"A Family Beyond Blood": Race, Gender, and Colonialism in  
Action Sociale de la Femme, c. 1914-1940

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In her 1940 biography of Jeanne Chenu, the founder of Women's Social Action (Action sociale de la femme or ASF), member Comtesse de Keranflec'h-Kernezne discussed the immediate context in which Chenu (1861-1939) had founded the ASF. She wrote:

Around 1899, the moment when Mme Chenu decided to find a project to devote herself to, what was going on in France? The years following 1870 had been full of the idea of revenge. . . . The colonial expeditions . . . often poorly understood in France, alas, had thrown a new luster on the humiliated flag of 1870. It was the flourishing of our colonial empire. . . . But, despite these signs of recovery, there were still such concerns and worries! . . . Since the downfall of Marshal MacMahon, religious persecution had assailed Catholics [in France.] . . . More and more, religion was confined to the church. . . . In this atmosphere, grew a malaise, a worry for the future: what would become of the country if our best did not make a vigorous effort to respond?\(^1\)

In 1900, Chenu, a prominent society hostess, did respond,

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\(^1\) Comtesse de Keranflec'h-Kernezne, Madame Chenu: 1861-1939 (Paris: Action sociale de la femme et le livre français, 1940), 8-9. Keranflec'h-Kernezne is sometimes referred to by her maiden name, Simone de Boisboissel.
establishing the ASF in order to create a space for the social education of other like-minded bourgeois women, "to remind [them] of their social duty,"² and to provide an outlet for social action.³ By 1902, the fledgling organization's well-attended lectures moved to a public hall with a seating capacity of 1,000. In this same year, the ASF formally registered as a society with its own secretariat and a monthly bulletin whose goal in part was to create a "family beyond blood" among its many far-flung readers.⁴ By 1904, provincial branches had been established and the ASF functioned as a clearinghouse of information for similar circles in nearly 200 towns. Roughly 5,000 women considered themselves members of the ASF by this time. Early agendas reflected concerns about national culture⁵ and a spiritual, namely Catholic, civil society. Discussions

² Keranflec'h-Kernezne, 11.
³ The ASF defined the "social" in terms of its duties toward society. Although it was a Catholic organization, the ASF provided all types of assistance – educational workshops, nurseries, financial aid – to working-class women of all denominations. In many ways, then, the ASF functioned as an authentic public sphere, in which "private people come together as a public." See Jürgen Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society, trans. Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 27.
⁴ See Action sociale de la femme: Bulletin mensuel, 10 October 1903, 539. Also, note that the ASF secretariat and the ASF Bulletin were to work in tandem to achieve their shared goal of providing for women's social education and social action. While the former was to respond to questions, to circulate announcements, and to "correspond with all who want to learn," the latter was developed to ensure this dialogue could take place on a national and even international level.
⁵ Following Stuart Hall, I focus on the discursive meaning of culture and define it in terms of a set of practices that people use to make sense of the world. Catherine Hall, "Introduction: Thinking the Postcolonial, Thinking the Empire," in Cultures of Empire: A Reader, ed. Catherine Hall (New York: Routledge, 2000), 12.
focused on defining a "proper" French identity embodied in art, literature, and indeed, in "woman" herself. Catholicism was central to the organization's vision; these bourgeois Catholic women believed that France's future well-being required them to do their Christian duty to rectify the moral laxity and decadence of contemporary society.

Keranflec'h-Kernezne's contextualization of the birth of the ASF makes special mention of the "flourishing of the colonial empire." Though it is true that the French empire was expanding in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, mostly in northwestern Africa, it was not until after World War I that the ASF showed any sustained concern for empire. In this regard, Keranflec'h-Kernezne's remarks reflect less a historical context for the group's founding and more the contemporary concerns of the group in the 1920s and 1930s. During this period, debates and discussions about empire, reflecting a broader cultural anxiety about the nation's identity as a global power, consumed French popular consciousness. Keranflec'h-Kernezne's decision to locate empire in the founding story of the ASF suggests how important colonialism had become in the inter-war period as a site through which the ASF women could rework and refigure their identity as Catholic feminist social activists.

In this paper, I argue that the ASF women recognized that France's post-World War I preoccupation with the colonies and colonized peoples presented an opportunity to

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6 It is important to note that elites and upper-class individuals in France had been calling for a recognition of the importance and necessity of colonial expansion since the 1880s. For such classes, colonial expansion would lead to national salvation. However, after World War I, two important shifts occurred: studying and understanding the empire came to interest the broader public, and colonial issues were repeatedly employed to define the French nation.
enact their feminist identity on a grander scale. By defining and sustaining the otherness of the colonized, they could use their work as "custodians of morality" to consolidate their claims to Frenchness while imposing a "proper" society on those people whose differences threatened the ASF's notions of morality and nation. The imperial imaginary was a key site in which the women of the ASF could reimagine not only woman's role in French society, but her duty to reframe the nation as inherently Catholic.

The ASF emerged within the context of and contributed to two overlapping cultural moments: a battle for French

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7 For a more complete discussion of the instability of the colonized's "otherness," see Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, eds., Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

8 Ann Laura Stoler, "Cultivating Bourgeois Bodies and Racial Selves," in Hall, 111; and Antoinette Burton, Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), esp. 43. Although Burton's work discusses the British context in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I think many parallels can be drawn between her project and the present one. Both British and French feminists positioned their respective imperial nations as the most virtuous and civilized in the world. The chief difference lies in the motivations for their projects; whereas the British women's appeal for moral improvement was a secular project employing religious rhetoric, the French women I am discussing made their religious belief fundamental to their project.

9 As Ferdinand Brunetière, a member of the French Academy and a principal ASF collaborator, wrote "everything we do, everything that we allow to be done against Catholicism, we allow to be done . . . to the detriment of our influence in the world, against the grain of our history and at the expense of the qualities which are those of the 'French soul.'" Quoted in Jeremy Jennings, "The Clash of Ideas: Political Thought, Intellectuals and the Meanings of 'France,' 1890-1945," in French History Since Napoleon, ed. Martin S. Alexander (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 209.
identity between the "two Frances" – one Catholic and conservative and the other republican and anticlerical – and an international Catholic program for social reform known as social Catholicism. Conflict between the two Frances sharpened in the context of debates about the separation of Church and state, which was finally achieved in 1905. Although the nation's large Catholic population argued that Catholicism was France's "inescapable destiny," others privileged individual rights and the memory of 1789 in defining the nation. To them, "Frenchness" was premised upon the liberal democratic tradition and individual rights rhetoric of the French Revolution; religion no longer had any connection to the state.

The nation was not the only social edifice under attack in the early twentieth century. Faced with the combined threats of anticlericalism, increasing secularization, and the dilemma of the "social question," the Catholic Church had responded with the doctrine of social Catholicism that urged followers to identify and eliminate the causes of social injustice. Although all Catholics were called to participate, women were nonetheless reminded that their proper place remained in the home. Thus, for Catholic

10 For a more in-depth discussion of the competing notions of the French nation, see Jennings, 203.
women eager to take part, the domestic realm of home and motherhood was the only acceptable site for their energies.

The ASF forged a hybrid and tenuous position in the interstices of these two moments. They carved out a vision of "Frenchness" that was definitely Catholic but still steeped in the rhetoric of individual rights. Although initially ASF women had framed their concerns in the context of home and family, they increasingly recognized their actions in maintaining and improving the home as inherently political. Operating "not only as wives and mothers," they pursued their goals of being recognized as individuals and of enhancing social wellness in the larger public sphere.

Moreover, the group pushed the bounds of social Catholicism by negotiating the boundary between women's religious belief and political action. Although members of the ASF originally resisted the designation "feminist," they ultimately founded one of the largest women's organizations in France and spearheaded campaigns for women's enfranchisement in France after World War I. Conversations with the great-granddaughter of founder Jeanne Chenu have further convinced me of the group's feminism.

My argument here is premised upon Joan Scott's discussion of politics. While initially the women of the ASF viewed politics in terms

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In the context of these events, race emerged as part of the discourse in the *ASF Bulletin* through discussions of the superiority of the "French race." Articles and recommended readings emphasized the preservation of the "French race," often elided with the "French nation." In the ASF's interwar treatment of immigration and colonialism, "race" was premised on particular cultural notions of religion and civilization, of which color functioned as a convenient marker. Furthermore, although France suggested it was possible for immigrants to become French, this was disingenuous: really only other Europeans were suitable candidates for citizenship.

Although in this essay I only consider two moments in the ASF's discussion of empire, I want to stress the extent of their engagement with this issue, as evidenced by the sheer number of meetings convened, literary and academic books reviewed, and articles published on the topic of attempting to gain recognition or participation in a government, they came to realize that politics was really more a process through which power and knowledge were mobilized to create and sustain identities. See Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 5, 57.


colonialism in the 1920s and 1930s. The immigration issue did not appear significantly in the Bulletin until after World War I when the journal reproduced two extensive lectures on the subject, one a joint lecture by V. Bucaillle and Mgr Chaptal, the other by Jeanne Chenu. Both talks were shot through with an implicit discourse on the desirability of various immigrants according to racialized criteria. But for Chenu, immigration offered an opportunity to emphasize once again the particular aptitudes—and therefore authority—of her gender.

On 10 February 1925, V. Bucaillle and Mgr Chaptal, auxiliary bishop of Paris, gave a joint lecture to the ASF entitled "Immigration in France: What We Can Do, What Remains to Be Done." Citing the growing number of

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17 See the following issues of ASF Bulletin, Jan. 1922, 14; Apr. 1922, 87-8; June 1922, 140; Jan. 1924, 14; Apr. 1925, 72-8; May 1925, 108-10; Jan. 1934, 64; Feb. 1934, 110; July-Aug. 1938, 112; Mar.-Apr. 1939, 58; and July-Aug. 1939, 192. Articles included essays that discussed the special merits of female doctors in North Africa and others that urged French colonial settlers to model a proper and moral Christian life for their indigenous housekeepers. See ASF Bulletin, Jan. 1934, 64-5; and Jan. 1934, 67. Even as they detailed events in the colonies for their readers, several leaders of the ASF, including Chenu and Keranflec'h-Kernezne, traveled to these sites themselves in order to gain first-hand knowledge of the colonial experience. See ASF Bulletin, Apr. 1925, 73 and Mar.-Apr. 1939, 55. Chenu's trip came about when she accompanied her husband, Charles Chenu, on a fact-finding mission to Syria. Keranflec'h-Kernezne's tour of French colonial possessions was made possible by Mme Robert Cottin, who invited several members of the ASF to tour with her because she recognized their need for a comprehensive knowledge of the colonial situation.


20 ASF Bulletin, Mar. 1925, 47-53. The Cercle Vaneau, to whom
foreign laborers in France and the "bloody incidents" that sometimes occurred between pockets of foreigners and French nationals, Buaille urged his listeners to consider carefully the social and juridical problems posed by immigration. Arguing that foreign workers did not always benefit the economy, he called for the formation of commissions with European nations to set intra-European immigration limits. Significantly, he did not recommend similar commissions to control immigration from non-European nations or French colonies; this silence suggests that he viewed such immigration as temporary and undesirable.

In his lecture emphasizing the importance of adopting a policy that encouraged familial immigration by Europeans, Chaptal readily acknowledged its transformative potential, especially for the French Catholic Church. Because most of these immigrants would be Catholic, their eventual development into fellow "Frenchmen" would strengthen the potential political power of the Church.

Chenu articulated many of these same concerns in an essay entitled "Emigration and Immigration," published in the Bulletin in March 1926, and she appealed directly to the lecture was delivered, was a literary and artistic circle of the ASF that was created on 5 Dec. 1922. The fact that this group, ostensibly not "a study circle," chose to listen to a lecture on immigration suggests how increasingly politicized the women of the ASF had become. See ASF Bulletin, Jan. 1923, 231.

22 For a discussion of the virtues of family immigration in the pronatalist press, see Camiscioli.
23 For an examination of the relationship between the Church and politics during this time, see Kay Chadwick, Catholicism, Politics and Society in Twentieth-Century France (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000).
women readers in a way that Bucaille and Chaptal had not.
Noting that countries "want to preserve the language, race, and religion" of their citizens living abroad, she realized that this foreign presence could be problematic for a nation with low birth rates; it could even lead to "colonization" of the under-populated nation by the stronger one. Like Chaptal, she stressed the religious needs of immigrants. Arguing that the Church needed to seek a "just solution" to the immigrant question, Chenu emphasized the importance of priests accompanying their nation's emigrants to foreign lands so as to circumvent initial language and cultural difficulties.  

Although I contend that Chenu's emphasis on "justice" for immigrants emerged from her own marginalized location in the social Catholic movement, she still elided Frenchness with Catholicism. She never addressed the possibility that immigrants might not be Catholic and might not wish to become so. Even though she acknowledged most countries' desire for their emigrants to retain their language and religion, she proposed a program to "make good Frenchmen of these foreigners who might not return to their country." She underscored the role of Catholic school education in this process: religious and language training would help "diminish the immigrant children's prejudices against the [French] nation." Encouraging her fellow social activists to welcome foreigners into their religious, study, and sport organizations, she concluded, "In allowing [foreigners] to create circles where their liberties are respected but where the means of becoming French are available, naturalization will occur imperceptibly in 2 or 3 generations." Once they had been indoctrinated into the "benefits" of the French nation, Chenu believed that most

25 Ibid., 46.
foreigners would willingly become French and, by extension, Catholic.

Chenu also developed an "emigration policy" that applied to French persons in foreign countries or in the colonies. To protect their "Frenchness," such individuals were to form libraries and reading groups, to become involved in French Catholic social action programs, and to remain informed about their homeland through the French press. Once again, the French nation is privileged over all others; Chenu did not acknowledge the possibility that French individuals abroad would grow to identify with their new nations. More important, however, was the implicit notion that while French people might remain in the colonies, the people of the colonies could not remain in France. In her discussion of the politics of immigration, Chenu noted that various factors made the program apply differently to different races. Her failure to discuss the possibility of colonial peoples moving to France implied that they were not meant to be there. Her concluding exhortation to French women further illustrated this belief that only certain people could become French: "Understand your duty, if you do not want the uncontrollable and unassimilable foreigner to invade your country."\(^{26}\) That some might not be able to become naturalized French citizens belied her earlier definition of Frenchness as an accessible cultural position.

The ASF's racialized discussions of immigration are an example of the group's attempts not only to examine issues that engaged the larger French community, but also to define its own approach to these issues within the context of social Catholicism.\(^{27}\) Acting within a larger French

\(^{26}\) Ibid., 47.

\(^{27}\) Although I define the ASF's position in terms of the lectures and opinions of the members of its head committee, I realize they might not
society that accused women of becoming "masculinized" and abandoning their duties of "social citizenship" in the name of economic and sexual independence, the ASF women redoubled their efforts to combat social ills. In so doing, they also sought ways to assert that their place in the public sphere – as threatening as it might be to a traditional view of gender order – was intimately linked to the preservation of French culture. Because colonialism threatened their vision of Frenchness, the ASF women recognized the immigration issue as an occasion to join their voices with other conservative critics in French society and to forward their Catholic version of national identity.

Although the earliest discussions of colonies in the ASF Bulletin centered on the economic and cultural benefits that France derived from colonial holdings, by the mid-1920s the Bulletin had shifted its focus to illuminate the social and cultural advantages that the colonies derived from French intervention. In stressing the moral imperative guiding French colonial policies, ASF speakers were locating the colonies within the domain of social Catholic doctrine. It was their duty as good social Catholics to introduce indigenes to Catholicism.

To the ASF women, the colonies represented a site in which they could combine their mission to Christianize with their political mission to define Frenchness in terms of Catholicism. In this section, I compare two lectures, one offered by Charles Chenu, a lawyer and husband of the ASF's founder, and the other delivered by the Comtesse de
Keranflec'h-Kernezne. Much like Jeanne Chenu's earlier piece on immigration, Keranflec'h-Kernezne's talk represented another step in the process of extending women's authority, in this case to the issue of colonialism and national identity.

In his lecture on Syria, given on 9 December 1924, Charles Chenu emphasized the significance of colonial issues for the ASF. Tracing the "diverse and disparate" phases of Syrian history, Chenu noted that the one continuity had been the ever-present "[French] influence." Although the peoples of the East strongly believed that Europeans were not interested in their welfare, only their lands, Chenu argued that French efforts in the 1920s to restore peace in the Middle East served as evidence of France's good intentions. He chastised the Syrians further: "The ungrateful people do not even realize that our main goal is to see them benefit from the most cherished of our western truths, universal suffrage."

One of the goals of Chenu's lecture was to emphasize the French duty to "educate" the Syrian nation. By foregrounding this point, Chenu suggested that larger forces, not those of self-interest, had compelled the nation's involvement in the Middle East. Although Chenu concluded that the French nation state had only a secular interest there, his discussion of religion suggested

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30 Ibid., 80.
otherwise. Noting that during his visit he had been informed that "Christians would be massacred if France withdrew," Chenu suggested that France's presence in Syria was necessary to maintain peace among the various religions. Chenu's conclusion that "we do not want to destroy the Orient but rather we want to bring it progress" implied that only the West knew true progress.\textsuperscript{31}

In May 1925 the ASF held a "women's social action day" (\textit{journée sociale féminine}) on "The Perils of Christian Civilization: The Crisis of the Western Mind and the Asiatic Danger," and Keranflec'h-Kernezné lectured on "The Intellectual Peril." Whereas Charles Chenu's piece had examined economic and moral motivations for French colonial involvement, Keranflec'h-Kernezné discussed threats to European hegemony. Arguing that Europe had been occupied with reforming the "Asiatic races" since the second half of the nineteenth century, she stated, quoting René Grousset, "Through rail and literature, through commerce and cannon, we have given them material civilization, economic tools, aspirations and needs, and the power and means of action to fulfill those needs."\textsuperscript{32} Implicit in this laundry list of "improvements" was the notion that the East had gained economically, socially, and culturally from the West. While Keranflec'h-Kernezné's piece echoed Charles Chenu's in this regard, she did caution her readers to be aware of their privileged position as purveyors of culture and to consider the reaction their presence could

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 75.

\textsuperscript{32} \textit{ASF Bulletin}, May 1925, 108. Although it is not certain that Keranflec'h-Kernezné's lecture was intended as a response to C. Chenu's piece, she would have been familiar with his work. Moreover, the two essays appeared in neighboring issues, so any reader would have noticed their juxtaposition.
provoke.\textsuperscript{33} Such restraint was not evident in Chenu's piece.

In seeking to establish a connection between the East and West, Keranflec'h-Kernezne argued that "Christian Europe does not, \textit{a priori}, despise the contribution of Asia."\textsuperscript{34} Noting that commonalities existed between Christianity and Islam, Keranflec'h-Kernezne suggested that Western peoples could appreciate the artistic and philosophical traditions of the East without necessarily subscribing to their entire doctrine.\textsuperscript{35} In a discussion of literature, Keranflec'h-Kernezne praised writers who could convey impressions of other races without "altering their characters with false consciences" or misrepresenting their doctrines.\textsuperscript{36} Moreover, she believed that by overemphasizing its superiority, French culture too often taught the colonized to hate France.

As these words reveal, Keranflec'h-Kernezne was part of a growing public that recognized the dangers of imposing Western culture on the East – a public that did not include Charles Chenu. I would argue that her own marginalized position in French society made her more interested in drawing attention to France's problematic interactions with other marginalized groups; in contrast, Chenu's interest in the legal realm revealed itself in his emphasis on economic and supposed philanthropic motivations for colonial involvement. In her conclusion, however, Keranflec'h-Kernezne limited the progressive potential of her essay. Even she was unable to move

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 103.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 106.
\textsuperscript{35} Here and in other writings her nods to the intellectual traditions of colonial peoples always referred to the "yellow" race of Asia and not the "black" race of Africa. This leads me to posit that the ASF women understood the intelligence and potentialities of different races in hierarchical terms.
\textsuperscript{36} \textit{ASF Bulletin}, May 1925, 107.
beyond her upper-middle-class Catholic sensibilities. Consider her words: "The sole means the people of Europe have of civilizing Asia and Africa without danger for themselves is to Christianize them."\(^{37}\) In closing her argument with a discussion of missionaries, Keranflec'h-Kernezne articulated a position entrenched in Catholic social doctrine.\(^{38}\) Despite her gestures toward an appreciation for different cultures, she still believed in the necessity of Christianization. Yet the very structure of her argument, with its constant call for the reader's sensitivity to the merits of Eastern civilization, suggests a slippage in her position toward the colonies.

In this paper, I have attempted to unravel the connections between nation, Catholic feminism, and colonialism as they played out in post-World War I France. Like many other organizations in early twentieth-century France, the ASF was interested in identifying ways in which its members could fulfill their patriotic duty and bolster national sentiment among the "French race." However, while other groups defined Frenchness in terms of language and a superior culture premised upon individual rights ideology, the women of the ASF argued it was also predicated upon a Catholic identity. Throughout their discussions of race, immigration, and colonialism, the women of the ASF evidenced an awareness of the dangers of imposing Western ideas upon the East. This appreciation of non-European culture, however limited, reflected the ASF women's awareness of their connection to the non-European. By their very natures – the ASF woman because of gender and the non-European because of race – neither

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 110.

\(^{38}\) Even if missionaries did not win converts, they still "taught and civilized people to respect human life, the weak, women, and children." Ibid., 111.
could ever reach the cultural or political achievements of the white male. \(^{39}\)

On the eve of World War II, colonial sympathizers, much like their predecessors at the threshold of World War I, avowed that France, given her wealth, soldiers, and prestige, would find "salvation in the empire." \(^{40}\) Anti-colonialists disagreed, arguing that Germany, Italy, and Japan were interested in French possessions and were growing strong enough to attack. The women of the ASF did not address this debate; in the face of escalating international tension, the \textit{ASF Bulletin} greatly reduced its production size and turned toward reproducing bibliographies on intellectual and cultural themes. However, it was evident that, nearly twenty years earlier, the empire had been, if not the site of their salvation, then an opportunity for their rejuvenation. Not only did it offer them the opportunity to assert their special role in society as purveyors of culture and guarantors of morality, but it also enabled them to redefine Frenchness in terms of Catholicism. That these women relied on problematic constructions of race and identity in order to assert their right to offer a vision for the French nation underscores their complicity in the colonial project, even as they were able to negotiate a new space for themselves within French public discourse.

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\(^{39}\) de Groot, 43.