

# The French Revolution

1789 — and the beginning of the long Christian wrestle with secular modernity • 1789–  
1914

By Shane Gunn • Following Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points*, ch. 10

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**Where this fits:** Lesson 25 of the Pleasant Springs *Church History* series — Noll’s tenth turning point. The **Wesleyan revival (Lesson 21)** and **First Great Awakening (Lesson 20)** were reshaping English-speaking Protestantism in the same decades the French Revolution was reshaping continental Christianity, though in the opposite direction. The secular modernity that emerges from 1789 becomes the dominant challenge every Western Christian tradition will face from the 19th century forward. See the full **Series Timeline**.

## WHY THIS LESSON MATTERS

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The French Revolution is not a single event but a ten-year upheaval (1789–1799) that overthrew a thousand-year-old Catholic monarchy, systematically attacked the organized church, beheaded a king and queen, killed tens of thousands through the guillotine, replaced Christian worship with a “Cult of Reason” and later a “Cult of the Supreme Being,” abolished the Christian calendar, confiscated church property, and exiled, imprisoned, or executed priests who refused to swear loyalty to the new secular state. When Napoleon ended the Revolution in 1799 and then crowned himself Emperor in 1804 (famously grabbing the crown from Pope Pius VII’s hands and placing it on his own head), the Catholic Church in France was shattered.

**Noll treats 1789 as his tenth turning point** not because the church's response to the Revolution was its most distinguished hour — it was not — but because the *terms of the problem* the Revolution bequeathed to Christianity have shaped every subsequent generation. Christianity was now, for the first time in 1,400 years of European history, one religious option in a publicly secular culture that could, if it chose, simply dispense with it. The long Christian engagement with **secular modernity** — liberalism, nationalism, socialism, Marxism, scientific naturalism, mass democracy, the welfare state, militant atheism — begins here.

This is the lesson about how the church lost Christendom and had to figure out how to live without it.

*LXX (Ps 2:1–2): ἵνα τί ἐφρούραξαν ἔθνη καὶ λαοὶ ἐμελέτησαν κενά; παρέστησαν οἱ βασιλεῖς τῆς γῆς... κατὰ τοῦ κυρίου καὶ κατὰ τοῦ χριστοῦ αὐτοῦ.*

Psalm 2:1–2 (ESV): “Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves... against the Lord and against his Anointed.”

## PART 1 — THE OLD REGIME AND THE CHURCH (PRE-1789)

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Pre-revolutionary France (the *Ancien Régime*) was officially Catholic. The Catholic Church:

- **Owned about 10% of all land in France.**
- **Collected the tithe** (a 10% tax) from all agricultural production.
- **Was exempt from direct taxation** by the crown, though it made voluntary grants (*don gratuit*).
- **Controlled education, poor relief, hospitals, and vital records.**
- **Was deeply class-stratified.** Bishops were almost exclusively nobility; parish priests (*curés*) were typically commoners, poor and often better educated than their

congregations. The gap between upper clergy and lower clergy was one of the Revolution's early social fault-lines.

**The Enlightenment critique** had been building for a century. Voltaire (d. 1778) wrote *Écrasez l'infâme* — “crush the infamous thing” — meaning clerical Catholic religion. Rousseau developed a civil religion in *The Social Contract* (1762). The *Encyclopédie* of Diderot (1751–1772) systematically naturalized religious subjects. Deism was fashionable among the nobility (for their Anglo-American cousin tradition, see [our study on the Founders](#)). By 1789 a significant part of the French educated class had drifted into anti-clericalism, Deism, or outright atheism — while the peasantry remained devoutly Catholic.

## PART 2 — THE REVOLUTION BEGINS (1789)

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**5 May 1789** • Louis XVI summons the Estates General to address a financial crisis. The three estates (clergy, nobility, commoners) have not met together since 1614.

**17 June 1789** • The Third Estate declares itself the **National Assembly**. Sympathetic lower clergy join them, giving them clerical cover.

**14 July 1789** • The storming of the Bastille. The Revolution has become an urban popular event.

**4 August 1789** • In one legislative night, the National Assembly abolishes feudal privilege, seigniorial rights, and — decisively — the **tithe**. The Catholic Church's primary income stream is gone.

**26 August 1789** • Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. Article 10: “No one may be disturbed because of his opinions, even religious ones, provided their manifestation does not disturb public order.” Religious toleration is now legal policy.

**2 November 1789** • The National Assembly nationalizes all Catholic Church property. The state will now pay clerical salaries out of the former church lands.

**13 February 1790** • Monastic vows are abolished. Monasteries and convents are dissolved. About 60,000 religious are expelled.

### **PART 3 – THE CIVIL CONSTITUTION OF THE CLERGY (1790)**

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The decisive break came with the **Civil Constitution of the Clergy** (12 July 1790). The Assembly reorganized the French Catholic Church by state fiat: bishoprics were realigned to match secular districts (reducing them from 135 to 83), bishops and priests were henceforth to be *elected* by local voters (including Protestants and Jews, under the Assembly's logic of citizenship), and all clergy were required to swear an oath of loyalty to the new constitution.

**Pope Pius VI condemned the Civil Constitution** in briefs of March and April 1791. The French clergy were forced to choose:

- **Constitutional clergy.** Those who took the oath. About half of the parish clergy and seven bishops. They were recognized by the state and paid their salaries. Most Catholics regarded them as schismatic.

- **Refractory clergy.** Those who refused the oath. They lost state pay, were barred from their parishes, and by 1792 were criminalized as enemies of the Revolution. Many fled France (to England, Spain, America); those who remained faced imprisonment and, in the Terror that followed, execution.

The oath tore the French Church apart at the parish level. Peasants who had loved their local *curé* suddenly had to choose between a revolutionary replacement priest and their own illegal spiritual father hiding in the barns. This was not yet an anti-Christian Revolution. It became one two years later.

## PART 4 — THE TERROR AND DECHRISTIANIZATION (1793–1794)

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After the monarchy was overthrown in August 1792 and King Louis XVI was guillotined on 21 January 1793, the Revolution radicalized. Under the Committee of Public Safety (June 1793–July 1794), the **Reign of Terror** executed somewhere between 16,000 and 40,000 people, including perhaps 3,000 priests, nuns, and religious (a Catholic martyrology, *Les Martyrs de la Révolution*, records specific names).

The most radical anti-religious phase was the **Dechristianization** campaign of autumn 1793–spring 1794:

- **The Christian calendar was abolished.** A new Republican calendar (5 October 1793) replaced the Gregorian. The week became ten days. Saints' days were replaced by days named for crops, tools, and animals. Year One dated from the declaration of the Republic.

- **The “Cult of Reason”** was inaugurated on 10 November 1793 at Notre-Dame de Paris. The cathedral was renamed the Temple of Reason. An actress playing the Goddess of Reason was enthroned on the altar. Similar ceremonies occurred in cathedrals across France.

- **Churches were closed or desecrated.** Statues were smashed. Priests were forced to abdicate or go into hiding. Convents became prisons. Church bells were melted into cannon.

- **The War in the Vendée.** In rural western France, Catholic peasants rose in open revolt against the Republic's religious policy (the Vendée War, 1793–1796). The Republican suppression was systematically brutal — the General Turreau's “infernal columns” of 1794 destroyed villages methodically. Historians estimate **150,000–250,000 died** in the Vendée War, many of them women and children, in what some modern historians have controversially described as the first modern genocide.

**8 June 1794** • Robespierre, disturbed by the atheism of the Cult of Reason, inaugurates the **Cult of the Supreme Being** — a deist state religion affirming the existence of God

and the immortality of the soul. A massive state festival is held on the Champ de Mars in Paris. Six weeks later Robespierre himself is guillotined (28 July 1794). The Terror ends.

**The death toll.** Conservative estimates: 16,000 guillotined in the Terror; 3,000–6,000 clergy dying in prison or in exile; 150,000+ killed in the Vendée; hundreds of thousands more displaced. It was the most sustained anti-Christian state action in Western history up to that point.

## PART 5 — NAPOLEON AND THE CONCORDAT (1801)

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Napoleon Bonaparte came to power in November 1799. He cared little for Catholic theology but understood French peasants needed their priests back. In a remarkable act of realpolitik he negotiated the **Concordat of 1801** with Pope Pius VII — a settlement that governed French church-state relations for the next century.

### The Concordat's terms:

- Catholicism acknowledged as “the religion of the great majority of the French” — not the established state religion, but the recognized majority faith.
- The Pope recognizes the Revolution's confiscation of church property as permanent.
- The French state pays clergy salaries.
- The state nominates bishops; the Pope confirms them (a modified version of the Gallican pattern the Revolution had tried to impose unilaterally).
- Freedom of public Catholic worship, subject to state regulation.

When Napoleon was crowned Emperor at Notre-Dame on 2 December 1804, he had Pope Pius VII travel from Rome to officiate. Napoleon's famous gesture at the ceremony — taking the crown from the Pope's hands and placing it on his own head, then crowning his wife Josephine

himself — was a calculated symbolic claim: the emperor derives his authority not from the church but from the nation. It was a gesture every 19th-century nationalist movement would repeat in different forms.

The Concordat persisted in modified forms until 1905, when the Third Republic's **Law on the Separation of the Churches and State** finally decoupled them. France has been a formally secular (*laïque*) state ever since.

## PART 6 — THE LONG NINETEENTH CENTURY (1801–1914)

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The Revolution did not just disrupt France; it reshaped the entire Western Christian situation for the next century. Noll and other church historians identify five overlapping responses Western Christianity made to post-revolutionary modernity:

**1. Catholic reaction and the papacy's defensive turn.** Pope Pius IX (r. 1846–1878) issued the *Syllabus of Errors* (1864) condemning 80 propositions of modernity — including religious liberty as a right (proposition 15), separation of church and state (55), and the idea that “the Roman Pontiff can, and ought to, reconcile himself to, and agree with, progress, liberalism, and modern civilization” (80). The **First Vatican Council** (1869–1870) then defined papal infallibility and universal jurisdiction (see **Lesson 2 Part 6**). These were defensive moves against the encroachments of liberal secular modernity.

**2. Liberal Protestantism.** German theologians from Friedrich Schleiermacher (*On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, 1799) through Albrecht Ritschl to Adolf von Harnack (*What Is Christianity?*, 1900) tried to rework Christian theology to meet modernity on its own terms — grounding faith in human religious experience rather than dogma, drawing a sharp distinction between the “essence” of Christianity and its historically conditioned dogmatic expressions, accepting higher-critical biblical scholarship, and reducing the gospel to the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, and the ethical teaching of Jesus.

**3. Protestant evangelical revival and missions.** Against liberal accommodation, evangelical movements (the Wesleyan revival, the Awakenings, Pentecostalism) maintained traditional doctrine while emphasizing conversion and global evangelism. The **missionary century (1800s)** saw British and American evangelicals planting churches on every continent, often paradoxically alongside the colonial projects of their governments.

**4. Socialist and Marxist critique.** Karl Marx's assessment of religion as "the opium of the people" (1844) framed a century-long leftist engagement with Christianity that would culminate in the 20th-century communist regimes' explicit persecution of the church. The Revolution's assault on religion in 1793 prefigured what Lenin, Stalin, and Mao would do on vastly larger scales.

**5. National Protestantism and Catholic nationalism.** 19th-century Europe saw the fusion of religious identity with nationalism — German Lutheranism, French Catholicism, Russian Orthodoxy, Polish Catholicism, Italian Catholicism, British Anglicanism — with national churches as vehicles of national identity. The terrible fruit of this fusion came in 1914–1918, when Christian nations under Christian flags slaughtered each other in the trenches of World War I.

## PART 7 — THE KULTURKAMPF AND BISMARCK

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A smaller but revealing episode: the **Kulturkampf** ("culture struggle," 1871–1878) waged by Otto von Bismarck against the Catholic Church in newly unified Germany. Bismarck's May Laws placed Catholic education under state control, expelled the Jesuits, required civil marriage, and imprisoned bishops who resisted. The Catholic response was remarkable resilience — Catholics out-organized the state politically, founded the Centre Party, and eventually forced Bismarck's retreat by 1887.

The Kulturkampf was the template for a string of 19th-century European state-versus-Catholic conflicts: in Italy (the Risorgimento's seizure of the Papal States in 1870), in Spain (anti-clerical liberal governments in the 19th and early 20th centuries), and in Mexico (the Cristero War of

1926–1929). Each confirmed the Revolution’s essential lesson: Catholicism and secular nationalism were structurally in conflict, and the church would spend the 19th and early 20th centuries figuring out how to survive that conflict.

## PART 8 — WHY NOLL CALLS THIS A TURNING POINT

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Noll’s chapter is titled *Discontents of the Modern West: The French Revolution (1789)*. His argument, in summary:

- **Before 1789, Western Christianity could assume it was the default framework of civilization.** The church’s institutions, calendar, symbols, and authority were woven into public life at every level.

- **After 1789, Christianity in the West has been one option among others.** The secular state defines public space; the church operates within it. Every Western country that came out of the 19th century — including the United States, despite its different constitutional history — has had to settle some version of this question.

- **The church has never again had the institutional authority it had before 1789.** This is as true for American evangelicals as for French Catholics, though we feel it differently.

- **Every modern movement that challenges Christianity — liberal Protestantism, Marxism, fascism, secular humanism, the Sexual Revolution, the New Atheism — is in some sense a post-1789 phenomenon.** They are debates over what replaces Christendom.

**Noll’s assessment is sober.** He does not romanticize pre-revolutionary Catholic France (there was much to criticize), and he does not demonize post-revolutionary secular modernity (there was much it rightly improved — religious liberty, civil equality, the end of feudal cruelties). But he does insist that the Revolution permanently changed the board the church plays on. The question for modern

Christians is not how to restore 1788 but how to be faithful to Christ in the world the Revolution produced.

## WHY THIS MATTERS FOR US

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- **We live in the world of 1789, not 1688.** American evangelicals sometimes imagine our challenge is to restore a lost Christian America. The reality is that we live in a secular public sphere the Revolution invented and the American Founders formalized in different terms. Our situation is closer to the early Christians' — a minority witnessing in a public culture that does not assume us — than to pre-1789 Catholic France. This is not all bad. It is just the world we live in.

- **Forced Christianity is not Christianity.** The Revolution's dechristianization was terrible; but the pre-revolutionary church that had been propped up by royal power and compulsory tithes was a shell in many places. The century after 1789, paradoxically, saw much of the West's most genuine Christian renewal — because faith had to be chosen rather than assumed. The Anabaptist tradition would have told the Catholic Church this in 1525 (see [Lesson 17](#)).

- **Religious liberty is a gift.** The Revolution's religious liberty clauses were, after all their distortions, real. A church that cannot be jailed by the state for its preaching is also a church the state cannot use for its own ends. The American Baptists (see [our Founders study](#)) understood this before most of their fellow Christians did.

- **Nationalism and faith make a combustible mixture.** The Revolution ended the first fusion (church + throne). The 19th century invented a second (church + nation). The 20th century showed what the second could cost (World War I). American Christians in every decade should ask whether our own patriotism has become our functional religion.

*Greek NT (Phil 3:20): ἡμῶν γὰρ τὸ πολίτευμα ἐν οὐρανοῖς ὑπάρχει, ἐξ οὗ καὶ σωτῆρα ἀπεκδεχόμεθα Κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν.*

Philippians 3:20 (ESV): “But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.”

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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**1.** The Civil Constitution of the Clergy asked French priests to swear loyalty to a constitutional regime. About half took the oath. Which side would you have been on — and what rule are you using?

**2.** The Cult of Reason tried to replace Christianity with a rationalized secular substitute. Are there modern equivalents in our culture?

**3.** Vatican I’s declaration of papal infallibility (1870) was partly a defensive response to 19th-century secular encroachment. When a tradition feels attacked, it tightens. Is that a faithful instinct, a defensive one, or both?

**4.** The 19th-century missionary century planted Christianity on every continent even as Europe secularized. Is that coincidence, irony, or providence?

**5.** “Our citizenship is in heaven” (Phil 3:20). How does that verse function differently when we live in a formally Christian society versus a formally secular one?

## CLOSING PRAYER

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Lord of the nations, we thank you for faithful priests who hid in barns during the Terror, for the Catholic peasants of the Vendée who would not abandon their Mass, for the French Protestants whom the Revolution briefly treated better than any government before it. Thank you for the 19th-century missionaries who carried the gospel around the world even as Europe forgot it. Forgive us for confusing Christendom with Christ. Forgive us where we have loved our countries more than your kingdom. Teach us to be faithful citizens of the heavenly city while serving as good neighbors in the earthly one. You are Lord of both. Amen.

## FURTHER READING

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### Primary sources:

- Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (26 August 1789).
- Civil Constitution of the Clergy (12 July 1790).
- Pope Pius VI, *Quod aliquantum* (10 March 1791) and *Caritas* (13 April 1791) condemning the Civil Constitution.
- Concordat of 1801.
- Pope Pius IX, *Syllabus of Errors* (8 December 1864).
- First Vatican Council, *Pastor Aeternus* (1870).

### Modern studies:

- **Mark A. Noll**, *Turning Points* (3rd ed., 2012), ch. 10: “Discontents of the Modern West: The French Revolution (1789).”
- Nigel Aston, *Religion and Revolution in France, 1780–1804* (2000).
- Dale K. Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution* (1996).
- Owen Chadwick, *The Popes and European Revolution* (1981).
- Reynald Secher, *A French Genocide: The Vendée* (ET 2003).

- Eamon Duffy, *Saints and Sinners: A History of the Popes* (4th ed., 2014).

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