The Murder of Anne Durif: Local Religious Politics in the French Revolution

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On the 15 June 1797 in the quiet farming commune of Tallende in Puy-de-Dôme, Etienne Chabozi led his wife, Anne Durif, who was six months pregnant with their first child, into their barn where he forced the handle of a pitchfork into her vagina. According to the testimony of a local doctor and a midwife, this action caused the stillbirth of the child and the death of Anne several days later. The murder became a source of local and national scandal not just for the gruesome nature of the attack but because Anne Durif was a former nun. Bringing to the fore continued controversies surrounding the refractory clergy and the compatibility of Catholic worship with revolutionary reform, the case generated discussions about the national and local politics of religion in Revolutionary France. As a pregnant married nun, Anne represented the ideals of revolutionary philosophy that promoted companionsate marriage, women's productive role nurturing future patriots, and opposed the abuses of the Catholic Church. An anonymous patriot implicated refractory priests in her death, rallying public opinion against religious tolerance. For supporters of the Revolution, her gruesome death exemplified the brutality of the forces of superstition and counterrevolution that opposed the Republic and the Enlightenment of the French people. For the people of her community, her death was nothing more than an atrocious domestic dispute. These two different explanations of the same event exposed the profound rift that divided opinions about dechristianization, the role of the Catholic Church, and clerical marriages following the Terror.

The French Revolution occasioned vast, controversial changes in the religious structure of France. The Civil Constitution of the Clergy in 1790 rationalized ecclesiastical hierarchy, appropriated Church property and transformed priests into public functionaries elected by their communities. The moment in 1791 when priests were called upon to swear an oath to uphold this controversial document has been called one of the most pivotal moments of the Revolution.1 It marked the end of the early honeymoon period of patriotic

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cooperation and precipitated political cleavages in French society that would result in civil war, religious schism, and violently radicalized opinions towards the Revolution. The question of the oath created a division between priests who supported the Civil Constitution and swore to uphold it, jurors, and the refractory priests who considered the Revolutionary Church schismatic and insupportable. The polarization of the nation around these issues led to the persecution of refractory priests who quickly became linked – both in the public conscience and in reality – to the forces of Counter-Revolution inside and outside France.

The closure of monasteries and the dispersal of monks and nuns was a key aspect in revolutionary religious reforms. The removal of marriage and birth records from the hands of parish priests to the civil authorities then paved the way for civil marriage and divorce. Throughout the revolutionary period many former members of the clergy married. Most recently, Xavier Maréchaux estimated that the actual number of the male clergy who married could not have been more than 6,000 or perhaps 20% of the male clergy. The number of married nuns, slightly over 500 documented to date, reflects an even smaller proportion of the 55,000 nuns of France in 1790. Despite the diminutive numbers, the marriages of former monks, nuns, and priests represented a definitive break with the values and religious culture of the Old Regime.

After the Concordat of 1801, recognizing that many former clergy members had strayed from Church discipline during the Revolutionary decade, Pope Pius VII made an unprecedented decision in the history of the Catholic Church. Provided the clergy members involved made a full confession and expressed remorse for their actions, the Church would legitimize illicit marriages contracted during the Revolution. The Pope conferred on his legate to France, Cardinal Caprara, extraordinary powers to rehabilitate the marriages of the regular and secular clergy in the hope of bringing as many clergy members as possible back to the Church. Between 1802 and 1808 Caprara received more than 3,500 petitions on the subject of the clergy's marriages, 396 originating from

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married nuns. Some of the more detailed letters to Cardinal Caprara, often written in the form of a confession, provided unique insights into women's experiences of entering a convent in the Old Regime, as well as their attitudes toward the Revolution, sexuality, and interpretations of religious responsibilities. Underlining the difficult position of single women in the eighteenth century, former nuns' petitions to Cardinal Caprara most often explained their marriages as a practical response to the need for financial stability and the desire to belong to a community after the dissolution of convents. Nuns themselves had more limited prospects upon leaving their convents than their male counterparts, many of whom successfully adapted to secular life as teachers, notaries, and mayors. Although provided a civil pension, former nuns found it difficult to live on this meager and often erratically paid income. Some went back to families unhappy to see daughters, who had often already been provided with large religious dowries, return from "civil death" to share inheritances and scarce resources.

While the motivations behind the clergy's marriages were complex and varied, the large numbers of nuptials that took place during the Terror suggested that persecution encouraged former clergy members to contract marriages in order to escape suspicion, prison, and the guillotine. However, according to a detailed study of the letters to Cardinal Caprara over half of the nuns who married did so for love, inclination, or financial stability. Similarly we can deduce that Anne Durif's marriage, contracted in 1795, was not connected to the Terror.

Unfortunately, no such personal documents offer insight into Anne's background, attitudes, or motivations. The court transcripts of the investigation of her murder focused more closely on material evidence and hearsay rather than developing a picture of her character. However, an anonymous letter writer from the vicinity of Tallende, provided some information on Anne's background that allows for a comparison with other

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7 My Ph.D. dissertation in progress, "Married Nuns in the French Revolution," further discusses the importance of married nuns and the motivations behind their marriages. Not all nuns writing to Cardinal Caprara explained why they married. This information was included in only 175 petitions. Of these, 42 of those cited economic hardship or the lack of resources as the reason for their marriages.
married nuns. He wrote that Anne, ten or twelve years prior to 1797, had used all of her resources to pay for her dowry as a choir sister in St. Amant, suggesting that she had no family to help her. At the closure of her monastery she was reduced to living on a pension of 600 livres, which proved to be insufficient to support herself. According to the author in 1795, in order to secure a position in the world “and without any talent to gain her living,” Anne convinced a young farmer from Tallende – Etienne Chabozi – that her pension and an expected inheritance could elevate his social status. Although Chabozi was twenty years her junior, the couple married and lived happily for eighteen months “in mutual affection.”

According to this account, sociologically, Anne Durif resembled other married nuns. At the time of the national census of convents and monasteries in 1790, the average age of French nuns was 48. At this time, Anne would have been in her mid-forties. Having joined the convent 10 or 12 years prior to 1797 she would have also been among the growing numbers of French nuns who entered the convent relatively late in life. In general, married nuns were younger than the average, reflecting their greater need for the protection of marriage and perhaps the greater ease of their insertion into secular life after fewer years of monastic routine. In her forties at the time of her marriage, Anne was part of sizable contingent of nuns between the ages of 25-50 who married. In his study of nuns in Poitou, Gwénaël Murphy found that 22 percent of nuns in this age group married, making marriage an important survival strategy for this segment of the population of former convents. Also, as the youngest members of the religious society of the Old Regime, these women were most likely to live longer, making the marriage of clergy members one of the most enduring legacies of Revolutionary dechristianization. Moreover, like Anne, these women were more likely to become pregnant, rendering this legacy all the more significant.

At the time of the murder in 1797, religious tension characterized the national and local environment despite the end of the official Terror and the institution of the more moderate Directory. While the Directory had ended the most repressive policies of the Terror, the regime remained highly anticlerical and reiterated decrees threatening refractory priests with deportation and the

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9 Ibid.
11 Ibid., 394.
12 From my sample of married nuns in the French Revolution, the median age of nuns who went on to marry in 1792 was 28. Gwénaël Murphy similarly discusses the youth of nuns who married. See, Murphy, “Les religieuses mariées.”
guillotine. The Constitution promised religious freedom, and the Directory supported refractory priests’ rights to worship, provided that their political opinions supported the Republic. However, the relationship between refractory priests, royalists, and even counterrevolution continued to pose problems in implementing religious toleration. The election of moderate and royalist deputies, more sensitive to the plight of the clergy, ushered in a brief period of leniency from 1796 to 1797 when Minister of the Police, Cochon de Lapparent, advised local officials not to disturb quiet priests.13 Nationally, isolated outcroppings of popular support for the refractory clergy revived traditional celebrations. Yet many churches, now owned by the state, remained closed and many of the faithful still found the shadow of the Terror too dark to publicly rekindle their relationship with the Church. Certain anticlerical areas, especially in the Parisian Basin, remained openly hostile to Christianity and continued policies of active dechristianization.14

Some areas of the Puy-de-Dôme showed the signs of a slow decline in religious fervor characteristic of the eighteenth century, as well as signs of active support for the Revolutionary policies of dechristianization. The attitude of the population of this department provides a fitting parallel to the larger religious divisions in France.15 In 1791, 48% of the clergy of this department took the oath to the Civil Constitution, approximately the same as the overall national rate of jurors.16 The district of Clermont-Ferrand, which included Tallende, remained more lenient than other areas of this deeply divided department in enforcing laws curtailing refractory priests and imposing restrictions on public religious worship. Yet during the Terror, the district indiscriminately arrested priests, even jurors, who threatened public order.17 It is likely that Tallende, like most French communes, lived through the Terror without public signs of worship.18

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14 Vovelle, *Religion et révolution*.
Despite the continued dangers, some refectory priests profited from the authorities' permissive attitude and the changing political fortunes of moderates and royalists under the Directory to return from exile and hiding to retake their parishes. In the spring of 1797 Tallende's church was open and refractory priests held mass to overflowing crowds. On the Saturday before Easter, Anne and her husband attended a mass performed by a refractory priest. During the ceremony, according to the account of one witness, the priest suddenly stopped when he noticed the couple's presence and refused to continue with the “antichrist” present. A group of women physically attacked Anne and forced her from the church. The author wrote, they would have “torn her to pieces” had another woman not protected her.

Like many other married nuns, Anne, most likely had not intended to sever her ties with the Catholic Church by marrying. The letters to Cardinal Caprara emphasized that many former nuns cherished their relationship with the Church and eagerly sought to reconcile themselves when presented with the opportunity. Anne Durif, like many of the other women in Tallende, had an appetite for religion that had been repressed during the Terror. Pregnant and mistreated at home, she probably needed the solace that the old rituals offered her. The women who chased her out of the church, however, played an important role in reinforcing religious order in the absence of traditional hierarchical structures. The priests had no power to punish Anne for her breach of ecclesiastical discipline, but the women of the town took the initiative and symbolically excommunicated her by denying her access to the church.

This anecdote supports studies that have shown that women in the Old Regime and Revolution were among the most enthusiastic supporters of the Catholic Church, and engaged in civil disobedience to protect their rites and priests. Women were especially active in religious politics in the period following the Terror, enforcing their desire to return to traditional religious celebration and filling gaps left by the destruction of ecclesiastical hierarchy. Exploiting their particular status that did not hold them accountable for their actions, the women of Tallende – like women across rural France – deployed traditional violence to punish deviant behavior. Anne, as a pregnant former nun, provided a target for protests against Revolutionary religious interference.

A few months after the Easter incident, local police officials were called to the Chabozi home to find Anne on her deathbed, surround by her husband's family. According to the statement made to the justice of the peace and the health officer on 15 June, Chabozi claimed that he had arrived late to church that

20 Desan, Reclaiming the Sacred.
21 Aston, Religion and Revolution in France.
day. He stood behind the sacristy until the end of the ceremony. Then, he came home and looked after his animals before discovering his wife’s accident. In this interview, he stated that his wife told him that she had fallen on the pitchfork in the barn while collecting laundry. Not finding evidence to support this story, nor a pitchfork in the barn, the officials questioned the family and were shown a wooden baton with no blood or other signs of having been involved in the accident.

The officials also questioned Anne Durif that day. She stated that she had been alone in the barn when she fell on a pitchfork standing near the ladder. She asserted that she had not called for help and had managed to get back to the house and into bed by herself. No one in the community, it seems, believed this story, and the judge certainly did not. Chabozi was arrested and in the subsequent trial in July of that year departmental police officials interviewed twenty-seven witnesses.22

According to these interviews, in the period before the police arrived, the Chabozi household reacted to Etienne’s crime and struggled to get their story straight in order to protect him. Witnesses testified that on the afternoon of the attack they had arrived at the Chabozi home to find Etienne at his wife’s bedside in a desperate state, threatening to kill her. Anne herself cried out to her husband’s sister and brother-in-law to help her. Antionette Girodon, a neighbor and relative, overheard an exchange between Anne and her husband in which she called him “Judas” and said that he was “an executioner…and she had not deserved it.” Anne told her husband if he had not wanted a child he should not have made one. Chabozi denied that he had hurt her and denied that he had impregnated her. His younger sister shouted that she would no longer stay in “this house with the devil!” His mother, Marguerite Brun, was heard to reprimand him that he should have gone to mass and lived peacefully, before suggesting that he should flee.

Anne Jasselin, a neighbor, claimed that she had seen Marguerite Brun approach Anne in a coercive way prior to the police’s arrival. Another witness, Antoinette Monestier, also heard Marguerite say that he “gave her what she wanted by forcing the baton in her belly,” suggesting, perhaps, that Anne had encouraged her husband to attack her in order to provoke an abortion.23 Others confirmed that before her death, Anne had told them that her husband and not a fall had caused her injuries.

Jean Coudert, a close neighbor, testified that he invited Chabozi to attend mass with him that day, an invitation that he refused. According to Coudert and

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22 “Procédure criminelle contre Etienne Chabozi,” dossier 29 and dossier 1265, carton 69, series U TRA, Archives Départementales Puy de Dome, Clermont-Ferrand. The following quotations come from these documents.

23 “il la contente en luy enforçant un baton dans sa ventre.”

Proceedings of the Western Society for French History
other witnesses, the day that Chabozi attacked his wife, Corpus-Christi, the church was so full that many members of the congregation were forced to stand. Yet no one saw Chabozi there. On returning from mass, Coudert heard Chabozi, yelling at his wife in the barn. He called her “bougresse” (bitch) and “putin” (whore), then Coudert heard a loud blow and the victim’s cries. Later, meeting Henry David, brother-in-law of the accused, he asked if Chabozi had really killed his wife. “It’s only too true,” David responded. Presaging questions of accomplices and motivations, he emphasized, “but no one told him to do it.”

The community seemed united in presenting the motivation for the attack as purely domestic; Chabozi had been mistreating his wife since it became clear that she was no longer going to receive a large inheritance. In the official investigation not a single witness mentioned that Anne was a married nun or told the authorities what had happened at church. Only the previously cited anonymous letter to the Minister of the Interior exposed the possibility of religious motive. The author recounted the violent confrontation at the church between the women and Anne on Easter Saturday, blaming refractory priests, “who have made fanatics out of everyone in this commune.” He wrote that, “these ferocious priests seeing how well the people served their malice, renewed their scheme last Thursday.” That day, once again perceiving Chabozi and his wife among the faithful waiting to hear mass, the priest knelt and prayed at the altar. When told that all of the people were waiting, the priest responded loudly that he could not continue with the antichrist in the church. According to the account

This response echoed in the church and the badly indoctrinated people, believing to serve their God, by a fanatic act chased the husband and wife from the church. The poor husband seeing himself the object of the his fellow citizens’ execration and having been previously counseled by these priests to send his wife away on the pretext that their marriage was only an abominable concubinage in the eyes of God, gave himself over to brutality.

Relating the confrontation at the church directly to the attack exposed a convincing motive for the murder and implicated the priests in Chabozi’s his crime as well. The suggestions by official witnesses, that Chabozi was angry about money and possible infidelity, failed to explain why the attack so violently targeted the unborn child. Breaking with village solidarity, the letter-writer revealed that Chabozi had been ostracized from his community and told that his child was the antichrist. According to this version of events, this led Chabozi to

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take desperate action to obliterate his error and regain his place in society. The "poor husband," a young and ignorant farmer, relied on his priest for guidance and sound advice. Ultimately, by encouraging superstition and sowing discord among his parishioners, the author claimed that the priest provoked a horrendous murder and proved himself the enemy of Revolutionary values and law and order.

Explaining why he preferred to remain anonymous, as well as the reluctance of the witnesses to tell the full story, the correspondent wrote:

The Justice of the Peace (le juge de paix) has arrested the criminal but I believe that no one wants to speak the truth as these priests have spoiled the public consciousness, and it perhaps would not be too prudent for the witnesses to speak against their ministers, and I myself who has the honor to address you cannot dare sign my name to this letter, because I would be almost sure to perish in this commune where everyone hates patriots.

The commentator, a clandestine patriot, underscored the political power of the priest in his community to intimidate the people and turn them against the Republic and its laws. This accusation supported Revolutionary fears that priests, royalists, and other enemies of the Republic sought to exploit the people's superstition and ignorance in order to foment political unrest and undermine the government.

A republican journal with a fairly wide readership, L'Ami des Lois, brought national attention to the gruesome crime while politicizing the role refractory priests may have played in inspiring the attack. The paper reported that Chabozi was heard to say, “his marriage was a sacrilege and his wife should be burned in the public square” in the days before the murder.26 A woodblock print entitled Horrible Murder happened in the town of Tallendre, commune of Monton, in Auvergne, committed by a fanatic: who disemboweled his wife with a pitchfork and ripped from her the child with which she was six months pregnant by the instigation of a refractory priest, is divided in two equal scenes, one depicting Anne’s denunciation in church and the other Chabozi’s crime.27 The first image shows Anne crying in church as the priest casts her out. Her husband and the other parishioners recoil from her as she runs away. The second image – the one of the attack – depicts Anne bound to a ladder as her husband stabs her in

27 Grand assassinat arrivée dans le bourg de Talendre[sic]; commune de Monton en Auvergne, commis par un fanatique: qui a evantré sa femme à coup de fourche, et lui à arraché l’enfant dont elle était en seinte de six mois; par la solicitation d’un prêtre refractaire (Paris: chez Fleuret, 1797).
the stomach with a pitchfork. Recalling popular portrayals of Revolutionary martyrs, she stoically receives her deathblow.

Graphic descriptions of the crime emphasized Chabozi’s religious beliefs and underlined the role of the bad priest. A song about the event was even created with the title, “Complaint against a horrible assassination committed by a fanatic who disemboweled his pregnant wife at the instigation of bad priests." In the song Anne is portrayed as an innocent victim who had lived with her husband in marital bliss – as good revolutionary women were expected to do – until the meddling of a refractory priest with “bloody designs.” The confrontation between Anne and the “bad” priest provided an allegory for counter-revolutionary attacks on the Revolution. From the Republican vantage point, the moral of the story was clear: fanaticism and refractory priests undermined the values of the Revolution and endangered Revolutionary society.

In the official criminal investigation, however, no priest was ever questioned. Not one witness mentioned confrontations at the church, or the priests calling her unborn child the antichrist. They all denied Chabozi’s alibi that he was at church that day. In short, all accounts of the attack originating from the investigation deemphasized the Church and any way in which Anne’s status as a married nun may have contributed to the murder. In fact, even Chabozi’s brother-in-law was careful to tell his neighbors that “no one told him to” murder his wife or attack their child. The officials kept the investigation focused squarely on the murderer himself despite the fact that elsewhere in France priests were locked up and interrogated on much smaller pretense. If this had happened in another district, even in the more radical commune of Montaigut less than twenty miles away, the priests in question likely would have faced the guillotine along with the actual murderer. If the inhabitants of Tallende were anxious to protect their priests, the authorities in this case were also unwilling to encourage religious strife.

In the end, on one point all accounts agreed: that Chabozi had cruelly attacked his wife in order to provoke an abortion. In August 1797, the criminal tribune of Puy-de-Dôme found him guilty and immediately sent him to the guillotine. The lenient treatment of priests would end in September with the coup of 18 Fructidor and the ousting of royalist deputies sympathetic to the refractory position. A small second Terror followed, again driving refractory priests back into hiding with threats of imprisonment, deportation, and the guillotine. At this

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time marriages of priests and nuns also increased slightly.\textsuperscript{30} The Concordat of 1801, which reconciled the Constitutional Church with Rome, officially ended the antagonism between constitutional and refractory priests. However, the religious divisions created by the Revolution would prove to be long lasting.

While not a typical story, Anne's murder provides insight into the changing political and religious divisions of French society precipitated by the Revolution. While the truth of Chabozi's motivations for murdering his wife or the role that any priest played will likely never be known, the polarizing interpretations of the event exposed the fault lines between Catholicism and Patriotism—a conflict that would continue well into the nineteenth century. Despite the conservative attitudes of the inhabitants of Tallende, as evidenced by their attachment to traditional religious services, they were not isolated from the larger religious context of Revolutionary dechristianization. In fact, the national struggle to reconcile religious and political differences played out in their daily relationships. Likewise, the events taking place in this small town sparked national interest as one of many episodes illustrating the continued dangers facing the Republic.

\textsuperscript{30} Graham, “Married Nuns Before Cardinal Caprara,” 327.