one class to another.

Following these developments in Belgium, the Abbé Guérin founded the French Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne (JOC) in 1926. Within a few years several other movements had formed under the 'Action Catholique' title(45). They proclaimed that their main aim was to rechristianise France, milieu by milieu, by the mobilisation of Catholic youth.

In the beginning, everyone distrusted the ACJF as being too bourgeois. Equally, the ACJF criticised the formation of these specialised Catholic groups, as a fragmentation of the faith. Eventually, however, attracted by its institutional strength and support, most groups were absorbed into the ACJF.

In passing it is interesting to note that within a pluralist society, a plurality of social movements formed as the only way to ensure independent expression of their particular milieu.

The JOC, for example, acutely aware of worker conditions, stressed the importance of proletarian autonomy as the expression of some sort of mystical, spiritual quality of work. They were not then strictly within the Catholic heritage of social reform. Seeing themselves as brothers in the unity of Christ, they sought to rechristianise the working class, by emphasising the importance

of environment, and class, instead of preaching individual conversion. They took as their motto "To See, To Judge, To Act"(46). To see the problems of young workers, to judge according to the responsibilities of their Catholic principles, and then to act by animating the working class with Christian values, so that they may live as fellow Catholics in a non-christian society.

The Jeunesse Agricole Chrétienne (JEC) founded in 1929, adopted similar attitudes. As with the JOC, it distinguished itself from the ACJF by emphasising the importance of milieu instead of 'personne', except that in the case of the JAC, the mystical spirituality of the 'corps' was unsurprisingly expressed in terms of rural life. The JAC was, therefore, more traditional in character.

It is a fact that the growth of these and other movements of the 'Action Catholique' appeared as the great hope during the troubled years of the 1930's. At the JOC congress of 1937, one bishop claimed that within ten years, Action Catholique was going to transform the world(47). Despite youthful enthusiasm, however, these movements were far from obtaining significant results. In 1940, an enquiry was published on soldiers opinions (48), one ex-jociste admits to being more familiar with the JOC than the working class(49), still others are even more critical, explaining that although the JOC wanted to rechristianise the working class, it remained apathetic to the Church because of its bourgeois character. So what went wrong?



As one writer demonstrates (50), the JOC had 'seen' and 'judged' more than it had 'acted'. Similarly, two of its clergy later admitted that it had remained a parish movement(51), unable to significantly represent itself in the proletarian world.

In reality, therefore, despite its apostolic intentions, the JOC had existed in a somewhat unstable, artificial position between parish and worker. Its presence in the parish, for example, was regarded with great suspicion by clergy, who did not welcome outside interference. As for the JOC, it felt uncomfortable in this type of fixed structure. Similarly, in the proletarian world, the JOC found itself unable to operate in the factory situation.

It became increasingly clear that the JOC projects had not succeeded because there was a severe lack of back-up institutions to support its action. In Belgium, greater success had been possible because there existed powerful Christian structures to absorb the former JOC members. Institutional and environmental support could, therefore, consolidate their apostolic training. French workers, on the other hand, were non-practising because the Church belonged to a world that was foreign to them. When structures comparable to their Belgian counterparts did exist, for example the Catholic union (CFTC), they formed only a modest, subsidiary part of the whole worker movement.

Nevertheless, despite its limited success, the important issue