

What was the significance of the Catholic Church in the governance of France during the period 1715-1789?

Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet described the body of the state as consisting of religion and justice, and that this state is a passive subject to be preserved – good governance is preserving the social order, which in turn is grounded in the Christian order.¹ Religion's significance within the Old Regime is recognised by contemporaries and historians – Michel Péronnet argued that Catholic ideology dominated and animate the monarchical state to an extent to merit the description of a theocratic state.² Thus, understanding the role of the Catholic Church in governance is necessary for grasping the changing nature of the Old Regime during the eighteenth-century. Examining the spiritual function of the church - at national and parish levels -, reveals the indispensable function of parishes in maintaining social peace and order as opposed to an increasingly symbolic legitimization of absolutism. Parallel to its spiritual significance on the parish level, the parish church had a consistent and irreplicable contribution to mechanical – non-religious, administrative – role as the contact for the crown to every corner of the realm.

The Catholic Church bestowed upon French kings the Grace of God so that they may be exempt from being accountable to their subjects, although this retreated from the realm of the practical to that of the abstract during the final century of the Old Regime.³ Julian Swann's case for the French monarchy increasingly having to justify its decisions – something which should not be necessary if the public believes in the divine right of kings –, gives credibility to Merrick's claim.⁴ McManners's breakdown of the coronation of Louis XVI supports Swann as the omission of asking the people whether they accept their king caused a backlash, with one radical journalist arguing that a representative of the people should join the nobles and clergy in symbolically touching the crown.⁵ However, Aston's case

¹ Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, *Politique tirée des propres paroles de l'Écriture sainte*, Jacques Le Brun (ed.) (Geneva, 1967), p. 212.

² Michel Péronnet, 'Police et religion à la fin du XVIII^e siècle', *Annales historiques de la Révolution Française*, 42, 1970, p.397.

³ Jeffrey Merrick, *The Desacralisation of the French Monarchy in the Eighteenth Century*, (Baton Rouge, 1990), p.19.

⁴ Julian Swann, *Exile, Imprisonment, or Death: The Politics of Disgrace in Bourbon France, 1610-1789*, (Oxford, 2017), p.311.

⁵ John McManners, *Church and Society in Eighteenth-Century France Volume 1*, (Oxford, 1999), p.15; Account in *Correspondance secrète*, in A. Chéruef, *Dictionnaire historique des institutions*, 2: 2, 1855, p.1118.

against the idea of ‘desacralisation’ of the French monarchy as a reductive concept is also convincing – although Louis XV’s impious reputation could not be denied, the relationship between throne and altar was deeply personal to Louis XVI, as expressed in his 1775 coronation.⁶ As such, public opinion, increasingly consequential during the eighteenth-century, disfavoured divinely sanctioned absolutism while the special relationship between sovereign and church fluctuated, its strength depending on the monarch. Thus, the Catholic Church was gradually less able to support monarchical governance through divine legitimisation.

Scaling the study down from a national role to the parishes – as the vast majority interacted with the church through their parish priest-, the Catholic Church was significant to governance as it utilised its spiritual authority to maintain social order. The world view preached from the pulpit simultaneously legitimised the inequalities of the old regime and provided comfort - although the expulsion from the Garden of Eden differentiated the “haves and have nots,” Jesus preferred the pious poor over worldly wealth.⁷ McManners convincingly links this abstract idea to historical reality by quoting Bishop Bossuet – “better be poor in his company than be found with the powerful.”⁸ Although McManners’s idea is sound, Aston attempts to narrow the analysis down to the service of Mass for maintaining social peace – Mass is an affirmation of “heavenly grace and earthly good-standing,” encouraging all members to embody Christian peace.⁹ However, Aston’s claim of the causal role of Mass as an inspiration to parishioners is based on the writings of a *curé*, not a layman, and so cannot be established on first-hand experiences.¹⁰ Susan Desan’s breakdown of the significance of the parish church – public ritual, localised sacred power, communal prestige and identity, patterns of festivity, moral order – presents a more convincing case for church’s role in social governance as it does not overreach where evidence is insufficient.¹¹ Aston recognises this too - while individual belief may wax and wane, no one could ignore the rhythms of the liturgical year, the Christenings, the marriages, and

⁶ Nigel Aston, *Religion and Revolution in France, 1780-1804*, (Basingstoke, 2000), p.7.

⁷ John McManners, *Church and Society in Eighteenth-Century France: Vol 2*, (Oxford, 1999), p.705.

⁸ Bossuet, *Sermon sur Jésus Christ objet de scandale*, cited by J. Truchet, *La Prédication de Bossuet* 2: 2, 1960, pp.165-8.

⁹ Aston, *Religion*, p.38

¹⁰ Letter of the *curé* Mollevant, 11 February 1788, in Leicestershire Record Office, DG 107-8.

¹¹ Suzanne Desan, *Reclaiming the Sacred. Lay religion and popular politics in Revolutionary France*, (Cornell, 1990), p.96.

the funerals.¹² McManners convincingly argues that out of such services, marriage had exceptional significance as the bedrock of the social order – the union ensured the transmission of property through generations in an orderly fashion.¹³ However, although the crown depended on the church to maintain peace and social order, the Jansenist dispute undermined this function of the Catholic Church in a minority of parishes - those to whom Jansenist doctrine was dear joined the Huguenots and other religious minorities who sought salvation elsewhere.¹⁴ Despite this, the integrally significant role of the parish for social governance was aptly summed up by one abbé who noted that “The priests and the *curé* are officers of the state destined to correct manners... to make citizens just and beneficent so as to please God.”¹⁵

Historiography on the church’s social governance has given insufficient attention to examining its different significance for men and women. For the overwhelming majority the church was firstly an enforcer of the social order along gendered lines, and thus the foothold established by McManners and Aston deserves attention. While the private sphere of the home was still dominated by a male figure, father or husband, the clergy were encouraging women to expand their presence in the public sphere through charitable works with a spiritual motivation.¹⁶ Aston expands his case by exploring how the Catholic Church provided an outlet for women’s emotions which they could not express elsewhere in society – while the church preferred women who joined religious orders, the vast majority of women who preferred a family life were accommodated with opportunities to fraternise with other women and charitable roles in confraternities.¹⁷ Aston’s claim that, besides their families, the loyalty of millions of women was to their church and their priests is useful for understanding the ‘special relationship’ between French women and the Catholic Church.¹⁸ Therefore, the significance of the social governance of the Catholic Church was different for men and women, the latter of which had a stronger relationship with the church.

¹² Aston, *Religion*, p.38.

¹³ McManners, *Volume 1*, p.68.

¹⁴ Aston, *Religion*, p.61.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p.37.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p.42.

¹⁷ *Ibid*; McManners, *Volume 2*, pp.175-180.

¹⁸ Aston, *Religion*, p.42.

While there was disconnect among priests and parishioners in regions with non-local priests, this presented limited hindrance to an institutions which could adapt to the local faith of its followers. Timothy Tackett's 'from-below' study argues that local origins of a priest determined whether he received sufficient support to impose the religiously grounded social order - regions such as the West with a higher proportion of priests from local rural backgrounds supported the eventual counter-revolution, demonstrating strong loyalty to the church and its social order in the community.¹⁹ Tackett's argument, although ambitious, is convincing - the key role of the parish priest in eighteenth-century France, with the exception of a few urban pockets, is accepted across scholarship, including by Cragg.²⁰ While Aston denies a 'dechristianisation' – the term would have meant nothing to contemporaries -, he accepts that urban priests who lost their monopoly over communal spaces to *cafés* and *salons* had a weaker capacity to enforce the Catholic social order.²¹ However, the 'from-below' studies of Tackett and Aston need to be supplemented with how the church's significance in social governance was sharpened by its compatibility with local religious experiences. While local mythologies and superstitions were suppressed by the post-Tridentine church, the toleration of them in the form of local saints augmented the church's monopoly on moral authority – followers had Catholic faith and their local saints.²² Judith Devlin argues that, in addition to being integral to the local religious experience, local saints linked the parish to the kingdom of God.²³ Finally, the church services were tailored to their audience – Aston recognises a trend of short homilies couched in a language intelligible to the rural population being contrasted by sophisticated sermons in urban parishes.²⁴ Therefore, Tackett, Aston, and Devlin's observations about the parish church being a reflection of, and being tailored to, the local community suggest the Catholic Church retained its ability to contribute to governance by command the respect necessary to impose social order.

¹⁹ Timothy Tackett, 'The Social History of the Diocesan Clergy in 18th Century France', in Golden, Richard, (ed.), *Church, State, and Society under Bourbon Kings of France*, (Lawrence, 1982), p.344.

²⁰ Gerald Cragg, *The Church and The Age of Reason 1648-1789*, (Harmondsworth, 1960); Aston, *Religion*, p.37.

²¹ Aston, *Religion*, p.52.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Judith Devlin, *The Superstitious Mind*, (New Haven, 1987), p.51.

²⁴ Aston, *Religion*, p.35.

In terms of mechanical roles in governance, the devotion of the Gallican Church enabled clerical talent to work for the monarchical state while continuing to be financed by the church.²⁵ Under this symbiotic arrangement, clerics fulfilled myriad roles – First Ministers, diplomats, *conseillers-clerics* in the Parlements, and chaplains to municipal institutions, the army, and the navy.²⁶ However, as clergy with mechanical roles of governance held their posts at the pleasure of the king, such as First Minister Cardinal Fleury, they were statesmen first and clergymen second.²⁷ The bishops did make their moral authority felt, such as in the Assembly of Notables in 1786 when they argued against Calonne’s secular reforms to taxation, although they shared the assembly with the second estate.²⁸ Bishops also participated in mechanical governance through provincial estates as representatives of the first estate in the *pays d’état* – provinces which retained their right to negotiate royal taxation.²⁹ While traditional historiography of Perry Anderson has treated the *pays d’état* as a relic reduced to survival on the spatial fringes of the kingdom, Rafe Blaufarb proposes an opposite relationship - the crown was dependent on the *pays d’état*, placed on military frontiers, rather than merely tolerating their survival.³⁰ Blaufarb’s revisionist case is convincing, as, during the eighteenth-century the growth of military expenditure, and subsequent debt repayment, rendered the capability of the *pays d’état* to borrow “rapidly, flexibly, and immediately” vital on military frontiers.³¹ However, as with the Assembly of Notables, the bishops shared this responsibility with secular nobles – the second estate eclipsed the clergy their roles in the administration of the state.³² Therefore, the higher clergy’s contribution to the mechanical governance of France, while significant, was outshone by its spiritual authority in social governance.

In addition to maintaining social order, the parish church functioned as the point of contact for the central government with every corner of the realm, thereby being indispensable for royal administration. Nigel Aston articulates the role of the pulpit as the transmitter of new taxations, poor

²⁵ McManners, *Volume 1*, p.58.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p.59.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p.354.

²⁸ Nigel Aston, *The End of an Élite: The French Bishops and the Coming of the Revolution 1786-1790*, (Oxford, 1992), p.45.

²⁹ Rafe Blaufarb, 'The Survival of the "Pays D'états:" The Example of Provence', *Past & Present*, 209, 2010, p.83.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p.113.

³¹ *Ibid*, p.108.

³² *Ibid*.

relief, militia ballot and other news from the outside world.³³ The significance of the parish as ‘point of contact’ increased after 1750 - the receiving of registers of birth, marriages, and deaths was supplemented with the informing of nationally significant events including the birth of the Dauphin, wars, and peace treaties.³⁴ Parish priests could contribute to governance both in their localities, by organising assistance in times of famine and aiding the sick, and nationally, by organising militias for the national war effort.³⁵ McManners identifies the broader significance of the *curés* in administration stemming from their being the only members of the educated class who were in contact with the common people.³⁶ In remote parishes where regional languages such as Occitan were dominant, the priest, who would be literate in French, would function as a translator when communicating with royal intendants.³⁷ As such, the parish church was indispensably significant for the administration of the kingdom as points of contact for the central government.

Gerald Cragg’s claim that the growing socio-political rift among higher and lower clergy brought discredit to the church, and McManners’s claim that this rift eroded the church’s ability to govern effectively should both be accepted in a reduced form.³⁸ Cragg’s observation is supported by Aston – “church unity was increasingly a façade” - and Timothy Tackett’s social history of the clergy – reduced recruitment was accompanied by “relative ruralisation” of new priests who came from lower ranks of society.³⁹ While Cragg avoids making universal claims - some “faithfully shepherded their flock” -, he nevertheless blames their frivolity for souring the relationship between lower and higher clergy.⁴⁰ Perceived despotic decisions, such as imposing the Unigenitus by *lettres de cachet*, became increasingly less acceptable as the “alienation” of the lower clergy was accompanied by an “almost revolutionary temper.”⁴¹ Although Cragg’s argument could be better evidenced, McManners also recognises this reaction – the *curés* demanded greater say in diocesan affairs and some radicals had

³³ Aston, *Religion*, p.36.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ McManners, *Volume 2*, p.706.

³⁷ Aston, *Religion*, p.36.

³⁸ Cragg, *Church*, p.202; McManners, *Volume 2*, p.705.

³⁹ Aston, *Élite*, p.37; Tackett, 'Social', p.343.

⁴⁰ Cragg, *Church*, p.203.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p.205.

joined in on the attack on aristocratic privilege with the revolt of the *curés* in 1789.⁴² However, this rift materialised into genuine obstacles of mechanical governance at the very end of the Old Regime – the parish priests and bishops continued to conduct their largely separate duties. In addition, criticism from below was growing more vocal, not necessarily more hostile.⁴³ Therefore, while there was a growing internal rift among lower and higher clergy, this did not reduce the church’s significance in mechanical governance until the final years of the Old Regime.

Overall, maintaining social peace and order for the parishioners was the most significant contribution of the Catholic Church to governance. As such, the church was indispensable for the prescriptive definition of good governance offered by Bossuet – the social order was enforced by the religious order. However, as growing public opinion nullified the church’s ability to sanction absolutism, and as the bishops did not have extensive independent mechanical functions neither as First Ministers nor in provincial estates, Péronnet’s use of a theocratic state is an overreach – the significance of the church in non-secular functions was eclipsed by monarchical authority and the second estate.

⁴² McManners, *Volume 2*, p.705.

⁴³ Cragg, *Church*, p.207.

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