THE PROTESTANT PROBLEM AND CHURCH–STATE RELATIONS IN OLD REGIME FRANCE

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The Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 and the persecution of French Protestants that followed was perhaps the high point of collaboration between the Catholic Church and the French state. The Revocation was welcomed by the Church and over the subsequent decades the institutions of state repression reinforced the conversion efforts of the clergy. Protestants who refused to convert were forced to flee or to go underground. The anti-Protestant laws remained on the books until 1787, most of them until the Revolution, although in the second half of the eighteenth century they were less and less enforced. This aroused the displeasure of the Assembly of the Clergy, the peak body of the Gallican Church, which repeatedly attacked the government’s laxity in enforcing the anti-Protestant laws and protested vigorously against the Edict of 1787 that restored some civil rights to the Protestant minority. It would seem, therefore, that on this issue there was a clear and growing division between church and state that most historians have attributed to the influence of the Enlightenment, a few to the impact of Jansenism, some to a more general secularisation that led to a “desacralisation” of the French monarchy. This chapter, focusing on the Protestant question, argues that there was less unanimity during the reigns of both Louis XIV and Louis XV than this picture suggests. Similarly, during the second half of the eighteenth century, the gap between the officially stated position and the reality of enforcement by the secular authorities was paralleled by divisions within the church. The continuities were as significant as the changes. Both the secular and the religious authorities were divided between those for whom ideology took precedence and those who were prepared to compromise in the interests of peace, religion, or good government.

Every student of Old Regime France learns that church and state were inseparable. As in Spain and its colonies, or in the Austrian Empire, the churches resonated with prayers for kings who ruled by divine right and the monarchy supported the church by punishing those who criticised church doctrine and by denying rights to religious minorities.1 The high

point of this alliance came in the late seventeenth century following the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, which in 1598 had granted limited toleration to French Protestants. But, according to the standard accounts, across the eighteenth century relations between church and state soured and by the 1770s the accord was unravelling. After 1750, the law courts intervened repeatedly to protect religious dissidents, a process that culminated in the banning of the Jesuits from France. The monarchy at first backed the bishops but finally, reluctantly fell behind the magistrates, even sending the archbishop of Paris into internal exile. A second area of conflict was the intervention of the state to reform the religious orders, raising the age at which vows could be taken, and closing some monasteries. At the same time the government took control of a significant part of the education system. These interventions threatened the independence of the church, and the consensus among historians is that across the eighteenth century the balance of power shifted significantly in favour of an absolutist state that was increasingly secular and—some would say—“desacralised”. The alliance finally unravelled on the eve of the Revolution, when the government relaxed the bans on Protestants and tried to remove the tax privileges of the church.

Yet this account of growing tensions, ending in divorce, is not the full story. It is a political and constitutional history, primarily concerned with the balance of power between church and state, considered largely as monolithic elements within the kingdom. It privileges the relationship between central government and the bishops who, after 1700, dominated the Assembly of the Clergy—the peak body of the French Church. This chapter takes a different angle, emphasising everyday administration and treating both church and state as complex entities whose diverse representatives were rarely unanimous. It focuses on the treatment of French Protestants, the cornerstone of the renewed alliance between church and state in the late seventeenth century and one of the key issues on which relations are often deemed to have soured a hundred years later.

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