The Severing of the Relationship Between the Catholic Church and the French State

Dan Jasinski

Professor Salyer
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The relationship between a church and its members is generally one of unquestioned loyalty. Through a church, people find an identity for themselves within society as well as a code by which to live their lives. Churches provide a sense of security for their members, giving them strength in times of trouble and encouraging them when success comes. Indeed, with all of the good things that churches can provide, it is easy to see why a government would feel as though it were competing with religion in the quest to obtain the loyalty of the citizens of their country. This becomes even truer when the church in question can count nearly every resident of the country as a member and has a tradition of power dating back for centuries. This scenario accurately describes the situation of the Catholic Church and its position in France. Although the Church and the monarchs of France had enjoyed a respectful if not entirely friendly relationship, there was an abrupt change with the onset of the French Revolution of 1789. The violent measures of the newly formed French Republic failed to completely unseat the authority of the Church, however just under a century later the government of the Third Republic would attempt to achieve the same goals through political means.

One manifestation of the revival of revolutionary goals can be seen in the efforts to nationalize schooling in the Third Republic. Leon Gambetta, prominent French statesman and anticlerical leader, described the kind of nationalism seen in the Revolution as a, “…secret spring of wounded patriotism which has caused the cult of popular education to develop so prodigiously in the country….“¹ However, mixed in with this sense of patriotism, one can clearly see a government that needed to forge an identity. In particular, one group of laws that marked the path of the new government

were the Ferry Laws, which made elementary education in France compulsory and secular. This legislation marked a radical shift in the education policy of the French government, considering that as recently as 1850 laws had been passed protecting the rights of the Church to establish schools. These schools were intended to create the secular identity that was to characterize the Third Republic. By fully understanding the lasting effects of the original French Revolution in combination with the internal and external forces that were affecting the Third Republic, it becomes clear that both republicanism and pragmatism led to the creation of the Ferry Laws.

The French Revolution of 1789 is in many ways an extension of the French Revolution carried out a century earlier. To attempt to label even a small few specific reasons for the revolution would be to ignore the fact that there were numerous political, social, and religious factors coming together to bring about this revolution. Politically, revolutionaries rejected the concept of the absolute authority of the monarch, Louis XVI. For many years, the monarch of France was seen as the father of the country and the people as his children. Just as the leader of a church guides his followers, the king of France claimed to be the absolute moral and social authority for the nation. However, Dale Van Kley notes in his book, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution* that “...by the 1780’s a century of desacralizing religious conflict had done its worst, stripping the king of his public patriarchal qualities.”2 Indeed, as the monarch connected himself more and more with the church and the idea of absolute power, his faults as a man became more apparent to the people of France. In addition, the citizens of France were making it known that the current system of political representation was flawed.

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Since 1614, the government of France had included a parliament known as the Estates General made up of three representative bodies, known as the First Estate, Second Estate, and Third Estate. The members of the First Estate were all Catholic clergymen, while the Second Estate was comprised entirely of members of the old nobility. The members of the Third Estate came from the remaining portion of society, and when issues were presented to the Estates General, each Estate was given one vote on the matter. Two problems were very clear with this system. First, the Estates General was not a parliament in the sense that it was a government body that met on a regular basis to make policy. Rather, it only met when summoned by the king, and served more as a guide rather than an actual legislative body.

The second problem was the fact that each Estate was given an equal vote in matters presented to the Estates General. This created a situation in which the Estates of the nobility and the clergy, who comprised a very small portion of the total population, could control the direction of the Estates General. Meanwhile, the Third Estate, which in reality represented the majority of the French people was unable to effectively represent its constituents. Thus, when the king received approval from the “representative” body of the people, in actuality he received approval from the small group of Frenchmen who would benefit from a strong monarchy. Enlightenment theorists of the 18th Century such as Voltaire and Rousseau raised awareness throughout Europe of the dangers of absolute monarchy. The focus of the Enlightenment according to these theorists was the use of reason to solve all problems, whether they were social or political. Clearly, a reasonable solution to a political problem entails asking the opinions of more than the nobility and clergy of a nation. In addition, the use of reason further entails questioning

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traditional values or beliefs, such as religious doctrines. A French political cartoon published in 1789 demonstrates this critical view of the Estates General from the perspective of the ordinary French citizen. In this cartoon, one can see a naked common man bound in chains being ridden by a clergyman, an aristocrat, and a judge.\textsuperscript{4} Clearly, this demonstrates the feeling that the members of the Third Estate, the common man, was being dominated and abused by the higher estates. At this point, both the government and the church that supported it were being challenged, and it would not be long before action was taken.

On June 17, 1789, the Third Estate formed its own political body known as the National Assembly and claimed to be the voice of the people of France. This political move was soon followed by action in the streets, and on July 14, an armament storage facility and former political prison known as the Bastille was seized, and soon after Louis XVI abdicated, and the First Republic was born. With this symbolic victory, it seemed as though the people of France had discarded the monarchy in favor of a government that would live up to the motto of the Revolution: liberty, equality, brotherhood. However, the reign of the Republic would be short, as by 1804 France would officially be an empire.

To understand the reasons why the ideas of the Revolution lingered on in the minds of Frenchmen long after the death of the First Republic, it is important to understand why the Revolution failed. One of the first tasks of the new government was to hold elections to choose the new leaders of the government. Indeed, one of the primary reasons that the monarchical government was seen as illegitimate by many Frenchmen was that the leaders were not elected by the people. Though elections were

\textsuperscript{4} Spielvogel, \textit{Western Civilization} p. 537
frequent in the First Republic, they were not the primary way in which the goals of the Revolution were accomplished. According to historian Rafe Blaufarb, “Insurrection, civil war, and coups d’etat proved more important than elections in determining the course of revolutionary politics.”\textsuperscript{5} Unfortunately for the new government, while it may have had the ideological support of the French people, the methods of implementing this ideology turned many supporters into enemies. For instance, peasants in rural areas of France would often take great joy in humiliating their former lords. Historian John Markoff notes that in rural areas, “Lords were dragged outside and forced to make public renunciations of their rights, often recorded by a notary.”\textsuperscript{6} While these acts certainly provided instant gratification for the people involved they were in no means indicative of how a modern state should conduct itself. However, this culture of violence and extralegal action was seen in all areas of the Republican government, and the relationship between the church and state was no exception.

Soon after taking control of the country, the National Assembly moved quickly to lash out against the Catholic Church, which in its view had worked with the monarchy and nobility to weaken the power of the common Frenchmen. Church property was seized and nationalized, schools were closed and priests were ridiculed while the new government stood in support of the individuals, mainly Jacobians, carrying out the violence. Van Kley argues that “If tragedy there was, it was neither that the early Revolution dared to reform the church at all…but rather that it reformed it in such a way as to divide and ultimately to alienate even that considerable body of Catholic opinion

sympathetic to…the Revolution itself.”

As Van Kley suggests, the general problem of the First Republic was not its ideals. Indeed, there was clearly a large portion of the population that supported the ideas of popular representation and a government that separated itself from the Catholic Church. What they did not support was a government that went about accomplishing these goals through violence rather than through more respectful and legal routes. Within a decade, the people of France were willing to trade the chaos of the Republic for the security of Napoleon’s empire, yet the revolutionary values that were popular would remain in the French psyche through the Empire, Second Republic, and Second Empire, resurfacing again in the Third Republic.

The Third Republic of France began auspiciously. The French military had just been soundly defeated in the Franco-Prussian War which ended in 1871. The bitter loss was fresh in the minds of the French, who saw it as being a result of a largely backwards system of government in the Second Empire and sought to take measures to modernize the country. Part of this shift included a desire to have a more secular government, one that was dedicated to the equality of its citizens, similar to the ideals seen in the government of the First Republic. A member of the Senate declared “le socialisme est le dernier mot de la revolution,” which translates to “socialism is the final word of the revolution.”

The meaning of this statement was multi-faceted. First, this senator made a connection between the modernization effort in France and the general shift towards socialism throughout Europe, which implied that taking a position against legislation that provided for the separation of church and state was akin to taking a position against France joining the “modern” community. Election results from the time period when the

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Third Republic ran the country to elucidate this phenomenon. In 1911, political economist D.A. MacGibbon reported that “In 1889, socialism [the Socialist Labor Party] pulled a vote of 90,000; in 1891, a vote of 549,000. In 1893 it elected 50 members to the French Chamber of Deputies and thus entered the lists as a great political party.”

Within the context of the recent defeat at the hands of the Germans, it seemed to many as though failure to join the modern community, which the Germans were a part of, would lead to more embarrassments. This community contained many aspects beyond those embodied in the German government. Within Germany, the French saw an example of a nation that had a strong leader in Bismarck as well as a representative system embodied in a parliament. Furthermore, the French saw in Germany a school system that was producing a superior and better trained body of students. For example, when the Ferry Laws were passed, 15 percent of the French population was illiterate, including a total of over 600,000 children. This figure can be compared to the 3 percent illiteracy rate seen in the German states of Saxony and Bavaria. While Germany itself was not a pure socialist country, there were examples of socialist policies in other European nations. For example the British government, since its refusal to provide aid during the Irish Famine of the 1850’s led to thousands of deaths, was in the process of creating an expansive social welfare system. For example, under the administration of William Gladstone from 1868-1874, civil service positions were granted based on standardized exams, removing the system of patronage that had been in place. Thus, while there were not yet any completely socialist nations in Europe, two of the most powerful nations were making obvious steps towards more socialist policies. The Third

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10 Journal Officiel de la Chambre, December 21, 1880, p. 12614-12619
11 Spielvogel, *Western Civilization* p. 636
Republic, clearly wanting to return France to its position of prominence in Europe undoubtedly attempted to mimic the policies of these governments.

It should be noted that for the term socialism does not necessarily imply a communistic state, nor does it imply a connection with Marxism. For most of western Europe, the type of socialism which gained the most support was revisionist socialism, which sought to achieve the benefits of communism without resorting to a violent revolution. In many ways, revisionist socialism is similar to the welfare state which developed in post-World War II Europe as it sought to provide things such as education, regulated hours for workers, and representation for the working class citizens and the poor. Thus, while socialist parties were gaining popularity in western states such as France, it is essential to recognize that these were predominantly moderate socialists who were far more interested in promoting social welfare programs than in inciting a working class revolution through the end of the 19th century.

Next, by mentioning the Revolution, this senator was attempting to provide some historical legitimacy to the legislation. Many political figures of the Third Republic framed their political policies to carry out the goals of the original French Revolution, goals that now in many cases seemed to be compatible with the changes seen around Europe. Arguably the most prominent political figure who fit this description was Jules Ferry, a man who was a longtime opponent of the Second Empire and a man who would eventually become Minister of Education.

If one were to attempt to identify the key actions of Ferry during his time in government, undoubtedly the lasting legacies of his tenure were the pieces of legislation which bear his name, the Ferry Laws. These laws, passed in 1881 and 1882, made
elementary education compulsory for all French children, boys and girls, and required the primary education to be completed at a secular institution to be certified by the government. This legislation represented a rather sharp change from the policies of the Second Empire regarding the presence of the Catholic Church in education; in 1850, for example, the Falloux Law had protected the rights of the Church to establish its own schools. This change can be explained in part by the attitude of some Catholic teachers and other noble figures of the time regarding the non-egalitarian nature of education in France. Ferry himself commented at a conference in Paris in 1870 that “with the inequality of education, one can never have the equality of rights; not theoretical rights, but real rights, and the equality of rights is the foundation of democracy.” It seems as though many Catholic institutions of the era were concerned more with providing an education to those who were deemed worthy of one, rather than to all children. Historian Patrick Harrigan notes that when the Ferry Laws were created, “Teachers of Catholic schools in Aix even argued that it was better to direct some students into commercial occupations than to have too many and the ‘unsuited’ aspiring to the professions.”

Although steering certain students towards specific educational paths was not uncommon in most European states, problems arose when politicians began to recognize the fact that students were being directed towards less prosperous professions based not on their ability but rather based on their family background. Indeed, the belief that there are people who are unworthy of being educated because of factors such as family prestige or wealth is clearly incompatible with a government that is trying to modernize and liberalize its society.

12 Jules Ferry “De L’égalité d’éducation,” 1870.
One segment of society that quickly benefited from the legislation was young French girls, who were given their first chance at an equal education. French historian Alexandre Debidour notes that from the opening of the first all girls’ high school in France on October 3, 1881, sixteen new schools were opened around the country within five years. In addition, the number of female students rose from only a few hundred when the laws were passed to over 6,000 in the same period of time. Clearly, this change represents a positive shift towards equality in education, as thousands of young girls now had the chance to be educated in a way that was previously unavailable to them. Furthermore, the young boys of France would also see an expansion of schools, especially in rural areas where the only type of education had been provided by the Church.

Beyond the establishment of secular schools for the children of France, the Ferry Laws sought to ensure that the education that would be provided would be consistent with the values of the Republic. In his comprehensive two volume history on the presence of the Catholic Church in state affairs titled The Catholic Church and the State, Debidour comments that “It is imperative that the people…not have for educators the most dangerous enemies of our liberal institutions.” Debidour’s work chronicled the relationship between the Church and the French state from 1876-1906 and provides historians with an excellent primary source on the dynamics of the relationship between the two institutions. His book clearly supports the policies of the Republican government as is seen in the way in which he identifies Church educators as enemies of liberalism. Like the Revolutionary thinkers of 18th century France, Debidour saw the Catholic

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15 Debidour p. 275
Church as an institution which desired its members to obediently follow its directives rather than cultivate their own beliefs through the process of reasoning. Thus, in addition to removing the influence of the Catholic Church from the French schools, the laws were also designed to make sure that any other person or group who might support anti-republican ideals would not have the power to influence French children. These people included teachers who were trained by the Church or teachers who refused to teach along the guidelines outlined by the government.

An example of the way in which this was accomplished can be seen in the law of February 27, 1880, which introduced a bill in order to “reform the Higher Council of Public Education through the exclusion of the clergy.”16 In 1873, the Council consisted of forty members, over half of whom were representatives of the Church or social interest groups. After the law was passed, the majority of the council consisted of fifty-eight members, none of whom were representatives of the Church or social interest groups. In addition, the law granted the Council “surveillance over ‘free’ schools, could forbid their use of certain texts as contrary to morality, the constitution, and the laws.”17 Here, one gets an initial sense that there were perhaps more than simply egalitarian goals in mind regarding the spread of popular education. The government sought not only to remove illiberal influences but also, it appears, to create a new generation of perfect Republicans through its public education system.

Ferry himself provides a valuable insight into the government’s objectives in a letter he sent to French teachers in November of 1883 in which he outlines the key

17 Acomb, *The French Laic Laws and the First Anti-Clerical Campaign of the Third French Republic* p. 149
principles of his legislation. He writes that “It is our mission that you [the teachers] give to our students a moral education as well as civic instruction.” This statement seems to clearly suggest that part of the new education would include instruction as to the benefits of serving one’s government, a concept that is crucial to the success of a republic. The leaders of the Third Republic had undoubtedly examined the failures of the two previous French Republics and appeared to be trying to create a culture in France that was conducive to both the ideals and the practical realities of a Republic. Ferry continues by proclaiming that

it is the primary goal to separate the school and the Church, to assure the freedom of the conscience…of the students, to distinguish between two things that have long been confused: beliefs, which are personal, free, and changeable, and facts, which are communal and indispensable to all.19

Throughout the letter, Ferry makes many references to the kind of moral instruction that the new schools are supposed to provide. For teachers who were unsure of whether or not their lessons complied with the guidelines of the government, Ferry advised that they imagine as though a father of one of their students was present in class. “Imagine that a father was present in your class and listened to what you were saying…if he would not agree with what you are saying, you must stop.”20 This clearly suggests that the teachers were to limit themselves to an education based on facts that, according to the government, were beyond dispute. This would also be more likely to create a unified student body which would not be divided by potentially controversial religious teachings. Later in the letter, Ferry reminds the teachers that “Religious instruction is the duty of the family and the Church, and moral education is the duty of the school.”21

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19 Lettre aux instituteurs
20 Lettre aux instituteurs
21 Lettre aux instituteurs
Here, it is crucial to note that it is not simply education that is the duty of the school, but rather a moral education. Morality had previously been the domain of the Catholic Church, which had its own longstanding code of morality. In the Third Republic, the government was making a clear attempt to unseat the Catholic Church as the source for morality among the people of France, with these morals conforming to the values of a Republican state. Near the end of the letter, Ferry again asserts to the teachers that it is necessary “to distinguish between moral lessons, which are obligatory, and the other types of lessons which are not.”

Thus, one can clearly see the extent to which the government was stressing to its educators that first and foremost, they were to provide moral and civic instruction to the youth of France. The children were to be exposed to material that promoted the values of a truly Republican state and that encouraged both support for and future participation in the government.

An examination of the current French Code of Education can provide an insight into the extent to which the French government sought to control every facet of education in France. When a historian attempts to conduct research on any piece of legislation passed in France prior to 1986, he or she will quickly discover that the French government does not contain any online archives of legislation from this era. However, it does provide links to current pieces of legislation that in the opinion of government scholars who have studied the development of French politics mirrors the legislation that is desired. Therefore, by analyzing both the current articles of the French Code of Education which are direct descendents of the Ferry Laws in addition with statements made by Ferry in government debates, a clear picture is formed demonstrating how thorough government control of education was after the legislation was passed.

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22 Lettre aux instituteurs
One particularly interesting statement occurs in Articles L 131-6 and L 131-7, which state that if a child does not meet his or her academic obligations for the school year, both the child and the parents can be punished by the government in certain cases.\textsuperscript{23} What is so unique about these two articles is the fact that they are found in the national code of education, not in a regional or provincial code. This fact makes sense when it is considered in the context of the late 19\textsuperscript{th} Century. When the national government assumed increasing control over issues, such as education, which had traditionally been handled on a local level, it shows that there must have been a population willing to accept a more expansive government.

This statement is further supported by the fact that there were no measures taken in either the Chamber or the Senate to overturn the Ferry Laws after they were enacted. Indeed, the records of both the Chamber and the Senate of the Third Republic demonstrate that an overwhelming of both representative bodies of the Third Republic were in support of Ferry’s legislation. For example, the Chamber approved Ferry’s bill establishing free primary education by a vote of 356-120, with the Senate approving the same bill by a vote of 164-90.\textsuperscript{24} Those who did not support the legislation were generally persons who either still had ties to the Catholic Church or persons who were wealthy enough to provide education for themselves and their families.

Another example of the extent to which the government was seeking to mold its citizens occurs in Article L 131-8, which deals with acceptable reasons that children may be allowed to miss school. This article states that children may miss school because of an illness, death or sickness in the family, family reunion, or other extraneous circumstances.

\textsuperscript{23} French Code of Education, Art. L 131-6, L 131-7
\textsuperscript{24} Journal Officiel de la Republique Francaise, Nov. 30, 1880, p. 11729
that can be approved by local officials.\footnote{French Code of Education, Art. L 131-8} Again, nothing contained in this article is particularly shocking or outlandish, but perhaps the important question to consider is why the French felt the need to include something as seemingly banal as excused absences in a national code of law. This is likely due to the desire of the Third Republic to ensure that its young people were receiving education consistent with the values of the state, and it was impossible to be sure of this if the children were at home with their parents and not in schools where their actions could be controlled. In the United States, for example, while there are general national standards of education that must be adhered to, for the most part towns and states have the authority to determine policy such as why children are allowed to miss school.

Another aspect of the education code is the repeated mention of not only the French children, but French parents as well. Indeed, in nearly every Article, there is a reference made to the obligations of the children and the duty of the parents or guardians to ensure that their child is meeting his or her obligations. For example, Article L 131-5 states that it is the legal responsibility of the parents or guardians to ensure that their child is registered for some type of formal education by the time the child turns 6. This particular article directly mirrors the original legislation drafted by Ferry and supported by his friend in the Senate, Paul Bert. In a statement to the Senate, Burt outlined the bill by explaining that

\begin{quote}
A municipal school commission is to enforce this requirement [mandatory schooling above age 6], while the father or guardian of a child is to notify the mayor as to the school of his choice and give the head of the school reasons for any absence. Children educated in the family are to take an examination given by a special jury every year.\footnote{Journal Officiel, March 29, 1882, p. 1697-98}
\end{quote}
Further examination of the current Code of Education provides examples of the actions outlined by Bert and Ferry. A later article of the Code states that if the family moves or changes residences for an extended period of time, the parents must notify the school in their new location and register the child with that school as soon as possible.\textsuperscript{27} Should the parents decide that they would rather have their child home-schooled, they are allowed to do so, provided that they can demonstrate to the proper government officials that they are qualified to be educators within the French system.\textsuperscript{28} Clearly, there are numerous examples of ways in which the current Code of Education mirrors the reforms made by Ferry in the early 1880’s. What legislation such as this suggests is that there seems to be an attempt on the side of the government to associate itself with the French family, to become a part of family life. This also makes sense given the fact that Ferry was clearly trying to ensure a moral education would be given in French schools, as this had traditionally been another responsibility of the family. This new moral education would take the form of an education in civic responsibility rather than the type of individual morality present in Church schools.

As these changes were taking place in France, nations that had already severed the relationship between the state and religion were taking notice. For example, there was coverage of the parliamentary debates of the Third Republic seen in the \textit{New York Times}. In April of 1879, the \textit{Times} commented on the amount of control the government would have under the new legislation in comparison with the authority of the national government in the United States. The \textit{Times} noted that “Here it is only elementary instruction, or at most what in other countries is called secondary education, that is

\textsuperscript{27} French Code of Education, Art. L 131-5
\textsuperscript{28} French Code of Education, Art. L 131-4, L 131-10
regarded as a matter of public concern, and even with the administration, of that the national government has nothing to do.” 29  Clearly, a significant portion of the outside world recognized the great amount of control that the national government would have in regards to education. The Times recognized the broader objectives of the law in its attempt to undermine the Catholic Church’s authority: “An unavowed but probably far stronger objection to them [Catholic schools] is that they are bitterly hostile to the existing institutions of France, and do not hesitate to propagate their hostility.” 30  When compared with Ferry’s letter to teachers, this argument makes a great deal of sense. In his letters, Ferry was clearly trying to stress to French teachers the absolute importance of giving an education rich in Republican and civic values, which were seen to be different from the values being taught in religious schools of the era. Thus, even from the beginning of the debates, there were signals that the Ferry Laws were about more than simply providing an education to all French children. The government was determined to provide the right education in order to create an ideal Republican community which they felt would be impossible to establish with the existing educational institutions.

The Times highlights that the French government was trying to mold a new Republican country and also provides insight into the popularity of the legislation among the people. In August of 1880, the newspaper bluntly states that “It was evident that if the youth of France could be taken out of the hands of the reverend fathers and put into the State schools the country would be the gainer to an inestimable degree.” 31  This suggests that there were many people outside of France who believed that the French would be better off if their children were educated in a manner consistent with a modern

Republican state. Furthermore, the Times suggested, although without providing specific evidence, that the legislation was gaining support in France. It states that Ferry “…has framed the new [education system] with such logical simplicity and clear perception of the remedies required, and has so completely won the popular approval for his ideas that…the work of reform is practically finished.”\(^{32}\) Since there is no evidence to qualify the statement regarding the popularity of the legislation, it would be prudent to assume that this was not entirely the case, but there must have been something on which to base this statement. Thus, even if the legislation did not have the complete support suggested by the article, it would seem as though there must have been at least a good deal of support among influential Frenchmen.

Within the United States, the Times also focused attention on similar events occurring in Georgia in September of 1883. This particular example contains the story of a man within the Catholic Church who tried to take a stand against the secularizing of American schools. In this case, a man named Father Hennessy announced to his Catholic congregation that they ought to immediately remove their students from the immoral environment of American public education, on the penalty of not receiving a proper Christian burial. The Times expresses its support for both Georgia Senator Brown and Congressman Nathaniel Hammond, who “refused to agree to the subterfuge by which the State would be compelled to pay for religious instruction.”\(^{33}\)

Drawing on the evidence thus far, the government of France seemed to have at least two primary motivations in drafting the Ferry Laws. The first was to create an educational system that would provide schooling for all children, which was an action


that would be consistent with the general democratic climate of Europe at the time. The second was clearly to remove the influence of the Catholic Church and instill values in the French children that would ensure the success of the Third Republic. What is not as clear is which of these motivations could be considered the primary factor, or whether or not there were additional factors that also contributed to the creation of a secular, state run educational system.

One of the important things to keep in mind when considering the Ferry Laws is the way in which the Third Republic began. Recovering from a humiliating defeat at the hands of Otto von Bismarck and the Prussian Army in 1871, the Third Republic was established at a time when French confidence was at an extreme low. One parliament member asked in 1880, “Could it be true that France has been reduced to a condition inferior to that of neighboring peoples, so that we cannot realize here the progress accomplished elsewhere?”  

This sentiment was held by many in the country who felt that the defeat in the Franco-Prussian War demonstrated the backwardness of France in comparison with the rest of Europe. Ferry himself, commenting on the situation in 1885, said that

One must have been blind during the events of 1870, to have been accomplices in 1871, not to acknowledge that, in these two terrible experiences, one would not have been able to save the honor of France nor France itself, without these two things: the persistent feeling of national unity and the little which remains standing of a unitary and centralized government.  

One of the “backward” things to fix in the eyes of the Third Republic was clearly education, and by changing the way in which it was administered they could appeal to this sentiment in favor of modernization. Clearly, national unity was something that the

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34 Acomb, The French Laic Laws and the First Anti-Clerical Campaign of the Third French Republic, p. 96
35 Acomb, The French Laic Laws and the First Anti-Clerical Campaign of the Third French Republic p. 125
new government hoped would be promoted by re-formatting the educational system. Historian Evelyn Acomb writes that the government felt that “primary education should be established first so that the mass of the electorate might be trained in the ideals of the new regime.”\footnote{Acomb, The French Laic Laws and the First Anti-Clerical Campaign of the Third French Republic, p. 153} In order to ensure that the schools were stocked with the kind of teachers that Ferry advocated, the government enacted numerous pieces of legislation detailing a variety of offenses that would result in the dismissal of a teacher. By 1882, a teacher could be fired if he or she were, “inadequately trained, celibate, sometimes criminal, unsympathetic with the material, moral, and intellectual progress of modern society, unpatriotic, and hostile to the principles upon which the republic was founded.”\footnote{Acomb, The French Laic Laws and the First Anti-Clerical Campaign of the Third French Republic, p. 179} The ramifications of the state monopoly on education did not go uncontested in the Chamber. Ferdinand Boyer, a member of the Chamber, stated in 1879 that “If the state is to have a monopoly of education, there is a danger that one party would acquire excessive powers or that the state would give [teaching] positions only to its graduates.”\footnote{Journal Officiel de la Chambre, June 18, 1879, p. 5319-25} Clearly, one can not discount the way in which the government used the Ferry Laws to make it seem as though it was committed to modernity. This commitment would not only gain the support of those in France who echoed the same sentiments, but by carrying out the legislation, it would allow the government to mold the segments of society less inclined to a Republic into a more ideal Republican community.

Overall, it is clear that there were a multitude of factors that contributed to the mindset that led to the Ferry Laws. The weak starting position of the Third Republic left the new government in a position where it needed to make a strong statement about its
commitment to the improvement of the French state. A key aspect of this commitment involved severing the relationship between the government and the Catholic Church, which had played an influential role in shaping French culture for centuries. The Ferry Laws sought to remove Catholic influence over education by making schooling for French children both mandatory and secular. By doing this, the government of the Third Republic was able to reduce the influence of the Church in a way that was much more acceptable to the citizens of France than the violent methods pursued during the French Revolution. Thus, it seems as though the government was trying to replace the Catholic Church as the symbol of France by creating legislation that would establish a culture thoroughly educated in the values that characterize a modern Republican state.
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