The Peasant at the Gates of Heaven:  
*La Feuille villageoise, Religion, and the French Revolution, 1790–1792*

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Melvin Edelstein's 1977 monograph on the newspaper *La Feuille villageoise* is generally an excellent study of the attempts of French revolutionaries to re-educate the peasantry. Although Edelstein acknowledges that religion occupied an important place in the newspaper, he offers scant analysis of the subject.¹ Steeped in the literature of modernization theory, his focus on such topics as politics, economics, and the means of rural communication reflected scholarly agendas of the 1970s. But a new historiographical climate provides an opportunity to emphasize the centrality of religion in the French Revolution, for, in their effort to transform rural dwellers into patriotic and responsible citizens, the newspaper's editors expended more energy on this issue than nearly any other theme save that of the necessity of obedience to the law. Thus, this article fills a lacuna in Edelstein's work by examining the function of religion and the religious ideals espoused in *La Feuille villageoise* from 1790 to 1792. In doing so, it follows the lead of scholars such as Jonathan Sheehan, whose 2003 article on "Enlightenment, Religion, and the Enigma of Secularization" challenged the myth of the eighteenth century as an anti-religious age, and Dale Van Kley and Nigel Aston, who have respectively argued that

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religious quarrels help explain the origins and course of the Revolution.2

Although a variety of cultural media disseminated the French revolutionary message, Jeremy Popkin asserts that "the special qualities of the periodical press—its ability to keep up with the speed of revolutionary events, its ability to reach an audience all across the country almost simultaneously, and its ability to carry messages both ways between that audience and the centers of power—made it uniquely important in the life of the Revolution."3 If newspapers indeed played a special role in both expressing and swaying public opinion during the Revolution, their unique influence was made possible by the suppression of censorship and the National Assembly's concomitant declaration of freedom of the press. Approximately 1,350 papers were published in France from 1789 to 1800 as a result of changes in the nature of French publishing and political culture.4

In this proliferation of periodicals during the Revolution, La Feuille villageoise stands out for several reasons. First, it was long lived compared to the vast majority of highly ephemeral revolutionary papers. Appearing on a weekly basis in an octavo format of sixteen to twenty-four pages, it was published for five years from 30 September 1790 to 10 Thermidor Year III (2 August 1795). Second, the paper was one of only eighteen to

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target a rural audience and only one of five such papers to last more than a year.\(^5\) The intended rural readership (or listenership, since the editors expected the parish priest or a local patriotic notable to read the paper to illiterate villagers) explains the editors' didactic tone and their objective of giving a civic education to inhabitants of small towns and people engaged in agriculture. To achieve its goal of providing newly liberated rural denizens with "the brake of instruction," *La Feuille villageoise* had to be priced appropriately. In fact, the subscription rate—7 livres 4 sous in 1790, rising to 12 livres in 1793—made the paper relatively inexpensive, though still beyond the means of most villagers. Finally, *La Feuille villageoise* appears to have been one of the most widely diffused revolutionary newspapers, as Edelstein supports the editors' claim of fifteen thousand subscribers, then calculates an overall weekly audience of perhaps two hundred and fifty thousand French people.\(^6\)

*La Feuille villageoise* emerged as the brainchild of Joseph-Antoine Cerutti, a Torinese by origin and professor at the Jesuit collège in Lyon.\(^7\) Cerutti's initial fame and aristocratic patronage stemmed from his *Apologie générale des Jésuites* (1762), but later reading and social contacts in Paris converted him into a philosophe whose Voltairean leanings were in evidence on the pages of the newspaper. His championing of the Third Estate in the *Mémoire pour le peuple français* (1788) antedated the now more famous work of Sieyès; it gave Cerutti the patriotic credentials that made him prominent in Parisian electoral politics, fostered close ties to moderate revolutionaries such as Mirabeau, and led to his election to the Legislative Assembly in 1791, though his death in early 1792 precluded significant participation in that body. Cerutti collaborated on *La Feuille villageoise* with Jean-Paul Rabaut Saint-Étienne and Philippe-

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\(^6\) Ibid., 68.

\(^7\) This discussion of the editors is based on Edelstein, *La Feuille villageoise*, 21–25.
Antoine Grouvelle. A highly educated Protestant pastor at Nîmes, Rabaut Saint-Étienne played a critical role in the 1787 edict that granted civil rights to French Calvinists, and he traveled to Versailles as a representative of the Estates General in 1789. He later sat in the National Convention but died on the guillotine in 1793 for his Girondin sympathies. Rabaut Saint-Étienne's brief official participation on La Feuille villageoise—he left the paper within the first year—meant that Cerutti mostly shared editorial duties with Grouvelle, a Parisian of artisanal stock who became a poet and composer and who, as a member of the Club de 1789, developed ties to other political moderates such as the Marquis de La Fayette, Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès, Jean Sylvain Bailly, and Cerutti. Grouvelle never enjoyed a major political career. As secretary of the Provisional Executive Council after 10 August 1792, however, he read Louis XVI his death sentence, and he became ambassador to Denmark in 1793. After Cerutti's death in 1792, Grouvelle sought the editorial assistance of Pierre-Louis Guinguené. From Rennes and of unknown social rank, Guinguené studied at the Jesuit collège there before moving to Paris in 1772 to pursue a writing career focused on poetry and music criticism. He was an ardent follower of Rousseau and penned a reflection on his Confessions in 1791. After Grouvelle's departure for Denmark in 1793, Guinguené's devotion to Rousseau can be seen in the paper's drift toward the active endorsement of a natural religion in place of its prior emphasis on ecumenism and denunciation of fanaticism. Following Cerutti and Grouvelle in his rejection of political militancy, Guinguené was imprisoned for political moderation from May to August 1794. Afterward he became director of the Commission of Public Instruction; Bonaparte later named him to and removed him from the Tribunate.

This sketch highlights the fact that, while La Feuille villageoise may have been aimed at inhabitants of France's rural hinterlands, its editors were decidedly Paris-based men of letters.

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8 On this revolutionary, see André Dupont, Rabaut Saint-Étienne: Un protestant défenseur de la liberté religieuse (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1989).
Well-educated and fervently committed to the cause of the Revolution, the editors perceived a vast cultural gulf between enlightened Paris and the provincial villages, and they exhibited considerable fear that the project of national regeneration would fail because of the peasants' servitude to feudal lords, Catholic superstition, and benighted customs. To bridge the gulf and hence promote the Revolution's triumph, the editors emulated Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac* by bringing education to villagers in a supposedly entertaining and accessible manner. The prospectus envisioned that education to be simultaneously civic, moral, and agricultural, arriving in installments as commentaries on the constitution, explanations of legislation, national and foreign news, lessons in history and geography, sentimental vignettes centering on themes such as the putative superiority of rural life, and above all exhortations to obey the law. Regarding the role of religion in the paper's educational project, Grouvelle's exasperated comment in 1792—"Religion is not our business. It is not a matter of rendering the Frenchman orthodox or heretical; it is a question of making him free and reasonable, and that is our goal"9—suggests that the editors neither anticipated nor relished expending so much energy and ink on theological matters and church practices. But the immediacy and ubiquity with which religion surfaced on the pages of *La Feuille villageoise* demonstrates the editors' belief that the Revolution's acceptance in rural areas would depend upon a successful redefinition of Christianity and reformation of the French Catholic church.

A quick perusal of the inaugural edition of *La Feuille villageoise* from September 1790 highlights the paper's overall goals, its preoccupation with proselytizing for a certain interpretation of Christianity that emphasized the interiorization of belief, and its tactic of employing sacred themes and language to promote the cult of the nation. The frontispiece invokes the well-known eighteenth-century trope of the *bon curé* (good

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9 *La Feuille villageoise*, vol. 4 (31 May 1792): 219. All translations from the French are my own.
Figure 1: Frontispiece, *La Feuille villageoise*
(Photo courtesy of The Newbery Library, Chicago. Call #FRC 5.649)
priest) by showing a patriotic priest sitting under the village oak, reading *La Feuille villageoise* to rural inhabitants and surrounded by the remnants of abolished feudalism (Figure 1). "Work my children," the priest exhorts his parishioners, "and obey the laws. I will look out for you and protect your rights." The engraving illustrates the editors' goal of providing newly liberated peasants, who possessed the rustic's good sense but had been subjected to centuries of servitude to lords and superstitious priests, with the restraint of education through the intermediary of *le curé patriote* (patriotic priest). As the *avertissement* announced: "Priests are the preceptors of religion. This [always critical function of religion] would become even more so if they added civic education to Christian instruction." The newspaper itself would serve as the "catechism" of the Constitution, for its goal was to promote obedience to the law whose "sacred principles [are] intelligible to all souls." The editors wrote: "We do not want to teach the people to argue about the laws, but rather to be faithful to them."\(^{10}\) Here, then, the paper championed a close alliance of a reformed Catholic Church and the larger project of national regeneration—an alliance that obviously became more tenuous and then tragically impossible as the Revolution progressed.

Of course, the paper's launch in 1790 coincided with the tense atmosphere over the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, and so the prospectus fulminated against soon-to-be refractory bishops who led the opposition to the Revolution's reorganization of the Gallican Church. Here the editors drew upon the legacy of Jansenist anti-episcopal writing and attempted to continue the Richerist momentum behind the "Revolt of the Curés" and the early, pro-revolutionary sentiments of the lower clergy; they railed against bishops who "used their ancient power over pastors of the countryside, hitherto their slaves, to disseminate in hamlets the seeds of discord that they have

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\(^{10}\) *La Feuille villageoise*, vol. 1 (30 September 1790): 7.
blessed on their altars." Rejecting episcopal claims that the Civil Constitution of the Clergy endangered the Christian faith, the paper argued that the source of bishops' opposition was the loss of tithes and the diminution in the number of dioceses—in other words, greed and power. Slightly embarrassed by their own zealous animosity, which violated the self-professed peaceful and conciliatory principles of *La Feuille villageoise*, the editors promised to leave in peace "the bishops, . . . the Sorbonne, the Inquisition, and all the spiritual powers that refuse to abdicate a chimerical empire"; they nevertheless explained that their "slight intolerance of papism" reflected a desire to rid the tree of faith of the "FANATICISM interlaced in all its branches." 

One of the goals of *La Feuille villageoise* was to report and comment on the news in France. Not surprisingly here, too, the first edition spilled much ink on religious concerns. For example, the editors introduced their first of many pleas for toleration, in this instance by castigating both Protestants and Catholics in Montauban and Nîmes for the outbreak of confessional violence in the south of France: "Real Christians would not wish to begin in the name of a God of peace sacrilegious wars of brothers against brothers." An article on the history of agriculture that ended the paper's first installment compared eastern and western institutions: in the great empires of Persia and China, agriculture constituted the first article of political policy and religious faith, while Rome's decline and European feudal barbarism could be traced to a disdain for cultivation and a rapacious system of aristocratic privilege supported by corrupt clerical institutions. This early promotion of a *culte champêtre* (rural religion) not only signaled the paper's realization that national regeneration first required a regeneration of France's agricultural sector and hence a positive reassessment of the people engaged in

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12 Ibid., 7.
13 Ibid., 10.
agricultural production, but also its proclivity for a natural religion on the model of Rousseau's Savoyard vicar.  

Subsequent editions of *La Feuille villageoise* from 1790 through 1792 bear out what was already in evidence in the first issue: namely, that the paper combined Jansenist-inflected Gallicanism, Richerism contaminated by Reymond, liberal Protestant humanism, Socinian sympathies, Voltairean anticlericalism, Erastianism, expedient latitudinarianism, and Rousseauist deism doubling as a civil religion. In part this eclecticism probably reflected the genuinely ecumenical proclivities of the men who collaborated on the paper. The eclecticism of the paper's early message also flowed from its paramount function of providing rural dwellers with a civic education that required of religion only the upholding of morality and the eradication of enthusiasm, whose worst consequence was the oft-invoked St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre. Finally, it also reflected the editors' political goal of attracting to the patriotic cause as broad a swath of rural dwellers as possible.

In short, *La Feuille villageoise* represented what Dale Van Kley labels the "Protestant, Jansenist, and philosophic nexus" of the French Revolution, whose representatives in the National Assembly spearheaded efforts to reorganize the Gallican Church. In this view (and that of the newspaper), French revolutionary reforms of Catholicism marked a return to "the primitive church" or a purified Christianity. The editors considered "episcopal despotism" to be the only remaining obstacle to the triumph of the primitive church, which along with the Constitution would usher in a new epoch of terrestrial happiness. For example, on 25 November 1790, the paper asserted that "nothing is more harmonious than the doctrine of the apostles of Christianity and the foundations of our

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14 For a recent study of Rousseau's religion, see Michaël Culoma, *La religion civile de Rousseau à Robespierre* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2010).
constitution,“\textsuperscript{16} while the 5 May 1791 issue insisted yet again that "the National Assembly, in reforming the Gallican Church, has only resuscitated the primitive church.\textsuperscript{17}

The Jansenist component of the paper's message revealed itself especially during the crisis over the Civil Constitution of the Clergy when the defense of revolutionary ecclesiastical legislation relied upon claims of national sovereignty that themselves sprang from the Jansenist definition of the Church as the assembly of the faithful instead of the clerical hierarchy. The paper mocked bishops who, after insisting that the National Assembly could not deliberate on the fate of bishops without consulting the church, defined the church as the bishops. "The church," Cerutti (most likely) wrote in 1791, "it is the assembly of faithful; the faithful are the citizens; thus, the church is the nation.\textsuperscript{18}

Interestingly, the Jansenist-inspired anti-episcopal message of the paper at first excluded the Bishop of Rome, whose initial silence on the Civil Constitution was quixotically interpreted as approbation. Reporting that French bishops had entreated the pope to excommunicate the National Assembly in the wake of the proposal by the Jansenist representative Camus to require an oath in support of the Civil Constitution, the editors claimed that the Roman pontiff allegedly responded: "I am the father of the faithful and not the chief of intriguers . . . Your benefices, your miters, your crosses of gold . . . did not descend from the heavens with Jesus Christ . . . I hold his office to bring peace to the earth and not to trouble it . . .\textsuperscript{19} This delusion did not last long, and by March 1791 \textit{La Feuille villageoise} was excoriating the anticipated papal bull against the National Assembly as a work containing one hundred pages of ultramontane maxims and one hundred pages of episcopal complaints, all of which were easily refuted by references to "true religion" as well as to France's own Gallican history. As the

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{La Feuille villageoise}, vol. 1 (25 November 1790): 185.
\textsuperscript{17} \textit{La Feuille villageoise}, vol. 2 (5 May 1791): 94–95.
\textsuperscript{18} \textit{La Feuille villageoise}, vol. 1 (10 February 1791): 366.
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{La Feuille villageoise}, vol. 1 (25 November 1790): 181.
paper noted, "Our independence from monopolistic and despotic papalism goes by the name of the liberties of the Gallican Church." ²⁰

Support for religious toleration was by no means a Protestant monopoly in eighteenth-century France. But as a principle that clearly benefited Protestants and as a subject dear to Rabaut Saint-Étienne, the regular paeans to, or vignettes about, religious toleration might plausibly be considered a Protestant component of the paper's message. One of the accessible stories that, along with didactic lessons, were the stock in trade of *La Feuille villageoise* told the tale of Sultan Mulhausen who, in a fit of Islamic fervor, founded three monasteries of dervishes that descended into luxury and incomprehensible quarrels over the Koran. Alarmed, the sultan consulted his three advisors about how to bring accord to the theologians and ordered each of them to implement their policy in one of the monasteries. Ibrahim counseled severity and advised the forced recognition of one doctrine; as a result, half of the members of his monastery were exiled, while the remaining hypocrites were mired in such useless stupor that the monastery was soon closed. The philosophe and moralist, Atalep, believed that a council of wise doctors guided by patriotism and good sense would lead to theological consensus. After several peaceful meetings, this "Sorbonne monastery" became a lair of discord. Half of the dervishes excommunicated, then exterminated the other half, and Atalep himself was finally immolated. The third advisor, Kara-Idail, invited everyone to teach his own interpretation of the Koran, but prohibited invective against one's neighbor. Fraternal respect soon replaced doctrinal vituperation, and the Sultan decreed religious liberty while admitting all sects into his court, where "the Koran was interpreted as one wished, but observed." ²¹

²¹ "L'alcoran fut interprêté comme on voulut, mais observé." *La Feuille villageoise*, vol. 2 (26 May 1791): 131–32.
The editors' Protestant sympathies were especially apparent in a regular installment on "universal geography." These thirty-three lessons about foreign countries reduced national histories and constitutions to the interplay of easily recognizable forces: despotism, feudalism, and religion. It then measured national well-being in terms of the impacts of those forces on commoners and the spread of commercial activity and agricultural prosperity. The paper's editors argued that despotism and feudal tyranny both received support from an obscurantist priestly class even more ambitious and seditious than the nobility. "Monk-knights, conquering hospitaliers, and mendicant sovereigns" littered the European landscape. Citing agriculture as the first concern and the first religion of civilized peoples, the paper regretted how clerical greed infused Jesus' cûte champêtre with sacerdotal superstition. A glance at the entries on Spain and Poland conveys a sense of the journal's Voltairean contempt for how priestcraft and confessional states inverted the natural equality and liberty of conscience central to Jesus' teachings. The upshot of these entries is that people groaned in misery and poverty in Catholic countries and in Russia—in other words, wherever a privileged nobility and a powerful clergy with a monopoly on the interpretation of revealed religion lent support to an absolutist monarchy. Conversely, Protestant nations or German cities such as Augsburg, which were governed by religious liberty, enjoyed commercial prosperity, political freedom, patriotism, and bons moeurs (good customs). In May 1791, Cerutti wondered if France would capitulate in the face of a papal bull or follow the path of felicitous and Protestant England, Sweden, and much of Switzerland. "This excommunication of France would be the last lightning bolt and the last attack of the Vatican against a people believing but free, Catholic but enlightened, friend of the Gospel but loving the Constitution."

22 *La Feuille villageoise*, vol. 2 (14 April 1791): 20.
23 *La Feuille villageoise*, vol. 2 (12 May 1791): 110.
An entry on Poland treating Socinianism illuminates where the paper's Protestant component shaded into the philosophic. In obvious sympathy with this "heretical sect" of Polish Brethren that opposed atheism as much as Catholicism, the editors enumerated the central teachings of Faustus Socinus: that God did not have a son; that Mary's son was only the oracle of the human race born in the image of eternal God; that original sin, grace, predestination, and all the most revered mysteries were only papal inventions and theological illusions; and that the priesthood was but a sanctifying profession and not a sacramental order. The paper's strategy of condemning sacerdotalism while relegating doctrinal issues to the realm of individual conscience meant that until at least 1793 it rarely weighed in on what the fundamental tenets of Christian spiritual belief were. But the reader of La Feuille villageoise would be hard pressed to find a single passage that contradicted these Socinian teachings, which had numerous affinities with the deism of enlightened French elites.

Although the newspaper's anticlericalism and insistence on distinguishing temporal power from spiritual authority would have resonated with Jansenist, Protestant, and enlightened audiences, the references to Jesus Christ from 1790 to 1792 hint at the underlying "sub-Christian" religious belief that, by Year II, would emerge as a full-fledged celebration of natural religion penned by the Rousseauist Ginguené. To be sure, the paper had always treated Jesus as the source of values—fraternal equality and the golden rule—in perfect harmony with the Revolution's own ideals as well as natural law. But from the earliest issues of La Feuille villageoise, primitive Christianity was treated as little more than a natural religion in which Jesus preached the love of a Creator and the practice of charity and in which Church rituals reflected a natural religion. Cerutti wrote in April 1791: "The religion of Christ, so favorable to the human race, is attached on

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all sides and in all its dogmas to rural interests . . . The crèche of Bethlehem would seem to be that of agriculture . . . and the resurrection of Christ harmonized in a holy manner with the resurrection of the countryside that spring caused to be reborn."

But, the editor added, "[t]he fundamental relationship between Christianity and naturalism, between heaven and earth . . . then disappeared under a heap of monastic interventions."26

That "heap of monastic interventions" consisted, of course, of the whole organization and entire history of the Catholic Church since the time of Constantine. To demonstrate just how far the editors' conception of the primitive church diverged from eighteenth-century Catholicism, one can point to the paper's gleeful retelling of a medieval tale about the Peasant at the Gates of Heaven. In this story, a peasant dies, but neither angel nor devil comes to claim his soul. He sees the angel Michael with another person and decides to follow them on the road to Paradise. At the gates Saint Peter tells the peasant to go away, that he is not welcome without an escort, to which the peasant responds: "I never denied Jesus." Saint Thomas and then Saint Paul each appear in turn to tell the peasant to leave, which prompts the respective comebacks, "I never doubted Jesus" and "I never persecuted anyone." Weary of the troublemaker but unable to get rid of him, the saints complain to Jesus. The peasant, in turn, asks Jesus for judgment, insisting that he has as much right to enter heaven as the saints and stating that he was born in misery, worked without complaint, helped the poor, took the sacraments, and confessed his sins. Jesus responds: "I grant you entrance to heaven, which you have well merited. The keys to Paradise are in the hands of whoever practices virtue and obeys the laws."27

In conclusion, Quinet's 1865 exploration of the Revolution in the context of religious developments seems strikingly perspicacious based on a reading of *La Feuille villageoise*, which predicated the success of national regeneration on the conversion

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26 *La Feuille villageoise*, vol. 2 (28 April 1791): 63.
of the peasantry to a type of faith that promoted morality and patriotism but that in reality was only nominally Catholic. Not surprisingly, *La Feuille villageoise* contained few original ideas but was nevertheless instructive for its attempt to inculcate another type of Christianity that Quinet suggested was necessary as an alternative Gospel to the Catholicism deeply rooted in France because of the failure of Reformation there. Yet that other form of Christianity promoted by the newspaper would face nearly insurmountable obstacles during the Revolution, for outside of enlightened circles a religion focused on morality could scarcely compete with the transcendence of the Roman Church, while the radical anticlericalism of the paper's conception of the primitive church proved oblivious to the entrenched clericalism that Timothy Tackett has documented for critical parts of rural France. Ultimately, in the realm of religion just as in the case of the redemption of seigneurial dues and the political participation of the peasantry, *La Feuille villageoise* sorely misunderstood the rural inhabitants whose natural good sense was supposed to render them receptive vessels of the eternal truths articulated by enlightened Paris. On this misunderstanding hinges much of the tragedy of the French Revolution.

