Introduction: Popular Piety and the State in Modern France

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The articles in this virtual issue on popular piety and the state depict a powerful struggle against the pressures of secularization and the master narratives of history. They cast their subject as a challenge to narratives of dechristianization, as expressions of 'embattled identity,' and as resistance to the 'onward march of secularization' or to colonial rule. France has long experienced what White and Daughton describe as 'an uncomfortable relationship with religion,' from Enlightenment anti-clericalism to the insistent *laïcité* of contemporary French governments.[1] At the same time, as this collection of articles demonstrates, there is rich evidence of the vitality of religious faith and its legacies in both past and present. Drawing on research into popular practices, devotions and print culture, the articles in this virtual issue suggest that the story of popular piety in modern France is thus one of immense changes, rather than of unchecked decline.[2]

In France, popular piety in the modern period was profoundly shaped by the great cataclysm of revolution. The advent of the modern, liberal and imperial nation-state greatly altered the place of the Catholic Church in French politics and society, as well as the roles of established religions in the countries it later colonized. For the faithful, regular shifts in political regimes and in the degree of secular zeal exhibited by particular governments not only defined the spaces within which they practised their religion, but also determined their relationship to secular authorities, and their perceived status within the social, political and spiritual order. Although the articles in this collection are primarily focused on Catholicism, the inclusion of a study of Algerian Muslim piety in tension with the colonial government sheds further light on the complexities and paradoxes of the relationship of the modern French state to popular religion.[3]

The Declaration of the Rights of Man rather presciently characterized religion as an 'opinion': a private rather than a state matter. Yet the capacity of the Church to mobilize the faithful would have increasing import as the nineteenth century progressed, and especially as the emergence of modern, mass society and politics gave new weight to public opinion. The

intertwining of the religious and the political is a shared theme in the articles of this virtual issue, where the spiritual is understood primarily in terms of its relationship to the secular world. The influence of the cultural turn is also strongly marked. Drawing on cultural artefacts such as ex-votos, letters descended from heaven, pamphlets stuffed into the hands of schoolchildren and newspaper reports of miraculous visions and religiously inflected insurgency, the authors read religious practices as a means of understanding the experiences and imaginaries of different peoples within their wider secular contexts.

Our collection of articles begins with the eighteenth century, characterized by Ralph Gibson in his now classic study of French Catholicism as displaying 'the warning lights of dechristianization'.[4] Hannah Williams' essay on the cult of Saint Geneviève, patron saint of Paris, reflects the ways in which recent scholarship has challenged perceptions of the eighteenth century as a turning point in the history of secularization. Through the study of material objects (ex-votos, relics, architecture and paintings), as well as of the rituals associated with them, Williams underscores the enduring popularity of Saint Geneviève. Hers was a cult with obvious potential benefits for the authorities—especially, in the latter half of the century, the French monarchy. For Williams, the very violence of revolutionary efforts to stamp out belief in Saint Geneviève in 1793 offers testament to the power of the saint's cult, which remained popular until well into the twentieth century. By deliberately continuing the story of devotion to Saint Geneviève after the revolution, Williams aims for a 'richer understanding of the role [France's] religious past still plays in its secularist present.'

Nevertheless, as the following three articles demonstrate, by tearing asunder the close ties between crown and altar the revolution also transformed power relations between believers and the Church. Martyn Lyons, in his study of modern revivals of the medieval practice of celestial letters, paints a vivid picture of the uneasy relations between orthodoxy and popular belief in the aftermath of the revolutionary era. Just as the clerical and secular authorities described in Williams' article recognized the political potential of harnessing popular devotion, so too did the Catholic Church in this later period see opportunities to exploit the popular religious fervour reflected in the letters. In the post-revolutionary context, the 'chaotic and irrational' imaginary of folk belief was newly important for the restoration of the Church to its previous place in everyday life; and clerical endorsement of the letters could be an indicator of the power of religion as practised by subalterns.

Purportedly descended from heaven, then roughly printed on cheap, coarse paper and distributed by itinerant peddlers, the celestial letters provide powerful evidence of the centrality of popular religious practice in the print economy of the nineteenth-century religious revival. Lyons' essay speaks to the ways in which book history has illuminated the role of this religious revival in the expansion of print culture in the modern era.[5] By the mid-nineteenth century the impact of the revival on the French publishing sector was clear, with religious works accounting for between 20 and 25 per cent of the market. Churchmen lobbying the government over its foreign policy towards the papal states were particularly aware of the political potential of print. My article contends that where religion was once considered to have been one of the primary casualties of the rise of liberal nation-states as well as an obstacle to democracy, in fact the Catholic Church played an integral role in the constitution of mass society and politics. Indeed the popularity of Catholic newspapers, alongside the ingenuity of pro-papal pamphleteering during the Italian Question, shaped decisions by Napoleon III's government to loosen restrictions on print distribution and on initiatives to promote reading.

The question of how far the balance of power had shifted towards popular devotion is explored by Detmar Klein in his study of Marian apparitions in the contested border region of Alsace. In the summer of 1872, not long after the region had been annexed by the German Empire, a group of girls aged between eight and eleven reported visions of the Virgin brandishing a sword over the bowed heads of Prussian soldiers. The 'miracle of Krüth' inspired hundreds of subsequent visionaries, while also encouraging pilgrims to flock to this tiny village in the Vosges foothills—a phenomenon that eventually prompted the German government to send in the military to quell the popular movement. This was a discourse that was legitimated by male clerics—women's talk and children's tales would not gain credence otherwise—but in this case, as in countless others, the ecclesiastical authorities' hand was forced by sheer strength of numbers.

As Klein writes, Marian apparitions amongst a Catholic population fearing persecution 'revealed the power of religion as a source of communal identity.' This is a history that encompasses some of the most marginalized subjects in modern French and francophone societies: the poor, young children, disabled people, populations under occupation and colonized peoples. Certainly the tensions between religion and the state—and the potentially unifying role of religion in opposition to hostile authorities—come into sharp focus in a

colonial context. In Jennifer Sessions' close reading of a revolt to convert male colonists forcibly to Islam in the French–Algerian settler village of Margueritte (now known as Aïn Torki) in 1901, the rebels' actions appear not just as acts of political resistance to colonial rule, but also as the performance of scripts imbued with meaning by their quotidian experiences. The ritual removal of the settlers' European clothing, and particularly their hats, provides insights into the Algerian men's struggles against the 'social practices by which colonial hierarchies were embodied.' Whereas detractors had sought to downplay the religious orthodoxy of the children's visions at Krüth, in this colonial context the metropolitan government and media deliberately emphasized the religious motivations of the Margueritte uprising, rather than acknowledging the brutality of colonial rule as the root cause. In both metropole and colony however, popular piety was understood to be potentially subversive.

Sheila Nowinski's article cautions, however, against any straightforward comparison between rural believers in France and indigenous communities in rural Algeria in terms of relationships to the secularizing, metropolitan Republic. Tracing the Jeunesse Agricole Catholique's [JAC] attempts to implant its youth movement in rural Algeria, Nowinski explores how the organization encouraged French peasants to export their model of agriculture to Algeria as a means of integration into the modern French nation. Nowinski's study reveals the vulnerability of the JAC missionary project as it endeavoured to remain in Algeria following the collapse of the French colonial government. Here, the neo-colonial tones of their religious mission were too evidently in tension with the desire of activists to engage in development work.

The authors in this special issue demonstrate the capacity of faith to mobilize believers to join social and political movements, forge connections across borders, and articulate identity and belonging. James McMillan used to point to the example of the political culture of the United States as the most obvious rebuttal to the European historical narrative equating modernity and secularization in the West. The resurgence of religious identity as an organizing force on the populist right and far right in contemporary politics across the United States and Europe, including in France, offers further confirmation that the stark narrative of decline underpinning earlier historiography must be laid to rest.[6] As this virtual special issue

suggests, challenging the notion of a secularist present forces a reappraisal of the place of religion in the recent French past.

*Hannah Williams, 'Saint Geneviève's miracles: art and religion in eighteenth-century Paris', *French History*, 30.3 (September 2016), 322–53.
https://doi.org/10.1093/fh/crv076

*Martyn Lyons, 'Celestial letters: morals and magic in nineteenth-century France', *French history* 27.4 (December 2013), 496–514.
https://doi.org/10.1093/fh/crt047

*Sophie Heywood, '"The Apostolate of the Pen": Mgr de Ségur and the mobilization of Catholic opinion in Second Empire France', *French History*, 26.2 (June 2012), 203–21.
https://doi.org/10.1093/fh/crs010

*Detmar Klein, 'The Virgin with the sword: Marian apparitions, religion and national identity in Alsace in the 1870s', *French History*, 21.4 (December 2007), 411–30.
https://doi.org/10.1093/fh/crm051

*Jennifer Sessions, 'Making settlers Muslim: religion, resistance and everyday life in nineteenth-century French Algeria', *French History*, 33.2 (June 2019), 259–77.
https://doi.org/10.1093/fh/crz005

*Sheila Nowinski, 'French Catholic activism in Algeria between decolonization and development, 1930–65', *French History* 27.3 (September 2013), 371–93.
https://doi.org/10.1093/fh/crt054

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[1] O. White and J. P. Daughton (eds), *In God's Empire: French Missionaries and the Modern World* (Oxford, 2012), 3.

[2] The pioneering study which developed the dechristianization thesis was Michel Vovelle's *Piété baroque et déchristianisation en Provence au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1973). Cumulatively, this virtual issue thus contributes to and builds on the 'religious turn' identified by Thomas Kselman in the rich historiography on the Catholic Church and the politics of secularization in modern France, exemplified by studies such as N. Aston, *Religion and Revolution in France 1780–1804* (Basingstoke, 2000); R. Harris, *Lourdes. Body and Spirit in the Secular Age* (New York, 1999); T. Kselman, 'Challenging Dechristianization: The Historiography of Religion in Modern France', *Church History*, 75 (2006).

[3] Popular piety in the modern period has been most closely examined in articles on Catholicism. However, *French History* also showcases research on the range of religions practised in France, including recent special and virtual issues on the memories and legacies of the French Wars of Religion for Protestants and Catholics, and a continuing emphasis on the relationship between Jews, Muslims, culture and citizenship in the Francophone world. See: 'Remembering the French Wars of Religion' *Fr Hist* 34.4 (2020), and 'Legacies of the French Wars of Religion': https://academic.oup.com/fh/pages/legacies-of-wars-of-religion; S. Charnow, 'Imagining a New Jerusalem: Edmond Fleg and interwar French ecumenism', *Fr Hist* 27 (2013), 557–78; Itay Lotem, 'Beyond memory wars: the indigènes de la République's grass-roots anti-racism, between the memory of colonialism and antisemitism', *Fr Hist* (2018), 573–93; A. Ofrath, '"We shall become French": reconsidering Algerian Jews' citizenship, c. 1860–1900', *Fr Hist* 35 (2021), 243–65.

[4] R. Gibson, *A Social History of French Catholicism 1789–1914*, (London, 1989), 35.

[5] C. Savart, *Les Catholiques en France au XIXe siècle. Le témoignage du livre religieux* (Paris, 1985); L. Artiaga, *Des Torrents de papier: catholicisme et lectures populaires au XIXe siècle* (Limoges, 2007); C. Boulaire (ed.), *Mame: Deux siècles d'édition pour la jeunesse* (Rennes, 2012).

[6] There is a growing literature on religion and the populist right, for example N. Marzouki, D. McDonnell and O. Roy (eds) *Saving the people. How populists hijack religion* (London, 2016); F. Mabille, 'Le populisme religieux, nouvel avatar de la crise politique', *Observatoire géopolitique du religieux*, May 2019 https://www.iris-france.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Obs-religieux-Populisme-religieux-mai-2019.pdf accessed 21 November 2022; on France, see Y. Raison du Cleuziou, *Une contre révolution catholique. Aux origines de La Manif pour tous* (Paris, 2019).