



# FOR THE SOUL OF FRANCE

CULTURE WARS IN THE AGE OF DREYFUS

## FREDERICK BROWN

A K N O P F  B O O K

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ALSO BY **F**REDERICK **B**BROWN

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*Flaubert: A Biography*

*Theater and Revolution*

*Zola: A Life*

*Père-Lachaise: Elysium as Real Estate*

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FOR THE  
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*Culture Wars in the Age of Dreyfus*

FREDERICK BROWN



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*(Unless otherwise attributed, all the illustrations come from the Cabinet des Estampes of the Bibliothèque Nationale)*

Ernest Renan at the time of the publication of *La Vie de Jésus*.

“Le Cantique,” by Jean Béraud, at the building site of the Sacré-Coeur, 1887.

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The Palace of Industry.

Gustave Eiffel. Photographed by the Nadar studio.

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“A bas-relief for the Chamber of Deputies.” Caricature by Forain.

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An anti-Semitic flyer, 1897.

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The smoldering ruins of the Charity Bazaar, 1897.

Photographs, May 1897, from the Charity Bazaar, printed in *La Chronique Universelle*.

The centerpiece of the Exposition Universelle of 1900, the Palace of Electricity.

# CHRONOLOGY

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## PRINCIPALS:

Maurice Barrès: 1862-1923

Marcelin Berthelot: 1827-1907

Eugène Bontoux: 1820-1905

Georges Boulanger: 1837-1891

Georges Clemenceau: 1841-1929

Alfred Dreyfus: 1859-1935

Édouard Drumont: 1844-1917

Gustave Eiffel: 1832-1923

Jules Ferry: 1832-1893

Léon Gambetta: 1838-1882

Ferdinand de Lesseps: 1805-1894

Patrice de MacMahon: 1808-1893

Louis-Édouard-Désiré Pie: 1815-1880

Pius IX: 1792-1878

Jacques de Reinach: 1840-1892

Ernest Renan: 1823-1892

Adolphe Thiers: 1797-1877

Émile Zola: 1840-1902

## 1848

- FEBRUARY: Paris revolts against the constitutional monarchy established after the Revolution of 1830. King Louis-Philippe flees and the Second Republic is proclaimed.
- JUNE: In a second uprising, the Parisian populace, goaded by economic hardship, threatens the republican government and is crushed.
- DECEMBER: Louis-Napoléon, Napoléon Bonaparte's nephew, captures 75 percent of the vote in an election for the presidency.

## 1851

- DECEMBER: Louis-Napoléon carries out a coup d'état. One year later, he will emerge from a plebiscite as Napoléon III and establish the Second Empire.

## 1853–1856

- The Crimean War, fought between Imperial Russia on one side and an alliance of France, the United Kingdom, Sardinia, and the Ottoman Empire on the other.



1857

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- Lieutenant Georges Boulanger, in North Africa, fights in his first campaign, against Kabyles.

1859

- APRIL: France, in alliance with Piedmont-Sardinia, declares war against Austria. Two major battles take place in Northern Italy, at Magenta and Solferino. Lieutenant Boulanger serves under General MacMahon. Fighting on another front is Gustave Eiffel's father.

1863

- Michel Lévy publishes Ernest Renan's *Vie de Jésus*, stirring enormous controversy. It will be one of the two or three best-selling books published in France in the nineteenth century.
- Georges Boulanger serves with the French colonial army in Southeast Asia.

1864

- Pius IX issues the encyclical *Quanta Cura*, containing *The Syllabus of Errors*.

1867

- APRIL: The Exposition Universelle opens.

1869

- A Vatican Council is convoked to condemn "modern errors deriving from rationalism." It affirms the doctrine of papal infallibility. It concluded in October 1870.

1870

- JULY: France declares war against Prussia and her German allies.
- SEPTEMBER 1: Defeated at the battle of Sedan, Napoléon III abdicates. Three days later, on September 4, the Empire gives way to a Government of National Defense, whose animating spirit is Léon Gambetta.
- SEPTEMBER 19: The German Army besieges Paris.

1871

- JANUARY: An armistice is declared; the siege is lifted.
- FEBRUARY: Nationwide elections of a National Assembly are held, to form a government with which Germany can treat.
- MARCH: The government moves from Bordeaux to Versailles, but is not recognized by Paris, where National Guard regiments proclaim a Commune and organize elections. (Paris is again besieged, this time by a French army.)
- MAY: France cedes Alsace and part of Lorraine to Germany in the Treaty of Frankfurt.
- JUNE 21-29: Adolphe Thiers unleashes the Versailles army on Paris, under Marshal MacMahon, in a bloody campaign known as "*la semaine sanglante*."

- SEPTEMBER: The National Assembly confers the title of president of the Republic on Thiers, but, paradoxically, the conservative majority refuses to confer the title of Republic on the State.
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1872

- MAY: The first group of Communards condemned to transportation departs for New Caledonia. Trials of Communards, resulting in imprisonment or execution, take place throughout the year.
- SEPTEMBER: Religious fervor swells the ranks of pilgrims to sites consecrated by mystical visitations: Lourdes, La Salette, and elsewhere.

1873

- JANUARY: Napoléon III dies in England.
- MAY: Thiers is forced to resign the presidency by a conservative coalition, which elects Marshal Patrice de MacMahon for a term of seven years, inaugurating a reactionary regime known as the Septennate, or, more often, l'Ordre Moral. Forbidden thenceforth is the celebration of Revolutionary events such as the capture of the Bastille (July 14) and establishment of the First Republic (September 21).
- JUNE: A pilgrimage to the Cluniac basilica of the Sacred Heart at Paray-le-Monial attracts tens of thousands. The National Assembly authorizes expropriations for the construction of a basilica in Montmartre.
- AUGUST: Pretenders representing the two branches of the French royal family establish a line of succession, the Comte d'Orléans agreeing to follow the Comte de Chambord; in October, however, Chambord will effectively withdraw from any future in French politics by announcing that he will never consent to reign under the tricolor flag.

1874

- Frémiet's statue of Joan of Arc is unveiled at the place des Pyramides.

1875

- JANUARY: The universal jubilee of the Catholic Church commences.  
With passage of the Wallon amendment, the government is officially designated a Republic.
- JUNE: The archbishop of Paris presides at the laying of the cornerstone of the Sacré-Coeur de Montmartre.

1876

- FEBRUARY: In legislative elections, republicans emerge with a decisive majority.

1877

- MARCH: Pius IX protests against anticlerical laws passed by Italian legislators. In France, Catholics petition the government to intervene.
- In the Chamber of Deputies, Gambetta, reacting to "ultramontane" agitation, makes his famous pronouncement "*Le cléricalisme, voilà l'ennemi!*"

- MAY 16: MacMahon attempts to establish an autocratic presidency by dissolving parliament. Three hundred sixty-three Republican deputies issue a manifesto of protest.
- SEPTEMBER: Adolphe Thiers dies. Hundreds of thousands in Paris witness his funeral cortege.
- OCTOBER: In legislative elections, the republican Left increases its majority.

1878

- The Chamber of Deputies passes a law severely curtailing the power of the president to adjourn or dissolve the Assembly.
- FEBRUARY: Pius IX dies and is succeeded by Leo XIII.
- MAY-NOVEMBER: The first Exposition Universelle of the Third Republic takes place.
- MAY: Eugène Bontoux is appointed director of the Union Générale investment bank.
- JUNE-JULY: The Congress of Berlin, hosted by Bismarck, reorganizes the Balkan states following the Russo-Turkish war.
- NOVEMBER: Leo XIII promulgates his encyclical *De inscrutabili deiconsilio* (“On the Evils of Society”). “Now the source of these evils, we are convinced, lies chiefly in this, that the holy and venerable authority of the Church, which in God’s name rules mankind, upholding and defending all lawful authority, has been despised and set aside.”

1879

- JANUARY: MacMahon resigns the presidency and is replaced by Jules Grévy. Léon Gambetta is overwhelmingly elected president of the Chamber. These events signal the beginning of an era of liberal reform, under the leadership of Gambetta and Jules Ferry.
- JULY: The first “republican” military review takes place at Longchamps.  
The government moves to Paris after eight years at Versailles.
- AUGUST: Leo XIII issues the encyclical *Aeterni patris* (“On the Restoration of Christian Philosophy”) in defense of Thomist teaching.
- Ferdinand de Lesseps announces plans to build a canal across the isthmus of Panama.  
The Assembly passes a law requiring the establishment of normal schools for both men and women, to train teachers, in every prefectural district.  
The first bond for the construction of a canal in Panama is issued.

1880

- JUNE: The Jesuits are expelled from their houses and schools. Other “nonauthorized” teaching orders are under threat of expulsion.
- JULY: July 14 is decreed a national holiday.
- SEPTEMBER: Jules Ferry becomes prime minister but retains his portfolio at the ministry of education.

1881

- JUNE: A law is passed abolishing tuition in public primary schools. It will be followed in March 1882 by laws making primary school education compulsory and secular.
- MARCH: Bontoux wins a contract to build a trans-Serbian railroad.
- OCTOBER: Boulanger attends the centennial celebration of the Revolutionary battle of Yorktown in Virginia as France's military representative and spends the following months touring the United States.

## 1882

- JANUARY: The Union Générale crashes; many publicly traded establishments follow suit, triggering a general economic slide.
- The public is offered the first of six Panama Canal Company bond issues.
- DECEMBER: Léon Gambetta dies of septicemia, following appendicitis, at the age of forty-four.

## 1883

- Assumptionists found the daily newspaper *La Croix*, whose regional satellites will bear the same name. It will eclipse *L'Univers* as the most influential Catholic newspaper in France.
- AUGUST: The Pretender, Henri, Comte de Chambord, whom Charles Maurras will describe as "the priest and pope of royalty rather than a king," dies at his castle in Austria.

## 1884

- FEBRUARY: Boulanger is appointed commander of the army of occupation in Tunisia.
- Divorce is legalized and public prayer abolished.

## 1885

- MAY: Victor Hugo dies. Three million people witness the funeral procession across Paris. In June, he is the first "grand homme" to be buried in the pantheonized Église Sainte-Geneviève.

## 1886

- JANUARY: Charles de Freycinet appoints Boulanger minister of war in his cabinet.
- Édouard Drumont's *La France juive* and *La France juive devant l'opinion* appear, months apart. The former will run through one hundred fifty editions by year's end.
- JULY 14: Boulanger emerges from the annual military review at Longchamps the idol of the crowd.

## 1887

- Ground is broken for construction of the "one-thousand-foot tower."
- APRIL: The Schnaebelé incident earns Boulanger the enthusiastic support of warmongering nationalists.
- MAY: With the fall of the Goblet government, Boulanger loses his ministerial portfolio and is assigned to a lackluster command in central France.

- JULY: Boulanger's departure from Paris provokes a tumultuous demonstration of hero worship.
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- DECEMBER: TWO prominent royalists confer secretly with Boulanger, hoping to bring about a restoration of the monarchy through him.

1888

- MARCH: Boulanger is discharged from the army. The Boulangist newspaper *La Cocarde: Organe Boulangiste* begins publication. Maurice Barrès will serve briefly as editor-in-chief.
- APRIL: Boulanger is elected to the Chamber of Deputies from the industrial north.
- AUGUST: Boulanger is the victor in three by-elections, affirming his national stature.

1889

- JANUARY: Boulanger trounces the moderate Left candidate in his first bid for election from a Parisian district. Urged to march upon the Élysée, he demurs.
- MARCH 31: Inauguration of the Eiffel Tower.
- APRIL 1: Boulanger flees to Belgium.
- MAY-NOVEMBER: The Exposition Universelle. It draws twenty-eight million visitors.
- JUNE: With government authorization, the Panama Canal Company offers a "lottery bond."

1890

- An outbreak of influenza in Paris claims hundreds of lives. Cholera claims more lives in the course of the year.
- FEBRUARY: The Panama Canal Company is liquidated by order of a civil tribunal.
- OCTOBER: Boulanger and Marguerite de Bonnemains leave London for the island of Jersey.

1891

- SPRING: France's economic problems are widespread. The price of bread soars in Paris. Workers throughout the country demonstrate for an eight-hour workday, with several such demonstrations leading to violent confrontations.
- MAY: Leo XIII issues the encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, defining the Church's view of the relationship between capital and labor, and refuting the basic premises of socialism.
- SEPTEMBER: A production of *Lohengrin* at the Paris Opera provokes anti-Wagnerian demonstrations. They are broken up by mounted police. In Brussels, Boulanger shoots himself.

1892

- JANUARY: Drumont and Paul Déroulède, leader of the Ligue des Patriotes, speak at an anti-Semitic rally in Neuilly.
- FEBRUARY: Leo XIII promulgates the encyclical *Au Milieu des Sollicitudes*, addressed to French bishops, clergy, and "faithful," urging all concerned to accept the legitimate authority of the Republic but to resist the onslaught of anticlerical legislation.

- Édouard Drumont founds *La Libre parole*. Its early issues feature an exposé of fraud perpetrated by executives and financiers of the defunct Panama Canal Company.
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The Prince de Sagan's mansion is dynamited. This is the first of half a dozen anarchist bombings in Paris in 1892. Tried, convicted, and executed (on July 11) for at least one of them is Ravachol.

- Baron Jacques de Reinach is found dead in his mansion, allegedly a suicide. Cornelius Herz flees the country.
- AUGUST: France negotiates an entente cordiale with Russia, thwarting Germany's attempt to isolate her.

1893

- De Lesseps father and son and Eiffel are tried on various charges, including breach of fiduciary responsibility. Trials related to the Panama bond issues will continue intermittently in subsequent years, until 1898.
- DECEMBER: A bomb hurled from the galleries by a professed anarchist, Auguste Vaillant, explodes in the Chamber of Deputies. It caused only slight injuries; Vaillant was nevertheless sentenced to death and executed in February 1894.

1894

- France and Russia sign a secret military convention.
- FEBRUARY: The first in another series of anarchist bombings takes place in the café of the Hotel Terminus, at the Gare Saint-Lazare.
- JUNE: Sadi Carnot, president of the Republic, is assassinated in Lyon by an Italian anarchist, Caserio.
- NOVEMBER: Czar Alexander III dies and is succeeded by Nicholas II.
- DECEMBER: Captain Alfred Dreyfus is court-martialed and convicted of treason.

1895

- JANUARY: Dreyfus is transported to Devil's Island.  
Félix Faure is elected president of the Republic.
- APRIL: Zola, Raymond Poincaré, and others honor Marcelin Berthelot at a "Banquet de la Science."
- OCTOBER: Louis Pasteur is buried with national commemorative rites.

1896

- MARCH: Discovery and analysis of the *petit-bleu* persuade Commandant Georges Picquart of Dreyfus's innocence.
- AUGUST: Picquart becomes aware of Esterhazy's culpability and early in September informs the army chief of staff, Boisdeffre.
- NOVEMBER: Picquart is forced out of the intelligence service and posted to Tunisia.

1897

- MAY: The Bazar de la Charité burns to the ground.
- JULY: Picquart's lawyer communicates Picquart's evidence to Scheurer-Kestner, vice president of the Senate.

- NOVEMBER: Scheurer-Kestner, Mathieu Dreyfus, and others agree to wage a publicity campaign and solicit Émile Zola's collaboration.
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1898

- JANUARY: *J'Accuse* is published on the front page of *L'Aurore*. Rioting against Jews erupts throughout France and in the Maghreb, with particular ferocity in Algiers.
- FEBRUARY: Zola is found guilty of libel. The conviction will be upheld on appeal in July, whereupon Zola will seek asylum in England.
- AUGUST: Colonel Hubert Henry commits suicide in his jail cell at the Mont-Valérien military fortress.

1899

- JUNE: The High Court annuls Dreyfus's conviction. A new court-martial is ordered and Dreyfus is released from prison. René Waldeck-Rousseau becomes prime minister.
- AUGUST: Dreyfus's second court-martial commences on the seventh in the city of Rennes, in Brittany.
- SEPTEMBER: Dreyfus's conviction is upheld. Upon appeal, he is pardoned by the president of the Republic, Émile Loubet, and set free.

1900

- APRIL: The Exposition of 1900 opens.
- JUNE: The *Appel au Soldat* banquet honoring Maurice Barrès is held at the Trocadéro.

1901

- Government measures are taken against religious teaching orders.

1902

- SEPTEMBER: Émile Zola dies.

1905

- DECEMBER: The Assembly passes a law decreeing the separation of Church and State, called "the Separation."

1906

- JULY: The High Court reverses Dreyfus's conviction and reinstates him in the army.

1908

- JUNE: Zola's remains are interred in the Panthéon.

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## PREFACE

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IN MARCH 1871, Versailles, once the seat of the Sun King, became the capital of a defeated nation. France had declared war against Prussia on July 19, 1870. Six weeks later, Napoléon III had abdicated the imperial throne after surrendering his battered army to General von Moltke at Sedan. In January, with trumpets blaring, Otto von Bismarck, the Prussian prime minister, proclaimed King Wilhelm of Prussia emperor of Germany during armistice negotiations in the Hall of Mirrors. A treaty signed on February 26 in the same grand baroque setting forced France to cede Alsace, the border province Louis XIV had annexed in 1697, and Lorraine, formerly known as Lothringen.

It was there at Versailles that France's provisional government established itself. A newly elected legislature, dominated by conservative gentry and provincial notables, had no sooner convened than the Parisian populace, led by two hundred armed National Guard battalions, rose up against it, disputing its legitimacy and creating a rival government, in the Paris Commune. Civil war followed. Troops who had recently fought against Germany were now mustered against their countrymen, and ordered to besiege Paris only two months after the Germans had withdrawn their own batteries. They would reconquer the city for Versailles during a week of slaughter—May 21 through 28, 1871—commemorated as *la semaine sanglante*. By late May the Tuileries Palace was a smoldering ruin. Retreating across Paris, the Communards, who had toppled Napoléon's victory column on the place Vendôme, set fire to the City Hall—the Hôtel de Ville—and all the civil records contained therein.

Had France's defeat been a fortunate fall? Men prominent in the ranks of Napoléon III and left-wing opposition felt that the country had indeed been brought to its senses when brought to its knees. They beheld the future as an opportunity for France, freed from the shackles of Bonapartism, to leap forward, secularize civic institutions, and confer upon science the prestige it enjoyed across the Rhine. Germany's military success, according to Ernest Renan, an eminence at the Collège de France, was the product of "Germanic science, Germanic virtue, protestantism, philosophy, Luther, Kant." Higher educational institutions in France, he wrote, "have been too influenced by the Jesuits, their latin verse, and stale orations . . . France's malady is its need to speechify." Renan's *Moral and Intellectual Reform* validated the agenda of politicians who went on to found the Third Republic and, at eleven-year intervals—in 1878, 1889, 1900—organize universal expositions that presented France as the champion of liberty, the impresario of science and technology, the genial host clasping nations in the spirit of exuberant cosmopolitanism. Those republicans known as "opportunists" who made policy in the late nineteenth century set their sights beyond Alsace-Lorraine. Their aim was to regain French stature on a world stage.

In other quarters, cosmopolitanism, far from reflecting well upon the State, was seen as tantamount to profanity or treason. The many for whom military defeat followed by civil war had opened an abyss found safe purchase in ideas of transcendence or innateness: the fervent celebration of Christ's bleeding heart, miracles, and saints' relics (which multiplied in race. Pilgrims who assembled at sites sanctified by visitations from Mary heard bishops after bishop insist that France wanted salvation, not enlightenment. She had lost the war for



having strayed from godliness and would find her way home again only as a penitent determined to right wrongs that descended from the original sin of eighteenth-century regicides. Salvation was also the cry and promise of nationalists, whose most eloquent voices argued the sacredness of soil, the virtue of roots, the infallibility of instinct, and the subversiveness of intellect. To them, "fin de siècle" in most of its cultural manifestations signified decadence.

Although nativist gospel and a religion proclaiming its universality did not always occupy common ground, both the politics of bereavement embraced by the Church and the reverence for ancestral French-ness exemplified by the writers Maurice Barrès and Charles Maurras oriented believers of one kind and the other toward the past. The past was, above all, a refuge from the dangerous mobility of people and things. It was stillness, order, containment. "The qualities I love in the past are its sadness, its silence, and most especially its fixity. Everything that moves disconcerts me," wrote Barrès (who must have reconciled his aversion to movement with his cult of "national energy").

The ideal of a guarded, self-referential nation schooled in the imperative of war flourished outside the pale of universal expositions. Among subscribers to that ideal, revanchism was synonymous with patriotism and Germany was an indispensable threat. But no less indispensable than the ogre next door was the alien within. Like Catholicism, nationalism had its ritual Judas. And these two forces converged as never before during the tumultuous nineties, in the Dreyfus Affair.

## FROM *The Life of Jesus* TO THE SACRÉ-COEUR

*If I place myself in 1900, and then look forward thirty-six years, and backward for as many, I feel doubtful whether the changes made in the earlier time were not greater than anything I have seen since. I am speaking of changes in men's minds, and I cannot in my own time [1936] observe anything of greater consequence than the dethronement of ancient faith by natural science and historical criticism, and the transition from oligarchic to democratic representation.*

—G. M. YOUNG, *Portrait of an Age*

**A**FTER OBSERVING THE pilgrims thronging Lourdes in 1891. Émile Zola noted that the time and setting were right for a novel about the intractability of mankind's dependence upon the miraculous. "Study and dramatize the endless duel between science and the longing for supernatural intervention," he instructed himself. The theme pervades his great fiction cycle, *Les Rougon-Macquart*, in which modernity is dogged by the pious and the primitive. Rural folk who aspire to a higher level of awareness are weighed down by the archaic baggage they carry with them; bourgeois women surrender to a priest's erotico-mystical predation. Everywhere, the Church casts a long shadow.

"Science" and "supernatural intervention" were indeed the competing prescriptions for France's recovery after the Franco-Prussian debacle of 1870-71, which toppled Napoléon III from his imperial throne. These alternatives informed her social, political, and cultural life in the last third of the century, framing a bitter debate over the country's heart and soul. It's as if a nation divided needed only humiliation at the hands of a foreigner to turn upon itself and wage without restraint the civil war that had long excited its most implacable hatred.

For everyone, 1789 was the inevitable reference point.

There were those on the one hand who held that France would betray the best of herself if she did not remain loyal to the eighteenth-century thinkers who had fathered the Republic. On the other hand, "*intransigeants*" committed to the ideal of a Catholic monarch anathematized the Enlightenment. In their view, divine grace was needed, and France could receive it only as a penitent mindful of the sins she had accumulated over the course of eighty years.

HOW THIS IMPASSE was reached is worth examining. The battle line was first boldly drawn during the Revolution—when clergy who would not pledge allegiance to the republican constitution risked exile or death, when saints' days were expunged from the calendar and Church property amounting to a fifth of France was seized by the State to be auctioned off. More contemptuous of the Scriptures staged a service honoring Reason at Notre-Dame cathedral. By 1801 Napoléon Bonaparte had gained power as First Consul. Mistrustful of anything clandestine, he negotiated with Pope Pius VII a treaty, or Concordat, that granted permission to worship "openly" and "freely" while reserving for himself the right to map dioceses and

appoint prelates: Gallican bishops. The Church was visible, but only as an emaciated shadow of itself, with far fewer parishes than before 1789, and no priests to serve many of them. Young men who at one time might have taken vows were instead fighting and dying all over Europe. Clerical black enjoyed little prestige in a military state that treated the curate as a minor agent of social order.

The downfall of Napoléon at Waterloo in 1815 was thus an occasion for celebratory masses. Repatriated nobles and clerics went about setting things right. In 1797, Louis XVI's brother, the exiled Comte de Provence, had instructed exiled French bishops never to forswear the marriage of throne and altar. "How indispensable it is that they support each other! May ecclesiastics imbue my subjects with this truth. ... The marvelous order that is the Catholic Church will not long survive unless it remain bound to the Monarchy." Eighteen years later, as King Louis XVIII, he restored the Church to its eminence, replacing Napoleonic functionaries with an episcopate of high-ranking aristocrats. Catholicism became once again the state religion. Religious orders reestablished themselves. Writing disrespectfully about the Church or insulting a priest constituted grounds for imprisonment; destroying liturgical objects was punishable as a capital crime; dolor and ecclesiastical pomp informed civil life and a secret society called Knights of the Faith ("Chevaliers de la Foi") controlled patronage. To those émigrés in whom loss had fostered humility, what often mattered most was the consolation they found in religion for their immense reversals of fortune. Not unlike the thousands who flocked to pilgrimage sites after the Franco-Prussian War half a century later, they prayed with fervor. But the war-torn nation, throughout which new church spires rose, also bred the kind of priest Julien Sorel encounters at his seminary in Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir* and Emma finds at Yonville in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*—country boys unable to do much more than administer the sacraments. "All told, the clergy has never been as ignorant as it is today, yet never has true science been so necessary," wrote Father Félicité in Lamennais, France's great Catholic philosopher.

The Revolution of 1830, which enthroned Louis-Philippe, the Duc d'Orléans—constitutional monarch descended from the cadet branch of the House of Bourbon, on whom Bourbon loyalists heaped obloquy—exposed the rift between Frenchmen greeting the new century and those fending it off. Knights of the Faith had subscribed to the orthodox precept that society must be a hierarchical edifice in which authority descends from God to sovereign to paterfamilias. But most of the bourgeois notables entitled to vote and run for office—those constituting *le pays légal* under Louis-Philippe—set up as Voltaireans.\* Piety was unfashionable, if not subversive. And where piety was unfashionable, militant Catholics made themselves scarce.

Militants there were all the same, most prominently those who had associated themselves with a liberal movement founded by Lamennais in 1830 and known by the name of its journal, *L'Avenir*. United in the belief that religion was doomed to irrelevance so long as the government subsidized religious institutions, they called for the separation of Church and State. A disaffected populace—the same that had recently pillaged, among other ecclesiastical mansions of note, the archbishop's palace outside Notre-Dame cathedral—would find spiritual meaning in an independent Church. By the same token, a Church no longer hostage to the powers that be would find strength in the converted masses. After forty years of republics and despotisms and monarchies eliminating one another in blind succession, what was left

intact? “Only two things,” Lamennais declared in the first issue of *L’Avenir*. “God and liberty. Unite them and all the intimate and permanent needs of human nature are met. Calm prevails only where it can do so on earth, in the domain of human intelligence. They are no soon separated than turmoil resumes and intensifies.” The providential laws that govern the “moral world” shone forth never more brilliantly, he declared, than during periods of transition, when “everything is being reborn, when everything is changing, when everything is transforming, when breezes of the future waft home scents of a new earth.” Having just launched a regime conspicuously disinclined to make preservation of the faith its first order of business, France might be ready at last to let religion walk free. Was a free Catholic Church not thriving across the ocean, in America? Reports to that effect would be confirmed by Alexis de Tocqueville, traveling abroad.

*L’Avenir* made its mark. Several thousand younger priests, many of whom served poor urban parishes, joined the movement. Threatened from below, French bishops condemned Lamennais and two close collaborators—Father Lacordaire and Charles de Montalembert—then set out for Rome to win the pope’s support. What they elicited instead was an Apostolic Letter that sealed the fate of *L’Avenir*. Loath to alienate the Gallican episcopate, to risk a quarrel that might imperil the Concordat, and to encourage liberals abroad while calling upon Austria to help him repress red-shirted republicans at home, a beleaguered Gregory XVI stood behind the bishops. “[We cannot] predict happier times for religion and government, from the plans of those who desire vehemently to separate the Church from the State, and to break the mutual concord between temporal authority and the priesthood. It is certain that the concord which always was favorable and beneficial for the sacred and the civil order is feared by the shameless lovers of liberty,” he declared in the encyclical *Mirart vos*. *L’Avenir* ceased publication. Lamennais kept faith with himself by abandoning the priesthood and writing a testament, *Paroles d’un croyant* (“Words of a Believer”), that earned him special condemnation in yet another encyclical. It became one of the great best sellers of its day.

Equally obstinate was Montalembert, the half-Scottish son of an émigré count, whose rhetorical brilliance matched his missionary zeal. Unable to influence policy from outside parliament, he resolved after 1837 to work from within it, as a member of the Chamber of Peers. Declaring that “those who profess or defend the Catholic faith must expect marked unpopularity,” he ruffled not only anticlerical colleagues but prelates resentful of a layman bold enough to fight for religious advantage with secular weapons in hostile territory. One of those weapons was the word on every progressive’s lips during the Louis-Philippian era—“*liberté*.” Liberal-minded Frenchmen were rallying behind Poles tyrannized by the czars, Italians living under a feudal regime in papal territories, German states ruled by a Lutheran Prussian squirearchy. Why then should Montalembert’s own country not afford its citizens freedom of conscience, freedom of the press, freedom of association? Above all, why should France compel parents to have their children earn baccalaureates in state institutions? Relentlessly, year after year, he championed “*la liberté de l’enseignement*”—meaning by “freedom” the full accreditation of schools run by religious orders. “*La liberté de culte*” (freedom of worship) was its corollary. In the Committee for the Defense of Religious Freedom, Montalembert fashioned a modern-day instrument of political action, supporting candidates who vowed to defend the faith. It proved itself in elections held midway through 1846, a year and a half before the revolution that would bring down Louis-Philippe.

By then, Catholic interests had gained some ground in the court of public opinion. Responsible for this shift were the dynamism of several Catholic luminaries, the social consciousness of clergy loyal to Lamennais, the pastoral work of provincial missions, and the wedge of daylight in bourgeois perception between the Church and the Bourbon monarchy. “For us French, who are slaves of words, a great thing has taken place,” Frédéric Ozanam observed in 1838, “the separation of two big words that seemed perfectly inseparable hitherto: throne and altar.”\* But of paramount importance for unorthodox Catholics was the enthronement in 1846 of a new pope, Giovanni Mastai-Ferretti, who took the name Pius IX. Succeeding the archconservative Gregory XVI, Pius comported himself, until 1848, as though liberal he was thought to be by the bare majority of cardinals who had elected him. He began with a reform of civic life in the Papal States. Political criminals were amnestied, and residents were granted such unheard-of privileges as freedom of the press. Pius’s behavior astonished Europe. Count Metternich, Europe’s staunchest advocate of monarchic absolutism, fumed over it. Among progressives, clerical and secular alike, there was jubilation. France’s Protestant prime minister, François Guizot, predicted that the Church would now reconcile with modern society. In its annual address to the king, parliament praised Pius for inaugurating “an era of civilization and freedom.” Frédéric Ozanam, a well-known Catholic intellectual associated with the ideal of Christian democracy, wrote that Heaven had put on Saint Peter’s throne “a saint the likes of whom we have perhaps not seen since the pontificate of Pius V”—in the sixteenth century. The pope’s firmest supporter, he declared, was the common man.

Economic depression accounted for some of the common man’s support. Half-starved workers who rose up against Louis-Philippe on February 24, 1848, were indeed more disposed than a later generation of Parisian insurrectionists to befriend the Church, even if many of the countless immigrants from the countryside could not have identified the parish to which they nominally belonged. On February 29, the provisional government asked the clergy to bless “the people’s achievement” by chanting *Domine, salvam fac rempublicam* after Sunday mass. And “God save the Republic” was taken seriously. “The principles whose triumph will introduce a completely new era are principles the Church has always proclaimed, and has just proclaimed again, to the entire world, through the mouth of its august leader, the immortal Pius IX,” Cardinal du Pont, archbishop of Bourges, told his congregation.\* Prelates hastened to affirm that liberty, equality, and fraternity were Christian truths (although not truly Christian, Lacordaire reminded his audience at Notre-Dame cathedral, unless broadly enough conceived to include obedience, hierarchy, and veneration). Many of them blessed the young “liberty trees” planted on city and village squares all over France in the spring of 1848, bringing holy water and incense to a ritual celebration of republican values. The archbishop of Paris, Monsignor Denis Affre, remarked upon the “Christian courage” and “virile demeanor” of street fighters with rifles in shoulder belts who attended a mass for their slain comrades.†

This general enthusiasm did not survive a second, failed insurrection in June. The Constituent Assembly elected nationwide in April was a conservative body. When radical leaders demanded strong measures to alleviate the suffering of destitute Parisians, the Assembly demurred. The bourgeoisie saw socialism in the offing, and among churchmen who had recently trumpeted liberty, equality, and fraternity, equality no longer passed muster.

a Christian truth. “All my political beliefs are shaken, not to say destroyed,” Montalembert wrote on the day a firebrand named Armand Barbès proposed extracting five billion francs in taxes from the rich. “I have devoted the twenty best years of my life to a chimera, to a transaction between the Church and the modern principle. ... My ideas are not yet completely settled on this score, however. I am waiting. Pius IX’s example will guide me.” He would be guided more immediately by the death of Archbishop Affre, who along with two vicars presented himself at a barricade in the Faubourg Saint-Antoine during the June 1848 insurrection, hoping to mediate between combatants, and received a bullet in the back for his trouble. Thousands died.

As for the pope, in November 1848 his trusted minister of justice, Pellegrino Rossi, was killed by insurgents who besieged the Quirinal Palace, forcing Pius to seek refuge in the city of Gaeta and creating a Roman republic. Pius reestablished himself in Rome fourteen months later, with the help of a French expeditionary force. His politics had meanwhile changed: the former liberal had become even more unbendingly authoritarian than his predecessor. And the newly elected president of the Republic, Napoléon’s nephew Louis-Napoléon, who was praised by the Catholic paper *L’Ami de la religion* as “the genius of strength and order ... come to France’s rescue,” the pope’s worldview found an open ear. Parliament, largely a collection of conservatives horrified by the events of June 1848, might have scuttled the Republic right away had they not been divided among themselves—some wanting a constitutional monarchy to replace it, others a Bourbon restoration, and others still a Napoleonic empire.

In his memoirs, Alexis de Tocqueville observed that those deputies with whom he sat in the Assembly might have been spared their grief if, earlier on, they had been mindful of historical precedent. When aristocratic émigrés who had been libertines in their youth regained power twenty years after the Terror, they made sure to enthrone devoutness. In the same way, the irreligious middle classes of Louis-Philippe’s day discovered the social usefulness of ecclesiastical authority during the upheavals of 1848. With the ground quaking under them they looked for stability to the Church’s sacraments, hierarchy, and mores—among its pedagogical precepts. The philosopher Ernest Renan might scoff at the exercises of classical rhetoric devised by Jesuit masters, but for Tocqueville eloquence was a guarantor of civilization. It performed the function that ancient Roman custom assigned to *oratio*. It was political wisdom’s first defense against tyrannical wrath. Nothing distressed him more in the Constituent Assembly of 1848 than the crude language of revolutionary delegates, the so-called Montagnards. “For me it was like the discovery of a new world,” he wrote.

One consoles oneself for not knowing foreign lands by supposing that one knows one’s own country at least, and one is wrong; for there are always areas of one’s own land that one has not visited, and races of men who are new to one. I experienced this fully then. I felt that I was seeing these Montagnards for the first time, so greatly did their mores and way of speaking surprise me. They spoke a jargon that was not quite the language of the people, nor was it that of the literate, but that had the defects of both; it was full of coarse words and ambitious expressions. A constant jet of insulting or jocular interruptions poured down from the benches of the Mountain; they were continually making jokes or sententious comments; and they shifted from a very ribald tone of voice to one of great haughtiness. Obviously these people belonged neither in a tavern or in a drawing room; I think they must have polished their manners in the cafés and fed their minds on no literature but the newspapers.



The café invaded other European parliaments at a later date, to the chagrin of other statesmen. During the 1880s, Ernst von Plener, the leader of Austria's Liberal Party, would have recognized in Tocqueville's predicament a foreshadowing of his own exposure to vehement demagoguery. Appalled by Georg von Schönerer and Karl Lueger (Hitler's political models), who filled the Reichsrat with coarse invective, he lamented "the barbarization of the parliamentary tone in our House of Representatives."

As Tocqueville saw it, demagoguery would be the ultimate political expression of a society bereft—of family pride, manners, grammar, local custom, hierarchical structure, religious principles, and sacred space. "What now remains of those barriers which formerly arrested tyranny?" he asked in *Democracy in America* thirteen years before the 1848 Revolution. "Since religion has lost its dominion over the souls of men, the most prominent boundary that divided good from evil is overthrown, everything seems doubtful and indeterminate in the moral world; kings and nations are guided by chance, and none can say where are the natural limits of despotism and the bounds of license. Revolutions have forever destroyed the respect which surrounded the rulers of the state; and since they have been relieved from the burden of public esteem, princes may henceforward surrender themselves without fear to the intoxication of arbitrary power."\*

Tocqueville could not have failed to appreciate that the prodigious reconstruction of Paris during the 1850s and '60s intensified feelings of "indeterminacy" by destroying neighborhoods, abolishing familiar vistas, and estranging Parisians from their past. But it was the Communards' secession that conformed most closely to his prophecy. Theirs was the "intoxication of arbitrary power." Or so it seemed to conservatives for whom, during the 1870s, in the bloody wake of the Paris Commune, "moral order" became a motto. As much as the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, the Commune, short-lived though it was, demonstrated the fragility of venerable institutions.

Tocqueville was interned at Vincennes Prison in December 1851, when President Louis-Napoléon ended the Second Republic with a coup d'état. Other noncompliant legislators like Victor Hugo among them, fled the country. After having himself dubbed Napoléon III by plebiscite one year later, the usurper ruled very much to the advantage of the Church, which pledged fealty to him, as it had at first to the Republic. The Church grew richer and stronger during the Second Empire. Teaching orders thrived. Jesuits banished from France under Louis-Philippe now slipped back into the corridors of power. Intellectuals known for their positivist convictions were purged from the school system. Louis-Napoléon's first minister of education abolished programs in history and philosophy but required high school students to be examined in religion. Lycées and universities scraped along on science. Necessity and mothering invention may best explain the accomplishments of Louis Pasteur, the chemist Marcelin Berthelot, the physiologist Claude Bernard, and other great scientists who made their mark at this time. In 1858 Pasteur complained that not one farthing had been budgeted for the advancement of science through laboratory work. Bernard grimly observed that laboratories were the tombs of scientists.

This situation improved somewhat after 1859. When Louis-Napoléon defeated Austria at Solferino in that year—driving it out of the northern Italian territories it had controlled since Napoléon I's downfall and leveling a formidable obstacle to the movement of nations

unification—his relations with Pius IX, whose temporal authority extended over one-third of the peninsula, deteriorated. Less reliant upon ecclesiastical support than at the time of his coup d'état, he seemed to rediscover the young exile who thirty years earlier had joined the Carbonari in Rome fighting against papal rule. Certainly, the Italian campaign announced a general liberalization of the Empire. While pious appearances were maintained, the spirit of scientific inquiry, like the language of political opposition, was given greater play. Though that would have invited censorship before 1860 now dared to speak aloud, though still not always with complete impunity.

THE BATTLE LINE between champions and foes of the Enlightenment formed once again in bitter controversy over a book titled *La Vie de Jésus*, by Ernest Renan. Its publication, in 1863, forty years after Darwin's *Origin of Species*, was a momentous event.

Renan, who had come to Paris from Brittany destined for the priesthood, might have made a learned cleric had he not studied Semitic languages at the Saint-Sulpice seminary. There, his voracious intellect found nourishment in philology, and this disciplined study of texts, when applied to biblical exegesis, raised doubts that ultimately convinced him to defrock himself before his ordination. "I took the measure of which concessions the Church can make and those that must not be demanded of it," he later wrote in his memoirs. "If the Church admitted that *The Book of Daniel* is an apocryphal text of the Maccabean era, it would be admitting error; if it had erred there, it might have erred elsewhere. It would no longer be divinely inspired." The Catholicism bred in his bone—of Scripture, of the Councils and dogma—no longer sat right in his mind, and he began life anew, charting a secular course. He thought it disrespectful of the faith to fiddle with it."

Letters that attest to Renan's loss of belief in divine revelation also document his precocious acquisition of mastery in the languages of biblical antiquity. On May 2, 1844, when he was twenty-four, the Institute of France (a cluster of learned societies including the French Academy) awarded Renan the Volney Prize for his *Historical and Theoretical Essay on the Semitic Languages in General and the Hebrew Language in Particular*. In 1848, amid revolutionary havoc, he earned an advanced degree in philosophy and completed a long essay called "L'Avenir de la science" ("The Future of Science"), which enunciated the intellectual creed by which he proposed to live. *Devenir*—historical development or flow, implying evolution—was now the conceptual basis of his scholarship, and he argued against the obscurantists sworn to social and cultural absolutes. "The science of the human mind must above all be the history of the human mind, and only through patient, philological study of the works it has brought forth in different ages does that history become possible."



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