

The Protestant Origins of the French Revolution: Contextualizing Edgar Quinet in the Historiography of the Revolution, 1789-1865

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Historians have explained the origins of the French Revolution in terms of class conflict, starvation, the hemorrhaging finances of the monarchy, the political use of “public opinion,” the Jansenist challenge to the Gallican State, and the subversive discourses of Enlightenment philosophes and Grubb Street hack writers.¹ In short, historians largely insist that the Revolution had political origins and social effects, but in the years just following the French Revolution, many thinkers imagined religious origins. As François Furet once noted, many nineteenth century historians wrote “great histories of the Revolution ... that began with Protestantism.”² The son of a Protestant mother, Edgar Quinet stands out for scholars familiar with the nineteenth century “politics of historiography.”³ Furet and Dale Van Kley have both recognized the connections Quinet made between

¹ For the most recent treatment of the Revolution’s origins, see Thomas E. Kaiser and Dale K. Van Kley, *From Deficit to Deluge: The Origins of the French Revolution* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2011); Peter McPhee, ed. *A Companion to the French Revolution* (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), especially section 1.

² François Furet, “The Revolution is Over,” in *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. by Elborg Forester (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 1-3; François Furet, “Academic History of the Revolution,” in *The Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution* eds. François Furet and Mona Ozouf, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 883.

³ On the “politics of historiography,” see Keith Michael Baker, “Memory and Practice: Politics and the Representation of the Past in Eighteenth-Century France,” in *Inventing the French Revolution*, 31-58; J.G.A. Pocock, *Political Thought and History: Essays on Theory and Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

the Protestant Reformation and the French Revolution. For Quinet, the failure of the Reformation in France necessitated the failure of the Revolution. Having missed its opportunity to cultivate “freedom” in the sixteenth-century, the French condemned themselves to impotent attempts at reform and inevitable failure.⁴

Ultimately, the goal of this article is not to rehearse Quinet’s argument, but rather to contextualize it against earlier and diverse descriptions of the Revolution’s Protestant origins.⁵ I situate Quinet’s argument in the larger historiographical tradition of the Revolution by tracing it to its counter-revolutionary Catholic origins during the Revolution and then following it through its re-appropriation in post-Revolutionary France when it became a French liberal staple. Across the political spectrum, all those who embraced such an argument did so in order to find a narrative capable of reconciling Christianity with the Revolution’s democratic, republican, and secular legacy. By linking the Reformation and the Revolution, these writers in the post-Revolutionary era used religion to serve multiple political purposes, whether to reaffirm pre-Revolutionary Catholic religious and monarchical hegemony or to sustain the Revolution’s claims of republicanism and individual liberties.

Quinet was not the first French thinker to connect the Protestant Reformation with the Revolution. Some historians, like Michael Printy, have recognized the

⁴ See also Paul Viallaneix, “Réformation et révolution,” in *Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, vol. 3: *The Transformation of Political Culture, 1789-1848*, eds. François Furet and Mona Ozouf (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Claude Lefort, “Quinet and the Revolution that Failed,” in *Democracy and Political Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989). It is also worth noting that historians have begun to recast the Reformation as the origins of modernity—as the progenitor of the Enlightenment. See Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion* trans. by Oscar Burge (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); David Sorokin, *The Religion Enlightenment: Protestants, Jews, and Catholics from London to Vienna* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); J.G.A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion* 5 vols (2002-2013); Knud Haakonssen, ed., *Enlightenment and Religion: Rational Dissent in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Jonathan Sheehan, “Enlightenment, Religion, and the Enigma of Secularization: A Review Essay,” *American Historical Review*, vol. 108, no. 4 (October 2003); 1061-1080; Dale Van Kley, “Christianity as Casualty and Chrysalis of Modernity: The Problem of Dechristianization in the French Revolution.” *American Historical Review*, vol. 108, no. 4. (October, 2003); 1081-1104.

⁵ See François Furet, *La gauche et la Révolution française au milieu du XIXe siècle : Edgar Quinet et la question du jacobinisme, 1865-1870* (Paris: Hachette, 1986); Dale Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 369-75.

importance of German philosophy, specifically the more Protestant strains associated with Karl Leonhard Reinhold. Printy also recognizes the importance of later thinkers like Georg Hegel, who claimed that the Reformation was the “all enlightening sun.” Certainly, many writers in the nineteenth century were influenced by German philosophy and Protestant apologetics.⁶ Edgar Quinet was one of them, but in general he was hyper-critical of German philosophy.⁷ While Quinet may have pulled from German literature and political thought to link the Reformation and the Revolution, it is far more likely that he was responding to a French Catholic narrative of French history. As Ceri Crossley argues, Quinet held the French bishop and theologian, Jaques-Bénigne Bossuet in high regard.⁸ In Bossuet’s *Histoire des variations des églises protestantes* (1688), he argued that Protestants overthrew the “order of discipline” in the pursuit of religious “independence . . . under the specious, flattering name of liberty.”⁹ This connection between Protestantism and freedom continued to be a mainstay of the Catholic counter-Enlightenment and conservative repertoire well into the nineteenth century.¹⁰ Catholic, counter-revolutionary writers were well-versed in such topics and got the most mileage out of such a narrative.¹¹

The conservative argument for the Protestant origins of the French Revolution narrative can be traced to the early Revolution and be categorized in two distinct ways. The first and probably best known by historians today are the more conspiratorial claims made in texts like the 1791 pamphlet, *Causes et agens des révolutions de France*.¹² For this polemic’s anonymous author, a secret “league” or

⁶ Michael Printy, “Protestantism and Progress in the Year XII: Charles de Villers’s *Essay on the Spirit and Influence of Luther’s Reformation* (1804),” *Modern Intellectual History* 9, issue 2 (2012); 303-329; Georg W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (New York: Cosimo, 2007), 412; Rebecca Comay, *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2011), 57.

⁷ Ceri Crossley, *French Historians and Romanticism: Thierry, Guizot, the Saint-Simonians, Quinet, Michelet* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 69.

⁸ Ceri Crossley, *Edgar Quinet (1803-1875): A Study in Romantic Thought* (Lexington: French Forum Publishers, 1983), 25; Bossuet, *Discours sur l’histoire universelle* (1681).

⁹ Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, *Histoire des variations des églises protestantes*, vol. I (Paris, 1688), 279.

¹⁰ Darrin M. McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 77-83.

¹¹ David Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism in France, 1680-1800* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 30.

¹² See Gordon S. Wood, “Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 39 (1982); 401-441; Timothy Tackett, “Conspiracy Obsession in a Time of Revolution: French Elites and the Origins of the Terror, 1789-1792,” *The American Historical Review* 105, no. 3 (June 2000), 711; Peter R. Campbell, Thomas E. Kaiser, and Marisa Linton, *Conspiracy in the French Revolution* (Manchester:

“cabal” of Protestant conspirators began plotting the downfall of the Catholic Church and the monarchy after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, and were later joined by the Enlightenment *philosophe*, the crypto-Protestant Jansenists, and Freemasons. According to the pamphlet, the combined Protestant-led entente orchestrated the sale of Catholic Church lands and the abolishment of sacramental fees. In prophetic terms, the pamphlet insisted that the Protestant’s next step was to perpetrate regicide.¹³ It was not uncommon for Catholics to employ similar pejoratives and scare tactics as those used during the Wars of Religion.¹⁴

While such conspiratorial claims appear in a modern light as colorful examples of the hysteria common to revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries alike — what Lynn Hunt and Timothy Tackett have called “conspiracy obsession” — many imagined Protestant origins in the *longue durée*.¹⁵ In this view, the Revolution resulted from the ideologies of the early reformers. The 1792 pamphlet entitled, *Les Français devenus protestants sans le savoir* claimed that, whether they knew it or not, revolutionaries turned un-suspecting Frenchmen into Protestants. “This new edifice had been constructed by the heretics of earlier centuries,” the pamphlet argued. The author evidenced the Civil Constitution of the Clergy of 1790 — an action against the sanctity of the Catholic Church, which “wreaked” of “Luther and Calvin.”¹⁶ Nicolas Sourdat, most likely the author of this pamphlet, reproduced its text and extended its argument in his 1797, *Les véritables auteurs de la Révolution de 1789*, in which he sought to definitively connect Calvin with the revolutionary attack on the Catholic Church.¹⁷ Two years later, in his *Réflexions sur le protestantisme*, Joseph de Maistre further popularized the links between the original Reformers and the revolutionaries, Calvin and the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, and the attacks on Catholic property of the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries.¹⁸

Such an argument became so pervasive that in 1800, the German Johann Georg Heinzmann, after a prolonged journey throughout France, noted in his continental

Manchester University Press, 2007). See also Darrin M. McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment*, 77-83.

¹³ *Causes et agens des révolutions de France* (n.p., 1791), 3.

¹⁴ See Bernard Dompnier, *Le venin de l’hérésie: Image du protestantisme et combat catholique au XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Le Centurion, 1985).

¹⁵ Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 39. ; Timothy Tackett, “Conspiracy Obsession in a Time of Revolution: French Elites and the Origins of the Terror, 1789-1792.”

¹⁶ *Les Français devenus protestants sans le savoir, ou parallèle de la religion protestante et de la nouvelle religion de France* (Paris, 1792), 4.

¹⁷ Nicolas Sourdat, *Les véritables auteurs de la Révolution de 1789* (Paris, 1797).

¹⁸ Joseph Marie de Maistre, “Réflexions sur le protestantisme,” in *Oeuvres complètes de J. de Maistre: nouvelle édition contenant ses œuvres posthumes et toute sa correspondance inédite* (Vitte et Perrussel, 1884), 76.

travel narrative:

The French counter-revolutionaries say that the Protestants are the cause of the Revolution and that they degraded the clergy and disseminated free ideas, which are those of foreigners, not the French ... The republican French value Protestants and give them credit for the first victory of light over dark. The true revolutionary ... is a friend of the Protestants.¹⁹

To be a friend of the Protestant was to be a friend of the Revolution, because in the French as well as in the wider European imagination, as evidenced by Heinzmann, Protestants had not only benefited from the Revolution, but were of singular importance to its foundations. He remarked that by the end of the “Reformation in the sixteenth century, the door closed for those who wished to think and judge”.²⁰ Catholicism hindered freedom of conscience and served despotic monarchies best—a nod to Montesquieu’s correlation between religion and political preference. “If the French wanted a Republic,” he concluded, “they needed to cease being Catholics.”²¹ For many republicans in the nineteenth century, the link between Reformation and Revolution underscored the continued importance of Christianity in a supposedly secular, revolutionary tradition. In early April 1802, on the same day that Portalis spoke to the legislative body about the necessity of the Concordat and the Organic Articles, the Institut national de France sponsored an essay contest on the question, “What has been the influence of Luther’s Reformation on the political situation of the different States of Europe, and on the progress of enlightenment?” Charles de Villers’s submission, titled *Essai sur l’esprit et l’influence de la Réformation de Luther* took the Institut’s prize. His essay explored the connections between Christian history and the Enlightenment and offered an interesting middle ground between the counter-revolutionary exhortations and the ardent republicanism of Edgar Quinet later in the century.²²

¹⁹ Johann Georg Heinzmann, *Voyage d’un Allemand à Paris et retour par la Suisse*, (Lausanne, 1800), 158, 172-3.

²⁰ Ibid, 169-70.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Historians of late have become interested in Villers for a number of reasons. Andrew Jainchill focuses on Villers essay to show how liberalism emerged out of secular and religious debates in the wake of the Terror and in response to Bonaparte’s Concordat, whereas Michael Printy finds Villers essay to be a turning point in the narrative of Protestantism and progress. Jainchill, *Reimagining Politics After the Terror* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 269-74; Michael Printy, “Protestantism and Progress”. For other similar interpretations of Villers work see Martin Staum, *Minerva’s Message: Stabilizing the French Revolution* (Buffalo, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1996); Helena Rosenblatt, *Liberal Values: Benjamin Constant and the Politics of Religion* (Cambridge:

Arguably, Villers won the Institut's prize because he recast the Catholic, conservative philippic in such a positive light. As opposed to earlier Catholic controversialists who viewed Luther as the seed of confessional conflict, Villers saw Luther and the Reformation as bequeathing to Europe a "philosophical period during which interest in truths of a higher order, in the discussion of the highest rules of logic, metaphysics and morality, gained a level of activity that had not been seen for many centuries."²³ The philosophical rationalism that emerged from the theological dealings of the Reformation spread the ideas of freedom of conscience and some abstract notion of liberty. The Reformation was not merely a religious movement in Villers's interpretation, but rather was an intellectual and cultural revolution, in both senses of the term. The Reformation returned the West to a time *before* the dogmatism of the Catholic Middle Ages and encouraged the *progress* of human intellect and its application to important social problems. The Reformation began by combating the political and theological "slavery" of despotism, hierarchical tyranny, and the supposed infallibility of Papal authority. The blossoming of intellectual activity that followed was unintended and took hold in areas where Protestantism flourished or failed. For once, the concept of liberty seeped into the ground water—it was impossible to remove it from European springs. This new ideology promoted the sciences, politics, economics, and philosophy. Villers contended that "the Reformation was, in its essence, nothing other than the act by which reason declared itself emancipated from the yoke of arbitrary authority; emancipation that was only naturally necessary and indispensable to the Enlightenment [*renaissance des lumières*]."²⁴

Villers' narrative differed remarkably little from his conservative predecessors and contemporaries. The French Revolution was merely the political extension of the Reformation and the Enlightenment — Luther's 95 Theses and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen sat at two ends of a long intellectual chain. Like Bossuet, Montesquieu, and many others before him, Villers recognized that Protestantism encouraged the creation of republican governments. Prior to the Revolution, Catholic claims of republicanism had defamed the Protestant community. Discussions of the Protestant Reformation and republicanism normally accompanied such words like "fanaticism," "enthusiasm," "blood," and numerous other slanderous, sanguinary, semantic flourishes meant to "other" the "so-called" Reformed religion. Only after the Revolution declared itself a republic and valorized republican ideals, did the supposed republican tendencies of Protestantism appear in a positive, less internecine light.²⁵

Cambridge University Press, 2008).

²³ Charles de Villers, *Essai sur l'esprit et l'influence de la Réformation de Luther*, 2nd edn (Paris, 1804), 272. This is the most common edition of Villers essay.

²⁴ Villers, *Essai*, 326.

²⁵ Villers, 326.

In metaphorical terms, Villers recognized that the light of reason revealed truth, but to the individual kept in darkness, the light's brilliance was equally blinding. The unfettered following of one's "Inner Light," when interpreted and acted upon without restraint, led to a type of religious and social blindness. Liberation led to violence. Just as the Reformation had led to the Wars of Religion, so too had the Revolution of 1789 led to the Terror. Villers recognized that for those with an uncompromising, absolute understanding of freedom of conscience or universal egalitarianism, any perceived obstruction necessitated great and unremitting force. Villers drew a direct comparison between the rural Reformation and the rural popular Revolution in France.

Among the Anabaptists one finds . . . the same pretensions to equality and absolute liberty that caused all the excess of Jacobin France: the agrarian law, the pillage of the rich were already part of their emblem. On their banners one could already have written "war on the castles, peace to the cottages!"²⁶

An interesting twist for an otherwise unabashed defense and outright lionization of the Reformation and Enlightenment, Villers's argued that liberty needed to be balanced by a degree of restraint. This point must have seemed poignant during a period where Bonaparte's desire for control publicly and politically outweighed the liberties of the citizenry. Liberties first expressed in the Revolution had given France 1789, but without the previous two centuries to balance and counterbalance, to evaluate and analyze, and to institute moderate reforms, France swung haphazardly and drastically from the Right and the security of the absolutist state to the Left and the chaos of absolute liberty. Whereas Catholic monarchists connected the Reformation to the revolutionary violence in order to undermine the clarion calls of equality, Villers did so in pursuit of moderation.

Villers and the other contributors to this essay contest sought to base their liberal claims on religious foundations. As Helena Rosenblatt has argued, liberalism was neither in a bitter conflict with Christianity, nor was it a part of a larger disenchantment of the religious mind.²⁷ For many liberals, Protestants served as the standard of a good liberal Christian. Protestantism detached man's mind from dogma, developed critical and rational thinking, and encouraged the free use of reason. The history of Protestantism was therefore the history of the rise of

²⁶ Villers, *Essai*, 141-2.

²⁷ See Helena Rosenblatt, "On the need for a Protestant Reformation: Constant, Sismondi, Guizot and Laboulaye," in *French Liberalism from Montesquieu to the Present Day* ed. Raf Geenens and Helena Rosenblatt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 115-33; Helena Rosenblatt, *Liberal Values*. Pierre Manent makes the argument that nascent liberalism opposed religion from its onset. See Pierre Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism* trans. R. Balinski (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

liberty—in religious *and* political terms. For those who sought to comment on the Revolution in the nineteenth century, Protestantism continued to be a cipher by which to consolidate revolutionary claims to modern liberty, freedom of conscience, and republicanism.

Alexis de Tocqueville, François Guizot, Louis Blanc, and others came out of this post-revolutionary tradition and each one of them thought of the French Revolution in religious, if not explicitly, Protestant terms. Like their German contemporary, Hegel, these thinkers viewed the Reformation as an intellectual wellspring and a source of individualism that combatted both spiritual and secular absolutism.²⁸ Yet, Edgar Quinet's *La Révolution* (1865) still stands out as the most remarkable "Protestant history" of the French Revolution and its origins. The connection between the Protestant Reformation and the Revolution must have been apparent as Quinet wrote his magnum opus while in exile after the Louis Napoleon's Catholic-supported, coup d'état that ended the short-lived, yet hopeful Second French Republic.

Why did the promises of liberty that accompanied the republican experiments of 1792 and 1848 seem to turn to empire and tyranny? "The French, having been unable to accept the advantages of the religious revolution of the sixteenth century," answered Quinet, "were eventually led to deny them ... and from there, how many false views did they not end up embracing."²⁹ The source of these false beliefs lay not within a secular political entity, but within the intertwined relationship between political "absolute domination" of this world and the Catholic Church's "spiritual absolutism" over the next. Protestantism liberated the people in the Netherlands, England, and the United States from the "irons" of dogma and ritual. These states benefitted from their revolutions (the Golden Age following the creation of the Dutch Republic in 1649, the Glorious Revolution of 1688, and the American Revolution), because they had learned from Protestantism the value of liberty of conscience.³⁰ In France, the people returned to servitude—in the form

²⁸ Alexis de Tocqueville, *L'ancien Régime et la Révolution* (Paris, 1856), 15-20; François Guizot, *Histoire de la civilisation en Europe* (Paris, 1828); Louis Blanc, *Histoire de la Révolution française* (Paris, 1847); Philippe-Joesphe-Benjamin Buchez, *Histoire parlementaire de la Révolution française*, 40 vols (Paris, 1834-8); Georg W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (New York: Cosimo, 2007), 412.

²⁹ Edgar Quinet, *La Révolution*, trans. by Claude Lefort (Paris, 1987), 158.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 176-80. Similar notions of the relationship between the Protestant Reformation and successful revolutions were expressed in the British liberal historiography of the French Revolution. See William Hazlitt, *The Life of Napoleon Buonaparte* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1875), I: 68; Seamus Deane, *The French Revolution and Enlightenment in England, 1789-1832* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988). The absolutist Protestant Prussian regime is rarely discussed in these accounts, as it would have likely proved counter-productive. A successful Protestant monarchy like Prussia would have undermined Quinet's republican image of the Protestant spirit.

of a single authoritarian ruler, whether it be a Bonaparte or a Bourbon.

For all that Quinet toyed with the idea of a republican religion elsewhere in his oeuvre, he ultimately insisted on the continued importance of Christianity in the nineteenth century. One might expect that Quinet's polemic against Catholic corporatism would have led to secularism or the advocacy of a religion founded on reason. Such had been the response of many *philosophes* and revolutionaries in the eighteenth century. Yet, Quinet maintained the importance of the Christian faith as a vehicle expressly built for Western culture. Deism had failed to supplant Christianity. Experimental and revolutionary replacements for the Christian faith, like the Cult of the Supreme Being or Theophilanthropy, remained only partial reforms. These supposed substitutes correctly emphasized individual reason or a sense of charity, but they failed to fill the need for Christian transcendence, the experience of spiritual communion, and the eschatological promise of life after death.³¹

In the "politics of historiography" that resulted from the Revolution, many sought to legitimate the continued importance of the Christian faith in a supposedly, secular liberal tradition and writing its history in Protestant terms had profound political implications. This paper has examined how individual thinkers explored and imagined the connections between the Christian tradition and the Revolution's legacy in order to make larger points about the significance of religion in the post-revolutionary world, the positives and negatives of unrestrained freedom of conscience, and the state's relationship with religious communities and institutions—the need for slow reform. What began as a counter-Revolutionary and particularly Catholic line of argumentation became a moderate liberal argument, informed by German philosophy, at the turn of the century. French thinkers recast the Protestant origins of the French Revolution's democratic and republican ideals in positive terms. In doing so, they employed many of the same arguments used to disparage Protestants prior to the Revolution—their republicanism, errant individualism, and freedom of conscience—in positive terms. In doing so, these thinkers constituted an important strain of nascent French liberal thought. They maintained that religion was necessary for political progress and insisted that the most liberal and progressive religion was Protestantism.

In terms of historiography, Marxists, Revisionists, and Post-Revisionists looked to 1789's origins in order to explain the effects of class consciousness and conflict, to complicate the social in favor of the political, or to discuss the politicization of a variety of factors from taxation and starvation to the desacralization of the monarchy in the Old Regime. Their histories often neglect religion entirely or reduce it to the now tired narrative of the inevitable rise of the secular from a sacred epoch. Yet, this transition point between the early modern and modern has also been viewed as the fulfillment of centuries of similar pursuits

³¹ Quinet, *La Révolution*, 718.

in the religious sphere. Whether viewed in negative, anti-Protestant and anti-Revolutionary terms or in positive, moderate republican terms, the purported links between the Reformation and the Revolution served a variety of political purposes—as a source of ridicule meant to reaffirm Catholic religious and monarchical hegemony characteristic of pre-revolutionary France or as a religious discursive base designed to support claims of republicanism and individual liberties.