The Church in the Street in Nineteenth-Century France

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I begin this paper with several images, ordinary postcards, from Marseille, Paris, and Puy-en-Velay in the department of the Haute-Loire. In each of these postcards, the eye is drawn to churches or to monumental statues jutting out above the rooftops, occupying a dominant position over the town, and rising out of the urban construction. The postcards show, in order of their construction, first, the colossal statue of Notre Dame de France in Puy, sixteen meters tall and forged in 1860 from canons taken at Sebastopol. Second is the sanctuary and the statue of Notre Dame de la Garde, built in Marseille in 1870; the statue, nearly ten meters tall, was built by Christofle in Paris and was said to be "sparkling like Minerva in the Parthenon." Also in Marseille, less well-known but equally impressive because it towered over the port, is the new cathedral, built between 1852 and 1892 in a Romano-Byzantino-Islamo-Italian style designed by the architect Vaudoyer. Finally, in Paris we see the basilica of Sacré Coeur whose construction, decided on in 1873, was begun in 1876 and completed in 1919. These three examples demonstrate the Church's desire to increase its visibility in the urban setting. We could easily add others, in particular the statues of the Virgin that Claude Langlois
has studied in the southeast.\textsuperscript{1} Régis Bertrand, who has analyzed the christianization of the Marseille landscape over several centuries, emphasizes that images of Marseille before the Revolution show a town with relatively few Christian landmarks; in paintings and engravings only about a dozen church towers rise over the roofs of the city.\textsuperscript{2} One century later, Notre Dame de la Garde and the new cathedral dominated the Marseille skyline. In the period from 1850-1870 (Second Empire through the government of Moral Order), many religious buildings and monumental statues of the Virgin were erected. After the destruction of the Revolution, the Church sought to reestablish its position in the urban setting in a tangible–even ostentatious–fashion.

Moving on from these images, I turn now to another manifestation of the Church's presence in urban space that was important in the nineteenth century and even up to the 1960s: the religious procession. Processions were ephemeral, occupying the streets only for a few hours, but they had many commonalities with religious buildings: in particular, the chronology of their construction and their purpose. In the second third of the nineteenth century, the ostentation and display of processions, like the monumental construction of churches and statues, sought to impress the spectator and to reaffirm the power and the presence of the Church.

The religious procession's occupation of the streets should be considered from several vantage points. We

\textsuperscript{1} Claude Langlois, "Mariophanies sculpturales et modèle provençal sous le Second Empire," in Mélanges Michel Vovelle: Sociétés, mentalités, cultures en France XVe-XXe siècles. Volume aixois (Aix en Provence: Publications de l'Université de Provence, 1997), 297-316.

\textsuperscript{2} Régis Bertrand, "De la toponymie à la statuaire: les formes de christianisation du paysage marseillais depuis le XVIIIe siècle," Annales du Midi 98 (1986).
should recall the procession's status in Catholic liturgy and the legislative framework within which processions took place—a new framework established in 1801-1802. The context of these processions was new in other ways too. On the one hand we see the Church's desire to be more visible—lavishly so—in the city streets. On the other hand, however, were new obstacles and limitations on that visibility in a century in which Catholicism lost its exclusive position and when forces hostile to the clergy or in favor of the new and increasingly triumphant secularism contested the Church's presence in the street. The Church in the street generated a nineteenth-century question that is by now largely forgotten—the "procession question"—in which the right to demonstrate and the right to express one's convictions and beliefs in the public square were at stake.

According to canon law, liturgical prescription, and diocesan statute, a procession is a "solemn march" that takes place inside or outside a church and that brings together priests and congregants with a cross, banners, statues, or relics either at the head of or among the participants. All canonical and liturgical texts emphasize the coming together of priest and faithful; there is no procession without clerical direction, and the faithful cannot organize or conduct a procession on their own. The prayers and the songs that take place during a procession depend on the purpose of the event; they may praise God, offer thanksgiving, or beg for his mercy or forgiveness. A typology of processions would begin with those that take

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place annually in the liturgical cycle: the most important are the Rogations, the three days prior to the Thursday of the Ascension which ask God for a generous harvest, and the Corpus Christi, the second and third Sundays after Pentecost which celebrate and honor Christ's presence in the Eucharist and during which the consecrated host—the Holy Sacrament—is carried triumphantly through decorated streets in the midst of a long cortège of priests and lay. Extraordinary processions happen on special occasions: in particular processions implored God to end drought, excessive rain, or fire; they honored saints whose relics were being transferred; and they recognized new bishops' entry into their towns upon their assumption of episcopal duties. There were other occasions for processions, but the important point is that processions, especially those that fit into the liturgical cycle, were part of regular worship. The Corpus Christi procession, for instance, was a specific moment in a larger worship service; the host that was jubilantly carried through the parish streets had just been consecrated in the mass moments earlier, so the procession was a prolongation and an extension of worship outside of the church.

Because the procession was a part of the worship service, it came under the jurisdiction of the law of 1801-1802, which recognized and protected worship in the church buildings that the state had made available to clergy and their congregants. This law began with the text of the Concordat, the treaty signed 26 Messidor Year IX (15 July 1801) between the Holy See and the French Republic. The first article of the Concordat reads: "The apostolic Roman Catholic faith will be freely practiced in France; worship will be public and will conform to the regulations that the government considers necessary for public order." This article is, in fact, fairly vague; it does not mention exterior
processions or ceremonies, but the term "public" was then understood to authorize worship outside the church building. In 1810 the penal code confirmed that interpretation; articles 260 and 261 established penalties for individuals who interrupted authorized worship "in church or in any other place intended for or in use for worship." These articles and French jurisprudence both established the street as a temporary site of worship, so that the state could not issue a general ban on processions. In only two cases—when "public order" was threatened (article one) or when there was more than one religion represented in a commune—could the state forbid processions. Article forty-five of the Organic Articles on the Catholic Church (added to the law on worship of 18 Germinal Year X (1 April 1802)) provided for this second case: "No religious ceremony will take place outside of buildings consecrated to Catholic worship in towns where there are temples intended for different religions." France in the nineteenth century operated with a system of multiple established religions; the state recognized and protected several religions and paid their ministers: Roman Catholicism, two Protestant confessions, Reformed and Lutheran, and Judaism. The Catholic Church was therefore no longer exclusive or even dominant in the eyes of the law except during the Restoration from 1814 to 1830, which recognized Catholicism as the state religion. The Catholic Church in nineteenth-century France was one religion among others.

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While I cannot trace in detail here the evolution of nineteenth-century processions, let me emphasize three main factors that shaped the debates that processions generated:
1. There were fewer processions passing through streets in the nineteenth century than before the Revolution. In Limoges in 1784, about a hundred religious corteges traversed the city during the first six months of the year; in 1879 there were only twenty-two and only thirty over the course of the entire year. The result of fewer parishes, the disappearance of many religious communities, and the decline of penitent confraternities, this diminution seems to have been offset by the new luster of specific processions and the multiplication of processions for extraordinary occasions.

2. Processions tended to evolve in specific and regular directions. Corpus Christi produced processions that best illustrate the evolution of other religious corteges, such as the Assumption (15 August) or processions organized for the entry of a bishop into his episcopal city. First, from about 1830 on, public authorities including mayors, prefects, and members of the judiciary ceased to appear in processions although they would reappear under the Second Empire. Second, corteges became longer, with more participants. In the 1830s and 1840s, under the July Monarchy, children and women often joined the processions, representing schools, catechism groups, congregations, or confraternities. Men did so also, although not in such great numbers; they were members of church vestries, of Saint-Vincent-de-Paul conferences, or (especially after 1870) of Catholic workers' groups. Third, decoration of the streets and squares through which the procession passed, which had largely disappeared with the

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4 According to a religious calendar for 1784 that covers the first six months of the year. Archives départementales de la Haute-Vienne [hereafter ADHV], I Sem 48.

5 La Semaine religieuse du diocèse de Limoges, which appeared weekly beginning in 1863.
Revolution, became increasingly elaborate and extensive; it included garlands, banners, tapestries, and flowers strewn on the street. Fourth, the role of the army and of civil or military brass fanfares grew as well. In the years from 1850 to 1870, cavalry or infantry soldiers often led or completed processions in garrison towns, and ranks of soldiers flanked the Holy Sacrament or presented arms as it passed. The Limoges police commissioner, in his June 1878 report on the Corpus Christi procession, wrote that the boulevards and squares of the city offered "an enchanting view." Finally, the paths taken by many processions also changed; in Poitiers in the 1850s and in Limoges in the 1870s, the itinerary of the Corpus Christi procession, unchanged since at least the eighteenth century, was modified. These were not changes intended to adapt processions to expanding cities and to direct them into newly urbanized nineteenth-century neighborhoods; rather, the itinerary remained in the older sections of town but demonstrated the clergy's desire to turn more streets into temporarily sacred space, to tie the urban landscape to the Church with processions that symbolically encircled the old center of town.

In the nineteenth century, the Church also seized new opportunities take to the streets and to deploy processions there, like processions to transfer relics or to honor a bishop's entry into his episcopal city. These solemn entries marking a bishop's accession were a Roman ceremony that had fallen out of use in France on the eve of the Revolution. Beginning in the 1840s these entries returned; the bishop would be met at the entry to the city by his clergy and then, under a dais and surrounded by a

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6 The decree of 24 Messidor Year XII, renewed 13 Oct. 1863, required soldiers to honor the Holy Sacrament. The obligation was eliminated by decree of 23 Oct. 1883.

7 Archives municipales de Limoges, P 245.
procession, he would traverse the city to the cathedral. In Poitiers in 1849 Mgr Pie's cortege passed under nine triumphal arches and included four brass fanfares. In his 1872 entry into Limoges, Mgr Duquesnay followed a procession of 3,000 children.

3. Gradually, some processions acquired precise meanings and functions that were unacceptable to many. This development was particularly clear in the 1860s. Corpus Christi processions took on a penitential aspect in which participants begged forgiveness and asked to atone for the wounds, the insults, and the blasphemies that Christ had suffered. In 1863-1864 clergy in several towns sought to organize particularly spectacular Corpus Christi processions as ceremonies of atonement for Ernest Renan's claim, in his inaugural lecture at the collège de France and in his *Life of Jesus*, that Christ had been "a remarkable man" but not divine. In the early 1870s, when France hesitated between republic and monarchy, the Catholic press gave extensive coverage to episcopal entries in order to emphasize the importance of the bishop's divinely ordained authority. For Mgr Sebaux's 1873 entry into Angoulême, the *Semaine religieuse* of the diocese wrote: "The bishop possesses the authority to govern Christians; it is not an artificial or ephemeral authority that any prince or potentate grants one day and removes the next. He receives his power and his mission from God." Processions were intended to demonstrate that faith remained alive and that the Church maintained its influence over the population and could still mobilize a crowd. In Limoges, the traditional displays of relics, which happened every seven years and

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8 *Journal de la Vienne*, 5 Dec. 1849.
9 *Semaine religieuse du diocèse de Limoges* (1872): 153.
10 *Semaine liturgique* (1864): 269.
11 *Semaine religieuse* (1873): 190.
during which the faithful could venerate and touch the relics of saints, began in 1862 with a magnificent procession that carried all of the relics of local churches through the town. In 1869, 80,000 people came to see this procession, and the next morning a vicar of a local parish wrote, "They say that there are materialists and atheists in France, men who don't believe in God, or in the human soul, in Jesus Christ or in his Church. . . . Yesterday, we didn't see any of those men. . . . Within our walls there were only good Catholics."  

In the 1870s Emile Zola depicted the multiple and sometimes brilliant facets of processions in his *Contes et nouvelles*. He described the magnificent dais, hung with velvet and topped with plumes, as an "immense litter in which a sick religion had itself carried out under a June sun." He also described the satisfaction of a parish priest from Tours who, using the influence of devout wives, convinced liberal and Voltarian bourgeois to take their places in the procession behind the dais, along with local high society, and thus to show how strong a sway religion maintained over the population.  

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The "procession question" emerged in the context of multiple confessions, rising anticlericalism, and a progressive affirmation of secularism; the words for the latter two concepts first showed up at mid-century and then appeared in dictionaries around 1870. The conduct of processions in public necessarily raised questions, posed problems and generated opposition, which we can

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12 *Le Courrier du Centre*, 5 April 1869.  
summarize around three main points:

1. Processions might be a public nuisance. They could, of course, tie up traffic, although this disadvantage was rarely mentioned. Their status as nuisance was more commonly linked to the fact that a ceremony outside of a church could easily provoke opposition or contestation. The mayor might, therefore, forbid processions through the streets, either preemptively or to avoid further trouble. Such public disturbances happened particularly frequently at the beginning of the July Monarchy up to 1835 and again around 1880, particularly 1878-1885.

The early July Monarchy was marked by an upsurge in anticlericalism. In 1830 Catholicism lost its status as state religion to become merely the religion of the majority of French people. In reaction against Restoration Catholicism, particularly the missions in which the clergy sought to rechristianize France in a counter-revolutionary mode, young liberal Orleanists or republicans interrupted processions all over France in order to force them back into churches and out of public spaces. With their tricolor flags, their revolutionary songs, and sometimes the support of the National Guard, they blocked the processions' path or organized their own counter-processions. Often in the early 1830s bishops, acting on the recommendation of local authorities, ministers, and prefects, advised their clergy to restrict processions, particularly in cities. Fifty years later mayors took the lead in forbidding processions. In Perigueux, for instance, the mayor forbade a June 1882 procession after an altercation marred the Corpus Christi celebration in the parish of Saint-Front. Just as the cortege paused at a temporary altar located next to a music stand, a brass fanfare that was giving a concert interrupted the benediction with an operetta tune. Catholics in the procession broke ranks to confront the musicians and a
fight ensued, punctuated by cries of "down with the priest-lovers, long live the Republic."\textsuperscript{14}

2. Processions were often disguised political demonstrations; in the late 1870s, they gave Catholics the chance to affirm their preference for monarchy and their support for the pope, the "prisoner of the Vatican" whom France ought to assist with the recovery of the Papal States, recently annexed by the kingdom of Italy. Monarchical symbols did appear in some processions on banners or in children's costumes: Bourbon fleurs de lys, white plumes, the yellow and white of the papacy. Local police regularly complained about one particular religious song with clear political implications: "Save Rome and France in the name of the Sacred Heart."

There was nothing new in this promotion of political symbols in religious corteges; fleurs de lys multiplied under the Restoration and the tricolor sometimes decorated temporary altars under the July Monarchy, but these symbols either demonstrated loyalty to the regime or mistrust of a clergy that had remained largely legitimist after 1830. Under the Third Republic, however, things were different. Many processions were perceived, correctly or not, as an occupation of the public thoroughfare by those hostile to the regime and its institutions. These processions featured a clergy that very often did not hide its animosity toward the Republic, and monarchist notables, often members of the Society of Saint-Vincent-de-Paul or leaders of Catholic worker groups. Some republicans, seeing these processions as political demonstrations, threatened to organize counter-demonstrations if the processions were not banned. These republicans wanted to offer a response to

\textsuperscript{14} Archives départementales de la Dordogne [hereafter ADD], V 48.
what they saw as the political message promoted by the processions.

To understand this republican reaction, it is important to recognize that no nineteenth-century French state recognized a right to public political assembly; the law of 30 June 1881 that acknowledged a right to assembly nonetheless declared the streets off limits. In his examination of restrictions on civil liberties from 1879 to 1914, *La République contre les libertés?*, Jean-Pierre Machelon speaks of a "juridical vacuum" with regard to the right to assembly in the second half of the nineteenth century.\(^{15}\) To assemble in the street was not a misdemeanor, but it was not a right either; if a public assembly threatened to disturb public order, it was required to disperse immediately upon the demand of a magistrate or a police officer. In this juridical vacuum, only Catholics were authorized by law—article one of the Concordat—to conduct public assemblies, and anticlerical republicans believed that Catholics abused this right to proclaim their opposition to republican institutions. In 1897 Emile Labussière, the socialist mayor of Limoges, refused Catholics' request to rescind the previous mayor's ban on processions so that they might conduct a cortege for the display of relics. Labussière declared that he "would be prepared to reestablish processions just as soon as the upper administration permitted socialist demonstrators to march in the streets with their banners."\(^{16}\) Processions thus begged the question of freedom of assembly.

3. Finally, processions raised the question of freedom of religious belief by imposing themselves on all, non-


\(^{16}\) Archives nationales [hereafter AN] F 19 6059.
Catholics as well as Catholics, as they traversed the streets. Catholic processions required non-believers to show signs of respect for a religion that was not theirs and that they did not practice. Public space, opponents of processions argued, ought to be free of all religious expression, especially as the law recognized no dominant religion and therefore gave no religion the right to seize the streets. When the mayor of Tulle banned processions in June 1881, the *Echo républicain de la Corrèze* wrote: "Now that freethinking is spreading everywhere in society, there is one overwhelming obligation that imposes itself: the obligation to respect freedom of conscience. It is fair that each religion be practiced indoors, and that exterior manifestations be prohibited so as not to impose on anyone's conscience."17

Relatively few mayors actively intervened to ban processions. In the departments of the center-west, slightly fewer than four percent of communes ever witnessed such a measure.18 Bans were concentrated in two moments: in the early 1880s and then between 1900 and 1910— that is, when laicization was at its most intense first with the secularization of schools and then during the struggles with religious congregations and the separation between churches and state in 1901 and 1905. The earlier bans, from around 1880, principally affected towns, especially departmental or arrondissement capitals. Most mayors justified their decrees in terms of public order because processions either had caused or threatened to cause

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17 *L'Echo républicain de la Corrèze*, 29 June 1881.
disturbances and because the law permitted them to forbid processions on these grounds. Mayors had two common goals in banning processions on these grounds. First, they wanted to maintain the neutrality of city streets in order to treat all religions equally and to respect freedom of conscience. Second, they hoped to deprive the church of access to the streets in which processions had taken on an increasingly triumphal and spectacular character. The second wave of procession bans in the early twentieth century mainly affected rural communes, and they were primarily motivated by mayors' virulent anticlericalism and their desire to reduce the parish priest's power over the community. Sometimes these mayors intended a genuine rupture with the Church, and their bans on processions were thus more antireligious than anticlerical. This was the case particularly in some regions of the Limousin where religious indifference emerged early on and with particular strength. Thus, the municipal council of Saint-Denis-les-Murs declared in 1901 that processions were a "challenge to common sense and reason." In a colloquium dedicated to violence and the democratic tradition, Michel Lagrée demonstrated the tremendous tension over processions that existed in 1903 across France, particularly in Rennes.

When the authorities forbade processions, reactions were strong and several different positions emerged in the debates surrounding the question of processions:

The Catholics, or rather some Catholics and particularly the clergy, generally acceded to bans and organized their processions inside of churches, but they occasionally tried to circumvent the rules without actually breaking the law.

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19 ADHV, 2V 16.
For instance, they might organize a blessing of the Holy Sacrament in front of the Church—not on public property, but facing the crowd, which would be assembled in the street or a square. They might organize a procession on private property but clearly within sight of nearby streets, or alternately they might conduct a "lay cortege" without religious emblems, songs, or clerical participation but clearly following the traditional processional path. When mayors issued bans in the name of public order, these Catholics might turn his arguments against him, first emphasizing that Catholics had the right to worship outside of churches, that article one of the Concordat recognized that right, and that the authorities were required to ensure that Catholics enjoyed that right. Then they would insist that if public order were threatened, it was not by Catholics who remained strictly within the law but by those who sought to disrupt processions. The authorities, these Catholics maintained, should take action against those who disrupted the processions, not against those who simply exercised their legally recognized rights. Protesting in 1880 against a mayoral decree forbidding processions in Angoulême, the Bishop wrote, "It seems to me that it behooves the authorities not to abdicate their role but rather to protect the rights [of those involved in the procession] and that a firm show of resolution would suffice in a quiet town like ours to prevent any disorder."

21 Mgr. Sebaux, Circulaires de Monseigneur l’évêque d’Angoulême au clergé de son diocèse relative à l’interdiction des processions à Angoulême (Angoulême, 1880).
demonstrations in disguise, that they disturbed public order, or that they violated liberty of conscience and should therefore be forbidden. Further, around 1880 opponents of processions and the Ministry of the Interior and Religion seized hold of the idea that Catholics enjoyed a privilege that the law did not explicitly accord them. Their argument maintained that Catholics benefited from a tolerance that the Concordat of 1801 did not specify, and they called the meaning of the term "public" into question. Until then, the meaning of "public" derived from 1803 ministerial circulars issued by Portalis and Chaptal, Director of Religious Affairs and Minister of the Interior, respectively, that interpreted "public" as giving the Church the right to conduct religious ceremonies outside in the street. Under the Third Republic, that interpretation changed. In June 1879, as a number of mayors began to forbid processions, the Minister of the Interior and of Religion Lepère, responded in the Senate to a senator who reminded him that even where mayors had banned processions, Catholic worship could continue "in an absolutely public fashion." "Are our religious buildings not publicly open to all who wish to profess the Catholic faith?" he asked. In other words, there was no need for Catholic worship to take place out of doors in order to be public because the state placed public buildings at the disposition of the clergy and the faithful so that they could worship peacefully and under the protection of the laws. In 1888 at a moment when processions were at issue in Poitiers, a local republican newspaper, L'Avenir de la Vienne, published an article

23 Journal officiel, 8 June 1879.
under the headline "Liberty": "Catholics, you are free to practice your faith however you see fit in the buildings that belong to you or that the state places at your disposition. Pray, sing, process all you like in your buildings. But give up the idea that we have to attend your ceremonies whether we like it or not because they take place in the streets. If you do that, you will take away from us the right to demonstrate against you."

In the same spirit, several court decisions also around 1880 reduced priests' public disciplinary authority. Up until then, the clergy had had the power to demand signs of respect—for instance, that men remove their hats when a procession passed—from everyone, including those who simply happened to find themselves along a procession route and who watched a procession pass as spectators rather than as worshipers. These decisions limited priests' authority to those people actually in the procession, rather than over the entire public thoroughfare. The amount of public space deemed temporarily "sacred" was steadily reduced.

The role of freethinkers' associations in the debates around processions was crucial. These associations were particularly active in the first years of the twentieth century, and they demanded that processions be restricted to church buildings. If the mayor refused to accede to freethinkers' demands, then they responded by claiming "their share of the street" just like the Catholics, so that they might demonstrate at the same time and along the same route as the procession. Freethinkers' associations were strongly anticlerical and also occasionally antireligious, and they had several goals: not to abandon the street to clergy and to

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those Catholics who, they claimed, wanted to keep the faithful in ignorance and subservience; to respect the liberty of public thoroughfares; and, most important, to encourage mayors to ban processions by threatening the disorderly possibilities of a counter-demonstration. In 1905 the leader of the Freethinkers of West-Central France, Emile Noël, joined a parade of freethinkers that ran parallel to the Corpus Christi procession in Bergerac, which led to blows exchanged between members of the two groups. Noël wrote to the prefect of the Dordogne: "We wanted our part of the street, peacefully and in the name of the Republic because our enemies hate our form of government and because they gain adherents to their cause by the subtle influence they exert on the weak-minded through the arrangement of their processions." Mayors rarely acceded to this sort of pressure since they judged that public order was not really endangered; some anticlerical mayors, however, seized on this pretext to forbid processions in the streets. After several encounters between freethinkers and Catholics, the mayor of Bergerac resolved the issue not by forbidding processions, but by authorizing them: the freethinkers could organize their parade at the same time, but they would have to follow the Catholic procession at a distance of a hundred meters.

Finally, there were those who believed that everyone had the right to express opinions in the street and that religious expression had as much right to the public sphere as political or syndicalist opinion. Georges Clemenceau, former Radical deputy and future senator and premier, for instance, published an article entitled "For Liberty" in the Dépêche de Toulouse in which he responded to a series of

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25 ADD, V 48.
26 Georges Clemenceau, "Pour la liberté," Dépêche de Toulouse, 6 June 1897.
incidents in towns including Versailles, Roubaix, and Saint-Denis where, in spite of an official ban, Catholics had nonetheless attempted to process and had had altercations with police and anticlericals. Clemenceau deplored the authorities' decision to suppress what he called a "right to privilege" (liberté de privilege) rather than allowing all citizens the right to demonstrate. According to him, Catholics enjoyed a "right to privilege;' that is, they were the only ones who could legally occupy the public square. Rather than forbidding Catholics the right to process through the streets, he wanted that right to be extended to all beliefs and all opinions: "It is a strange phenomenon that the bourgeois, allegedly liberal, Republic, not having dared pass a law on the right to public demonstrations for all beliefs, limited itself to suppressing a right to privilege in some locations. . . . I want liberty for everyone." At the same time Maurice Hauriou, an eminent legal scholar and professor in Toulouse, perceptive observer of the administrative jurisprudence of his time, deplored several governmental decisions approving mayoral bans on processions. He declared that these bans could not withstand "the rise of democracy:" "The taste for demonstrations is spreading. In the last few years we have seen student parades (monômes), meetings, protest assemblies. . . . Catholics will soon demand the right to demonstrate their faith, just as socialists demand the right to honor their dead. Since universal repression is impossible, we will have no choice but to accept liberty for all."²⁷

Georges Clemenceau and Maurice Hauriou posed the question of a right to demonstrate from outside of the

Catholic world, sidestepping the argument that Catholics had a right to conduct their processions in the street. They supported these processions but also reduced their importance, equating them to public meetings, socialist pilgrimages to the mur des fédérés in the Père Lachaise cemetery, or to the carnavalesque student parades. Religious beliefs thus became private opinions that, like any other "beliefs," in Clemenceau's terms, might be expressed in the public square. This analysis of religious belief at the end of the nineteenth century leads us to Philippe Boutry's argument that Catholic faith gradually changed its status across the century. Around 1815, Catholicism was "a mentality deeply embedded in the social life and cultural traditions of rural parishes." By the first decades of the Third Republic, it had become "a collection of religious opinions—of beliefs, ideas, and individual behaviors." Twenty-eight Whether or not Catholicism would be able to maintain its monopoly over the streets was a key point in the debate over processions at the end of the nineteenth century.

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Among the diverse arguments in the procession debate, there were in the end just two positions, two conceptions of secularism confronting one another, to borrow the analysis of historian Emile Poulat. Emile Poulat proposes on the one hand a concept of "negative secularism" (laïcité négative) in which everything touching on religion belongs in the private sphere or in space reserved for worship, and the

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state does not take religion into account in any fashion. On the other hand is a concept of "positive secularism" (laïcité positive), which authorizes the expression of religious sentiment in the public sphere and assigns the state the role of maintaining a strict separation between civil and religious authorities and preventing the latter from intervening in the organization of society.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the majority of French people and the majority of Catholics supported the Republic and thereby some form of secularism: "Catholics by universal suffrage," in Littré's turn of phrase. But with regard to processions, they fell in line with a positive secularism. In most communes, processions were not forbidden after 1880 or after 1900, and it is worth recalling here Jules Ferry's assessment, writing to his wife on 4 June 1877 during the Corpus Christi: "I am the elected representative of people who build altars, who support the Republic, but who nonetheless want their processions."30 Ferry was certainly critical of processions and the tone of his letter was supercilious; he was no "homme de processions" in the nineteenth-century phrase. He treated as a joke the "squadrons of the devout, old and young, primping, prepping, prettifying, warbling and swarming all for the greater glory of God." Jules Ferry was a positivist, convinced that religions were fated to disappear, but he recognized popular attachment to religious ceremonies that might be proclamations of faith, occasions of prayer, celebrations, or sumptuous spectacles in which children and women could play important roles. Ferry saw no reason to


confront French Catholics over their beliefs and their religious ceremonies. He preferred to speak of "neutrality" (**neutralité**) rather than "secularism" (**laïcité**), a word full of ambiguity that had been forged in the front lines of the combat between two Frances: a Catholic and conservative France on the one side and a secular and republican France on the other. Neutrality, for Ferry, did not have to extend its rule over the streets because the majority of French citizens wanted their processions.

In 1905, at the time of the separation between churches and state, this positive, open conception of secularism still dominated, and the separation law did not fundamentally change the management of processions in France. The initial draft, proposed in 1904 by Emile Combes, Premier and Minister of Religion, tended toward a negative conception of secularism because it envisaged a general prohibition on public religious processions except for funerals. The second version, composed by his successor Maurice Rouvier, maintained the prohibition but allowed mayors to authorize public processions. The parliamentary commission's reporter, Aristide Briand, had praised this draft for respecting the neutrality of the public thoroughfare and for preventative measures to ensure public order. There were, however, several objections raised in debate. The first objection noted the contradiction between a general ban on processions and article one of the law on separation that guaranteed the free exercise of religion. A second objection insisted that there was "universal consent" to processions throughout the French population. Eventually, article twenty-seven of the law emerged from these debates: "Ceremonies, processions, and other exterior manifestations of worship will continue to be regulated by articles ninety-four and ninety-seven of the law of 5 April 1884." Thus mayors, to whom the 1884 law gave police
powers to maintain public order in large crowds, could continue to forbid processions if they threatened to disturb the peace. As for these external manifestations of worship, the only notable change to the 1801-1802 arrangements was the disappearance of article forty-five of the now abrogated Organic Articles, which had been rarely invoked in the nineteenth century—indeed never under the Third Republic.

On several occasions under the July Monarchy and especially from the late 1870s, mayors had asked the government for general bans on processions so that they would not be called upon to make controversial decisions prohibiting specific processions. The various governments of the period always refused, even when the secular and anticlerical movement was at its strongest. Ultimately, as Charles Dumay, Director of Religious Affairs in 1905, observed in a memo on processions, the government placed its powers in the hands of citizens who, by electing the municipal council that in turn elected the mayor, were free to decide whether or not they wanted processions in their commune.31 The state preferred local arbitration, particularly that of the mayor, to a uniform and national decision; this was a flexible solution that simultaneously preserved freedom of religion and public order, the rights of citizens and the duties of the authorities.

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In the procession question as it erupted at certain tense moments under the July Monarchy or the Third Republic the stakes were varied, and they touched not only on religious questions, but also on political, spiritual, and philosophical ones. Not only religious freedom was at

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issue; the future of institutions, the role of the state in assuring the free exercise of religion, complete liberty of conscience, and public order were all involved as well, and reconciling these competing priorities was difficult, even impossible, given divided opinion on the issues.

The fact that at the end of the nineteenth century some republican leaders opted for tolerance, even for the free expression of all individuals in the public sphere, demonstrates that free speech was the most central aspect of the debates. As Georges Clemenceau said in 1897, Catholics seemed to enjoy a "right to privilege" in conducting their processions in the streets. That privilege, which some republicans contested and which led them into the apparent intolerance of their refusal to allow Catholics access to the streets to worship, ultimately made the issue more political than religious. As the philospher Léon Marillier wrote in 1890 in a work on freedom of conscience, that sort of intolerance is above all political: "The question is not whether or not one will be free to worship God or to follow one's conscience, but rather who will govern."^{32}

translated by Carol E. Harrison