

Introduction

This book makes no apology for taking an unusual slant on its subject. Most historians, whatever their topic, either stop before the French Revolution, or make that major event their primary concern, or commence after it. Here the trajectory is quite different: this book's primary purpose is to see how much of Europe's religious culture was changed immediately before and during the period c.1790–1815 and what stayed the same. The high-quality scholarly work produced over the last thirty years on the different Churches of Europe makes a synthesis and an overview considerably overdue, especially one straddling both sides of the revolutionary 'divide'. By going forward to c. 1830, I can deal more satisfactorily with the effects of the Revolution, both in the limited term and by noting the indicators for the long-term impact. What, apart from the name of Christian, linked the Churches and the churchgoers of 1750 with their great-grandchildren three generations on in 1830? This is the question at the heart of *Christianity and Revolutionary Europe*. The book's organisation reflects my Janus-faced approach to Christianity in a revolutionary era: surveying it before and after the deluge and trying to establish what survived of pre-1789 structures and practices – and what did not. The period c.1750–90 is not covered chronologically. Instead there are four chapters introducing the reader to the ordained ministry of the Churches and the structures within which they worked; the nature and variety of Christian beliefs and forms of worship; religion and the intellectual concerns of the Europe *des lumières*; and the perennially unpredictable relationship of Confessions to states and to each other.

The political and intellectual challenges to Christianity between 1750 and 1830 were as acute as any since its adoption as the principal religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, and yet the Churches were able to regroup and reclaim an organisational and credal strength that endured well into the twentieth century. At the heart of this book is an attempt to understand how this survival was achieved despite institutional upheaval and the widespread questioning of dogma and tradition. One of my central claims will be that eighteenth-century religion

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-46592-2 - Christianity and Revolutionary Europe, 1750–1830

Nigel Aston

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 Introduction

generally had a vitality and a resilience which historians have underestimated; these qualities played a key role in enabling the Churches to withstand the often traumatic experience of revolution. It is time to insist on the underlying religiosity of eighteenth-century Europe, the deep roots of a culturally dominant Christianity that revolutionaries and republicans found impossibly hard to dislodge, and the unwillingness of the average man and woman across the continent to relinquish a belief system which conferred meaning on their lives in this world and conditionally assured them of a better one in the next. The inherent attractiveness of an active religious life was hard to deny. Catholicism had moved away from the high spiritual demands of the seventeenth century in favour of re-emphasising the simple evangelical message of the Gospels. Elites and masses welcomed the trend, and found much in it to sustain their different understanding of faith. Eighteenth-century Protestants, on the other hand, could take pride in the ‘reasonableness’ of their religion or, if that seemed spiritually insufficient as it did to many of them, find emotionally liberating the inward conversion that evangelists taught was essential to salvation.

At this distance in time there is no excuse for teleological distortions or the covert partisanship which has so often reduced the value of studies in the religious culture of the era. Scholars no longer have any uses for the extreme historiographical traditions that on one side emphasise a martyrology and a triumphant early-nineteenth-century religious renewal and, on the other, the irresistibility of a Paris-based secularising enlightenment. And, while it is generally admitted that state Churches were under pressure from within the establishment in the later eighteenth century – the limited toleration of minority communions, diminution of other privileges such as mortmain, reduced elite interest in a life of active piety – these gestures need to be seen as in some sense just the latest manifestation of incessant Church–state tensions over one-and-a-half millennia and set against the corresponding strengths of the major confessions: a restraining moral influence on their flocks, the primary uses of the parish as an organisational unit in Europe, and the unique legitimacy Christian sanction conferred on government. As recent studies by Adrian Hastings and others have pointed out, the Churches and their followers helped form national identities and provided structures wherein they could be articulated to a degree that historians of nationhood have been slow to admit.

The high point of orthodoxy came late in the western Churches, approximately 1720–50, immediately before this book commences, so if, as is often alleged, it was harder for the Churches to make headway after

the Seven Years' War, that should hardly be surprising. The work of the Churches had become less to extend the faith than to confirm it, and there could only be a falling away from the heights of good Christian practice and grasp of the faith that had been reached by 1750. Away from the Ottoman enclaves in the east, Europe contained a thoroughly Christianised people, and that remained fairly much the case in 1830 as it had been eighty years earlier. The eighteenth century was the great age of missions into rural Europe, and the missionaries – whether Jesuits or Passionists, Methodists or Pietists – did their work well. They set out to win the attention of entire populations and all age groups and they largely achieved their objectives. In as much as it can be gauged, public opinion was broadly, though not uncritically, content with the work of the clergy (at least the *lower* clergy) on the eve of the French Revolution and was far from losing faith with them. Certainly, when the Revolution came to the countryside in the 1790s neither its propagandists nor its armed agents could readily persuade or intimidate villagers into abandoning either churchgoing or loyalty to their priests and ministers. After 1792–3 any hope that Christianity could be the ally or the midwife of the Revolution became implausible, but in turning the majority of practising Christians into the opponents of Revolution, the Jacobins turned Christianity into the motor of the counter-revolution, for the most part stronger and more popular than Revolution. Even Napoleon saw the sense of coming to terms with an international organisation that could reinforce rather than undermine French hegemony on the continent. Despite the range of alternatives on offer, Christianity displayed a remarkable capacity for survival in the half century from 1780 to 1830: the religious life may have been less unanimously followed in 1830 compared with 1789, but it was more authentic and profound.

The Christianity on offer in the later eighteenth century was projected towards men as much as women. If that appeal was gradually diminishing over time, one must be cautious about talking in terms of the feminisation of any confession at any point in the span covered by this volume. The principal vehicle of dechristianisation for the average French male was the army; yet elsewhere the armies of the militarised Europe of 1792–1815 were well stocked with chaplains as a deliberate counterpoint to the French example of faithlessness. In sum, the relationship between militarisation and dechristianisation is a complex one that has yet to be convincingly unravelled, and the presumption that large-scale enlistment in the armed forces unstitched allegiance to the Churches after 1815 remains doubtful. Much the same may be said of the Enlightenment. What might be called the Gay/Aries/Vovelle model of enlightenment

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-46592-2 - Christianity and Revolutionary Europe, 1750–1830

Nigel Aston

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 Introduction

predicated on overt hostility to institutional Christianity has fallen out of favour as historians of Britain, France, Italy and Poland have come across many examples of Churches and congregations endorsing or facilitating ‘enlightenment’ aims of educating, eradicating superstition and increasing toleration.

Away from France, the Churches and the clergy could be called broadly progressive forces. Protestant clergy and laity were happy to fit into that bracket. An earlier book in this series by Professor W. R. Ward insisted that Protestants remained alert to the possibility that Catholicism was still bent on extirpating the Reformation communions and that there was some basis for these apprehensions well into the eighteenth century. But one of the emphases of this volume is on the marked growth and recovery of Protestantism between 1760 and 1830 aided by the weakening of its historic enemies: the papacy and the Jesuits. The Jansenist reformist impulse – which ruined the Jesuits – was at the heart of the Catholic contribution to the Enlightenment, but was also deeply divisive within Catholicism and prevented the Church from concentrating its energies on irreligious enemies outside its gates.

One sees a remarkable continuity of Jansenist impulses in a variety of forms throughout this period, persistently attractive to regimes through to Napoleon’s. Why did they matter to officials? Why to so many educated clergy? The book tries to answer both questions, and in doing so queries the extent to which one should see the period of 1773 to 1791 between the abolition of the Jesuits as an order and the Civil Constitution of the Clergy as two precarious decades. If Catholicism was reverting to a conciliar or monarchical model, that was as likely to produce consolidation rather than disintegration. Emollient, undogmatic Protestants such as the United Irishmen leader, Wolfe Tone, spread the word that Catholicism had been ‘depapalised’, but the extent to which the experience of Catholicism in countries such as Gallican France had ever been ‘papalist’ made his glad tidings something of a half-truth. For papal power nowhere in Catholic Europe rode roughshod over monarchical wishes either before 1789 or after 1815, which is why both Pius VII and the restored monarchies of post-Napoleonic Europe were so anxious to clarify their mutual rights in the form of negotiated concordats.

One last warning and serious caveat. The religious geography of most countries varied appreciably in a manner which any general survey can only inadequately register, for instance the tremendous devotion of northern Spain and northern Italy which persisted into the modern era

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-46592-2 - Christianity and Revolutionary Europe, 1750–1830

Nigel Aston

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

5

compared with the much less-practising southern parts of those countries. This book, trying to draw attention to general trends, is embarrassingly aware of the exceptions to them. Attempts to shoehorn materials into convenient moulds have been resisted: the reader will gauge how successfully.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-46592-2 - Christianity and Revolutionary Europe, 1750–1830

Nigel Aston

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-46592-2 - Christianity and Revolutionary Europe, 1750–1830

Nigel Aston

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Part 1

Later eighteenth-century religion

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-46592-2 - Christianity and Revolutionary Europe, 1750–1830

Nigel Aston

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1 Church structures and ministry

The Christian culture of Europe

From Ireland to Russia and from Sweden to Sicily, the peoples and states of Europe in the mid-eighteenth century predominantly professed Christianity. Even Europeans living within the Ottoman Turkish Empire – in the Balkans, Greece and the eastern Mediterranean littoral – had largely held on to the faith and not adopted the rival Islamic monotheism of their overlords. Its roots went deep. Since the Arab conquests in the Middle East and North Africa, Europe had been confirmed as the heartland of Christianity, with its main spiritual leaders in 1750 resident in Rome, Constantinople, Moscow, Canterbury and Geneva. For most men and women Christianity was not one option among competing alternatives; it was part of one's inheritance. To be born a Frenchman or a Dane, a Scot or a Hungarian, or into any other European nation or empire, was by definition to be born a Christian unless one belonged to one of the numerically insignificant minority religions, principally Judaism. Christianity had to be actually disclaimed; otherwise the assumption was universally made that, to whatever extent, the individual subscribed to the Christian view of the world and the scheme of salvation it offered to man.

Even the deists respected the figure of Jesus Christ while rejecting his claims to divinity. They tended to present him as someone who, like themselves, had been misrepresented by the authorities of the day as a threat to their power. Unbelievers had to be exceptionally courageous to avow their infidelity. Deists and Christians alike saw the profession of atheism as a threat to social cohesion. Voltaire, the most famous *philosophe* of them all, was apprehensive that moral anarchy would inevitably follow on from a denial of God: it was not until the 1760s that he felt safe to publish extracts from the so-called *Testament* of the French country priest Jean Meslier (d. 1729), by which date some Parisian salons, notably the Baron d'Holbach's, had flung aside concealment and were openly fostering atheist publications and values. D'Holbach had few

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-46592-2 - Christianity and Revolutionary Europe, 1750–1830

Nigel Aston

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 Later eighteenth-century religion

imitators. Irreligious sentiments articulated with conviction remained a rarity, largely confined to the upper reaches of society and seldom heard in public utterance. They belonged to a well-established libertine tradition. Clerical concern that these views were on the increase and spreading among the population at large could not just be dismissed as alarmist by the later eighteenth century when public, written challenges to the faith were appearing, especially in the western European states, designed for a wide readership and combining the old slogans against ‘priestcraft’ with the latest enlightenment materialism. There is a limited sense in which such writings were sapping the prevailing Christian culture, but equally the influence of these ‘Men of Letters’ (except for the greatest among them, like Voltaire) was minimal in comparison with the omnipresence of the Church on the ground through its ministry to the mass of people.

That ministry, in all its diversity, gave some lingering credibility to the notion of Christendom as commensurate with the frontiers of Europe, although not in the shape of a seamless medieval web (in as much as there had ever been one), for the Reformation had led to the ‘confessionalisation’ of a unitary Christendom, fragmented into at least three main confessional Churches. With the last public reference to Christendom in the Treaty of Utrecht 1713, it ‘slowly entered the limbo of archaic words’.¹ Nevertheless, there survived a general Christian polity characterised by denominational tensions among Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox believers coexisting with an underlying commitment to the same historic faith differently perceived; the litany used in the Church of England still included prayers for Catholic Christians threatened by the Turks. Religion was formative in the maturing of national identities: Gallican Catholicism took pride in having a longer pedigree than the French monarchy and members of the Church of England were taught to look on its providential survival as a sign of God’s favour towards the nation. These were relatively settled states where national identity was not much contested. Other ethnic communities struggled to secure recognition. In the Ottoman Empire the Greeks made the most of the Hellenisation policy favoured by the Porte, regardless of its effects on other Christian national groups trying to survive in a multinational and multiconfessional polity. More and more national Churches were allotted to the oversight of the (Greek) patriarch in the Ottoman capital, Constantinople. In 1766 the Serbian patriarchate of Péc was suppressed, and the following year the Bulgarian Church came under the aegis of the patriarch with the forced retirement of Arsemnis, archbishop of Ochrid. Catholics in

¹ Denys Hay, *Europe: The Emergence of an Idea* (rev. edn, Edinburgh, 1968), 116.