Religion, Sexuality, Power: The French in Morocco 1900-1914

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Historian of the social imaginary Sarah Maza has stated, “Who we are as social beings is shaped by the constant messages we receive about whom to desire and whom to despise.”¹ Nowhere is this statement more applicable than when discussing France’s colonial relations with Morocco, where interactions between the colonizing power and the colonized peoples both shaped and reflected a fluctuating metropolitan French religious identity in the turbulent first decades of the twentieth century. Through an examination of how the French press, public figures, and literary authors molded what it meant to be “desirable” or “detrimental” to French society, this paper vies that desirability was a fluid concept depending heavily on race, ethnicity, and especially religious identity.

The French Third Republic passed the Law on the Separation of the Churches and the State in December of 1905. This law dissolved the complex relationship that had existed between the French state and the Catholic Church and ended the public role of religion. Supporters of the law proclaimed that the Catholic Church was “a permanent menace for the future, the seed of new and innumerable conflicts,”² and the forced interiorization of religion was sure to be a powerful “instrument of peace”

throughout the country.\(^3\) However, while religious conviction – particularly Catholicism – seemed to be on the wane within the French metropole, public rhetoric regarding the French presence in Morocco consistently referred to the French as “Christians” while the Moroccans were collectively labeled as “Muslim savages.”\(^4\) Interestingly, references to a “Christian France” often appeared with language condemning the morals and practices of the Moroccans, specifically practices relating to gender roles and sexuality. Although the dichotomous relationship between Christianity and Islam had been well established within French mythology during the medieval and early modern eras, its continued use by the French press after 1905 merits investigation.

While there has been significant work published on the subjects of sexuality and imperialism, this paper adds to this body of scholarship by viewing sexuality through an explicitly religious lens in the French-Moroccan context. In so doing, it examines how a new brand of French “Christianity” was utilized to morally justify France’s authority over the Moroccans. Uncovering the underlying moral rhetoric shared by Catholics and secularists in France after the Separation of 1905 elucidates why the notion of a “Christian France,” though officially discredited by the French government, continued to be utilized in public discourse. The label “Christian” underlined the presumed superiority of French civilization, and in particular its sexual superiority, in comparison to the morally inferior Moroccan Muslims. Even though the imagined binary between Christianity and Islam was not a novelty to contemporaries, its continued use after 1905 suggests that “French Christianity” had begun to take on a more secular meaning in the early twentieth-century. That is, the label “Christian” was employed in rhetoric regarding Morocco to highlight France’s civilized and moral superiority over a religious inferior rather than to imply any type of collective, national religious devotion.

It is a well-established notion within the historiography of European imperialism that matters of sexuality, family, and intimacy profoundly shaped metropolitan perceptions of the colonized. Ann Laura Stoler asserts that “colonial observers… appear to have had unlimited interest in the sexual interface of the colonial encounter.” In fact, “no subject is discussed more than sex in colonial literature… lurid descriptions of sexual perversion marked the Otherness of the colonized for metropolitan

consumption.” Julia Clancy-Smith discusses similar themes in regards to late nineteenth-century Algeria, claiming, “Colonial male writers...believed Arab men to be ‘over-sexed.’ The social consequences of exaggerated male sexuality, symbolized by polygamy and the harem, were momentous for North African Muslim civilization.” Perceived differences in sexual practices and gender roles legitimized and justified the European domination of “morally degenerate” colonized populations. The French media and French public figures used these sexually based justifications—coupled with religious discourse—to define both the French (as collectively “desirable”) and the Moroccans (as “undesirable”). These constructions allowed them to rationalize the power France exerted over the Moroccans in the early twentieth century.

First it is crucial to look at French conceptions of morality, sexuality, and religion during the Belle Époque. While an overt division existed in the period between the supporters of a secular France and advocates of a Catholic France, the two factions were not as mutually exclusive as current scholarship suggests. Discursive ties and shared ideals—particularly those regarding sexual morality—connected these two groups, enabling them to be grouped together under a seemingly unified banner of “Christianity” in regards to Morocco.

Although notions regarding “proper” sexual conduct were not necessarily tied to religion in early twentieth-century France, anticlerical language regarding sexuality nevertheless suggests an innate connection to Catholic values. That is, though secularists attempted to disentangle their own ideas about the benefits of sexual morality from French Catholicism, the two groups shared similar viewpoints concerning the role of morals in French civilization. The link between secular and Catholic mores manifests itself in the analogous language employed in the secular and religious literature of the period, for both groups produced works that stressed the societal benefits of sexual restraint.

For example, the work *L’education sexuelle*, by Dr. E. Stérian, acknowledged that humans were physical beings that required sex. However, Dr. Stérian claimed that young men forced to satisfy their “reproductive” desires in unfavorable circumstances inevitably “acted against morality and practiced masturbation and homosexuality.” Even though this work does not condemn young men for having—or even fulfilling—sexual urges (a more open-minded attitude than traditional Catholic morality), it does imply that an acknowledged, overarching moral code concerning sex existed within the broader discourses of early twentieth-century France. This “morality,” which included monogamy and heterosexual marriage, excluded the practices of homosexuality, which, according to the work, were “very dangerous for societies in the civilized world.” The work then outlines various scientific methods through which homosexual practices might be eradicated from France.

In addition, Dr. Stérian associates both physical and moral degradation with venereal disease. He states, “it is important to fight venereal disease and, in so doing, contribute to the work of moral regeneration” in France. By linking the decline of venereal disease—a malady associated with prostitution and sexual promiscuity—with the idea of moral regeneration, Stérian suggested that a healthy, vibrant society was one in which sexuality was kept within the confines of “morality,” that is, heterosexual marriage.

Similarly, French Catholics believed sexual restraint – in the form of a heterosexual, monogamous union – was the key to a productive and efficient French society. The *Annales Catholique*, a weekly religious magazine that wrote about political issues relevant to the French Church, stated that sexual morality was the “way to purity and fecundity in France.” The article nonetheless claimed, “it is not possible for man to repress his passions or instincts except by submitting to God, the moral authority.” Although this work invokes the help of God instead of the help of science to combat sexually immoral (and therefore, degenerative) behavior, the sense that sex should be kept inside a moral framework for the “fecundity” of France is apparent. Even though secularists and Catholics differed in their particular conceptions of

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8 Ibid, 73.
9 Ibid.
sexual morality, there appears to have been a contemporary understanding that social practices such as heterosexual marriage and monogamy were indicative of a prolific, superior civilization. Literary works regarding sexuality produced by both Christians and secularists acknowledged a similar, inherent moral law that was linked to rhetoric hailing a productive French state.

Judith Surkis supports this notion of an idealized form of civilized sexuality in her work, *Sexing the Citizen: Morality and Masculinity in France 1870-1920*. Surkis argues that many republican thinkers “imagined married heterosexuality as a motor and manifestation of civilizational and moral progress. “Conjugal complementarity,” Surkis continues, became “generative of sociality itself… it bound together gender ideals… with a specifically social and moral account of sexuality.” So, how did this republican view of sexuality come to be blatantly associated with Christianity in the Moroccan context? While the role of religion was the fundamental point of contention between the Catholics and secularists, their comparable language reveals that they perceived the aim of sexual morality to be quite similar. The superior civilization that was indicated by the French people’s supposed sexual virtue resonated with both Catholics and Secularists after 1905. Thus, a French “Christian” identity – used in conjunction with rhetoric about Islamic sexuality—was employed to unify the metropolitan populace discursively and to justify the French conquest of and “civilizing” presence in Morocco.

Because France was fighting to establish a protectorate in Morocco in the early twentieth century, the rhetorical interactions between the French population and the Moroccans had the most direct impact on French politics and culture. However, literary works that demonstrated France’s civilized, “Christian” superiority over the inhabitants of all Islamic colonies and protectorates were also widespread. The religiously toned monograph, *Dieu et science*, by Jacques Brac de La Perrière, stated of Islamic civilizations, “In rejecting the religion of Christ, these Mohammedans have diminished civilization… women are found in degradation and servitude.” According to this work, Islamic peoples degraded their women and lacked civilized qualities because they had rejected Christianity. This sweeping assertion implies that, in the minds of contemporaries, Christian morals exerted a civilizing power within society. Similarly, *Moeurs arabes*, a secular work by Witold Lemanski, compared the “Christian

dogmas” from which French morality emerged to Islam. The author stated, “monogamy… and polygamy… prove to be opposites.” 13 Lemanski continued that, while “monogamous marriage and its rules are the foundations of civilization,” polygamy was “a sign of primitive civilization.” His work also condemns the status of women in Islamic countries: “It is the Islamic religious tradition which fashions the immutable souls and lives of Muslim women…Islam would be undermined with the emancipation of women.” Although Lemanski was writing for a general audience, his invocation of France’s “Christian” heritage points to the idea that “Christian” sexual morals yielded a more fertile civilization than those of Islam. Judging from these passages, both Catholic and secular observers found common ground in condemning Islamic sexuality. By linking France’s “Christian” heritage to its civilized traditions and its superior ethics, Catholics and anticlerical writers alike created a stronger binary for validating power over perceived religious inferiors.

Newspapers in the early twentieth century echoed these discourses. An article in the newspaper Le Temps states of the Algerian Muslims, “they will never submit to our practices…for even if they cease to be Muslims, they will never become Christians.” It continues, "If we allow Muslims to unite with us, won't their familial life slowly invade our mores? For the two essential principles of their intimate domestic life, polygamy and the confinement of women…are signs of savagery.” 14 Not only did this article bind the morals of secular France to Christianity, it also revealed a fear that “savage” Islamic practices would slowly vitiate the French population's superior mores.

In the case of Morocco, French monographs and newspapers were littered with references to the depraved practices of the Muslim inhabitants. These assertions often appeared with language invoking France’s Christian identity. In the monograph Sorcellerie au Maroc, the author, doctor Emile Mauchamp, presents his work, not in the interest of religion, but in “the interest of science and civilization… for beneficial instruction and scientific progress” in Morocco. 15 According to Mauchamp, “the people of Morocco, have a fear and contempt of Christians.” He stated, “in this closed world of Morocco, which exists on the Fringes of radiant Europe, the people suffer, sealed in their misery and wariness, refusing the help of their Christian neighbors, like

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14 Adrian Hebrard, “Le problème indigène en algérie,” Le Temps, April 15, 1903.
obstinate prisoners in their cells rejecting freedom, health, light, and comfort.”

When commenting on the Islamic male practice of keeping multiple women in a harem, Mauchamp remarks, “love between women among the Moroccans exceeds moral and natural relations...the women, confined within the harem are, almost without exception, lesbians. Passions are born within the harems, provoking jealousy between the women and...homosexuality.” He also talked about the “debauchery” and “lasciviousness” that inevitably cropped up among these confined women, concluding, “the role of women in Morocco is restricted to pure animality.” This language suggests that the French believed the Moroccans had much to gain from France's “Christian” civilization.

Adding to these discourses are pamphlets focused on improving Moroccan ethics. The *Grand Atlas marocain*, by Paul Chatinières, characterizes Moroccan society by stating, “the Islamic religion determines the unique character of North African civilization just as Christianity created European civilization.” Whereas Christian morals had contributed to a productive and vibrant French civilization, the acceptance of polygamy and degradation of women in Islamic Moroccan society, according to Chatinières, had led Moroccan society to depravity. The bulletin *Société française de prophylaxie sanitaire et morale* also sets “Christian” sexual practices above those of Islam. After encouraging men and women “inhabiting Christian countries,” to practice “monogamy” and “early marriage between a man and a women” in order to avoid “moral degradation” and “carnal lust,” the work considered the oversexed nature of Muslim men that was causing depravity in Morocco. It concluded that “the suppression of debauchery and polygamy in Morocco is desirable” due to the fact that these practices were causing venereal disease and supposed degeneration among the Muslims. Plainly, despite France's secularized status, “Christian” sexual morality enabled the French to corporately define themselves against the Moroccan Muslims. By extolling “Christian” civilization over that of Islamic Morocco, French writers and public figures not only asserted that the Moroccan

16 Ibid, 75.
17 Ibid, 81,169.
19 Société française de prophylaxie sanitaire et morale (Paris, J. Rueff, 1912), 54.
20 Ibid, 10.
population was utterly debauched (and, therefore, in need of French civilizing help), but they also rendered the Moroccans as fundamentally inferior, thereby justifying France's imperial interference in Morocco.

In these ways, despite secularization and the legal interiorization of religion within France in 1905, a French “Christian” identity endured in public discourse regarding the sexual practices of colonized peoples. The “Christian” label had rhetorical significance within the metropole as well. By continually accepting the notion that the Moroccan Muslims were religiously inferior, the French public arguably began to develop an altered “Christian” identity in relation to the Moroccan populace. That is, although many French newspapers and writings during this time extolled France's newly established secularism, they simultaneously drew upon the centuries-old conflict that set the “French Christians” against (and morally above) the “degenerate Muslims.” The continued use of this binary after the Law of Separation suggests that the concept of a “Christian France” was beginning to be imbued with a more secular meaning in public discourse. The title “French Christian” was utilized in the rhetoric regarding Morocco to highlight France's innately superior civilization, moral supremacy, and supposed unity rather than to indicate any type of renewed national religious commitment.

Clearly, such a fabricated ideological rivalry between Christians and Muslims continued to enjoy legitimacy among the French public for many decades afterward. So, while the media and other writers responded to this established ideological reality, they also inevitably manipulated public opinion by consistently underlining the preeminence of French “Christianity” in relation to the peoples of the Islamic world. In this way, print media and public opinion fused and, as a result, modified French conceptions of what it meant to profess Christianity in the grander narratives of early twentieth-century French national identity.