The 19th century was a period of tremendous change and upheaval for the European continent that completely reshaped the political, economic, and social history of Western civilization. Among the many institutions that were profoundly altered during this period, the Catholic Church was one which experienced a fundamental change at its very foundations and a shift of focus that would carry on well into the 20th century. While a wave of Revolutions swept through Europe, beginning in the year 1789 and culminating in 1848, the Catholic Church experienced one of the most turbulent centuries in its history. Forced to adapt or be rendered obsolete in an increasingly modern world, the Church faced challenges that were political and ideological as well as social in nature, and the ways that it responded to each of these challenges resulted in the emergence of a Church with fundamentally different priorities and emphases than those it had held as immutable before the onslaught of the first French Revolution.

To fully understand the ways that the Catholic Church changed over the course of the nineteenth century, it is necessary to appreciate first how the Church, and its Catholic adherents, saw herself and her role towards the end of the 18th century. Before the onset of the French Revolution, the Church was regarded by all as not only a spiritual authority, but a political one as well. While the critique of organized religion that came about during the Enlightenment, coupled with many rulers’ desire for political and financial independence from Rome had led to an overall decline in the international power of the Papacy, the Catholic Church was still an influential force in the lives of many Europeans at the close of the 18th century. In pre-

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Revolutionary France, for example, the Church was intrinsically linked with the state in that “a non-Christian French monarchy was simply inconceivable”\(^2\) and for this reason, when Louis XVI’s monarchy fell during the Revolution, the Gallican Church was likewise doomed. Seen as a source of oppression and wealth, the Church’s property was seized by the victorious Revolutionaries, although it is important to note that this looting of Church property had far more to do with economics and politics than it did with religion. After Napoleon’s conquest of Italy, the Church suffered another devastating political and financial loss with the French capture of the Papal States, but this proved a temporary setback as the Church regained these lands after the Congress of Vienna. The complete loss of temporal power, even for a brief time, was seen as incredibly dangerous to Papal authority because at this time the political independence of the Papal States was still believed to be necessary for the survival of Catholicism.\(^3\) As such, the political challenge posed by the French Revolution played an important role in guiding the Church’s response to many of the other challenges encountered during this period.

The restoration of the Papal States came with its own problems, however, as Napoleon’s occupation had sown the seeds of liberalism and nationalism throughout Italy. This inspired subsequent popes to take a decidedly conservative stance in an effort to suppress these threatening ideologies and thus maintain the political authority of the Church. Despite this fact, a pope emerged towards the middle of the 19\(^{th}\) century who seemed ready to answer the prayers of Italian liberals and nationalists alike. Pope Pius IX began his papacy by instituting a number of changes such as freedom of the press and the establishment of a civic guard, making liberals

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hopeful that the Church was heading in a more progressive direction. Nationalists in turn were delighted when Pius asked for God’s blessing on ‘Italy’, despite the fact that “in the age of Metternich, ‘Italy’ was a dangerous hypothesis.” Even though Pius was clearly personally in favor of a united Italy, the only way that this unification could be achieved was by waging war against the largely Catholic Hapsburg Empire of Austria. This was something that Pius refused to do, for reasons that were as much political as they were religious. At the Congress of Vienna, the continental Great Powers had formed the Holy Alliance, with the intention of crushing any revolutionary forces that threatened to upset the European balance of power. For this reason, Pius feared that even if the Italians were able to defeat Austria, they would only end up being crushed by the other members of the Holy Alliance as a result. In the words of Pius himself, “Italy left to herself would soon be the first of the Great Powers of the world, and therefore the Five Powers of Europe will ever prevent her unity.” Pius’ failure to lead the Italian Revolution, as well as his subsequent turn towards more conservative policies led to a huge decline in his popularity as Italian liberals and nationalists came to see that the Church would not provide the political changes for which they had hoped.

His attitude rapidly hardening towards liberal ideas, Pius issued the Syllabus of Errors in 1864, condemning just about every aspect of modernity including socialism, science, and Protestantism. This demonstration of such extreme conservatism undermined papal support, making it easier for the Piedmontese to capture Rome, and thus robbing the Pope of the little temporal power that remained to him. With the loss of his political authority Pius tried a different approach wherein he transformed the doctrine of Papal infallibility, whereby the Pope

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7 Ibid. pp. 406-7.
was understood to always be correct when he spoke *ex cathedra* on matters of faith, into dogma. In this way, Pius hoped to reinforce his spiritual authority while his temporal authority collapsed, but like the Syllabus of Errors, this decision sparked outrage. The Pope was unjustly accused of using this supposedly religious declaration as an attempt to regain political power by effectively placing himself higher than any European ruler.\(^8\) In Germany, Pius’ declaration sparked the Kulturkampf, or culture struggle, in which the German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck sought to exert political control over Catholic institutions throughout Germany, forcing Catholicism into a more and more private sphere.\(^9\) Bismarck accused the Church of operating counter to the modern principles of competition and democracy, and thanks to the Syllabus of Errors and Pius’ obviously staunch conservatism, this position was easy to justify. In this way, the Church continued to lose temporal power throughout the century until its political authority had all but vanished entirely. However, after Pius’ declaration of Papal infallibility, the Church began to move in a different direction, placing more emphasis on its spiritual and social role than on the loss of political power.

The challenges facing the Church during the 19th century were not limited to the political sphere, however, and even as the Great Powers chipped away at the temporal power of the Papacy, Catholics were simultaneously caught up in an ideological battle over the very core of their teachings. It must be noted that the ideological component of religious belief throughout the 19th century is especially difficult to trace for the obvious reason that the depth of a person’s religious commitment is nearly impossible for an outsider to assess. At the beginning of the century, the majority of people still believed in God, despite the fact that the temporal authority of the established churches was beginning to wane, but by the end of the century the number of

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vocal atheists and agnostics had greatly increased, ultimately leading the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche to make his famous claim, “God is dead.”

This diminution of religious belief developed for a number of different reasons but was spurred on, at least in part, by the Church’s inability to adequately respond. The flowering of romanticism had led to a brief resurgence of religious themes in art and literature, but upon the onset of realism, this interest in the supernatural was quickly replaced by a concern for secular themes of everyday life. While the Catholicism still served as a guiding force of order and morality for many people, true belief in the doctrines of the Church had significantly decreased over the course of the late 18th century, due in part to the spread of the Enlightenment’s emphasis on human reason. People at this time often conformed to religious traditions more for material benefit than genuine belief, simply because Christianity was so deeply engrained in European society that to openly reject it could result in social alienation and unemployment. As such, while the majority of people in Catholic countries, such as France, still fulfilled their Easter duties, this did not entail that they were all devout Christians.

In addition to a general weakening of faith throughout European society, the scientific advances that had made the Industrial Revolution possible generated an intellectual assault on the basic principles on which Christianity was founded. This assault began with the discovery that the Earth was in fact millions of years older than previously believed, undermining a literal reading of the book of Genesis, and culminated in the popularization of Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection. At first it seems unclear as to why Darwin’s theory was such a blow to the established churches, as it does not directly refute belief in a Creator God. To grasp the root of this controversy, it is necessary to understand the intellectual backdrop against which

this discovery came about. Well before Darwin ever took his life changing voyage on the
Beagle, the British theologian William Paley had put forth his famous argument for the existence
of God by claiming that just as a complicated device such as a watch must have a maker, so must
the vastly more complicated universe. This argument was built around the idea that God created
each living thing to be perfectly suited to its environment, and was required reading for students
in Divinity for well over the first half of the 19th century.\(^\text{12}\) Although this argument helped to
link religion with science and provide a rational explanation for belief in God, it had catastrophic
consequences for religious belief towards the end of the century. Darwin’s theory that evolution
occurred in small stages over a vast stretch of time by means of natural selection overtly
contradicted Paley’s notion of living creatures being perfectly suited to their environment and
thus undermined his entire argument. Because this argument had become so deeply engrained in
the intellectual study of religion throughout Britain and much of Europe as well, the complete
refutation of Paley’s underlying premise seemed to render belief in God altogether untenable.
Paley had made Christianity entirely dependent on miracles and so when modern science robbed
creation of its miraculous quality, Christianity seemed to lose its force as an intellectually viable
position.\(^\text{13}\) One 19th century writer, F. Schaubach, gave a keen analysis of the prevailing opinion
of the time when he stated: “It is almost as though people want to show how intelligent they
think they are by the degree of their emancipation from Bible and Catechism.”\(^\text{14}\) As far as most
scientific intellectuals were concerned in the late 19th century, the days of superstition were over
and people could finally find freedom from religious oppression. That is, in the form of modern
science and technology, which seemed to promise a better and brighter future for all humankind.

Just as the political challenges of liberalism and nationalism had forced the Church to adjust its attitude towards temporal power, the ideological challenges of science and modernity led to a reevaluation of the fundamental role of the Catholic Church in European society.

In addition, while the Church suffered defeats in both the political and intellectual arenas, she came to excel in the social sphere of European life, with a rediscovery of the charitable principles which had characterized the early Christian Church. This came about as a reaction to the spread of new laissez-faire policies towards the destitute working class on the part of governments and intellectuals alike in the secular sphere. Although Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection had begun as a purely scientific theory, it soon came to take on moral implications. People began adapting it to justify cutting off aid to the poor, in that helping those who were financially disadvantaged seemed to work contrary to the natural principles of evolutionary progress. The Industrial Revolution had caused huge demographic changes throughout Europe, resulting in high concentrations of unskilled, and often unemployed, workers in urban centers who were forced to live in deplorable conditions of extreme poverty. By applying the scientific theory of natural selection to human affairs, wealthier Europeans could justify refusing aid to the poor, and the speed with which the idea of Social Darwinism was able to spread can likely be attributed at least in part to the fact that it fit in so well with the competitive mindset of the 19th century.¹⁵

Over the course of the century, there were many isolated incidents of religiously inspired charity, such as the response of both Catholic and Protestant Churches in Ireland during the potato famine. Both of these Churches saw the famine as an opportunity to do God’s work by helping those in need, and so directed much of their energy towards providing food for the many

starving people in need of financial aid. 16 Aside from these kinds of isolated instances, however, the Church made no real organized effort at attempting to overcome the poverty of the working class for the first half of the century. This could be due to any number of reasons, although it seems likely that the political battle in which Pius IX found himself engaged over the temporal jurisdiction of the Papacy in France and Italy diverted much of the Church’s energy towards political rather than social issues. For this reason, the Church was initially unsuccessful in winning over much of the working class, and was instead perceived as a force of oppression by people like Karl Marx who claimed that religion was used to keep the poor from overcoming their circumstances. According to Marx, the only way to overcome social alienation was to reject religion outright. 17

Towards the end of the 19th century, Leo XIII became Pope, and this marked the beginning of a transformation regarding the Church’s attitude towards aiding the poor. The Church had already given up most of its political aspirations by this point, forced to face the reality of its changing role within an increasingly secular society. Instead, the Church began a new wave of socially oriented activity. Leo XIII urged Catholics to “go out to the people, doing all they possibly can for the workers, the poor, and members of the lower classes.” 18 This new attitude of a socially active Church was reinforced when the Pope issued the encyclical entitled Rerum Novarum in 1896, condemning both capitalism and socialism alike as detrimental to the well-being of the impoverished workers. Unlike the declarations of his predecessors, Leo did not try to assert the temporal authority of the Church in this encyclical. Instead, he chose to take a position of moral leadership within the European community in order to better the conditions of

The working class. The combination of Leo’s emphasis on a religion of good works and the virtual disappearance of ecclesiastical temporal power led to a fundamental shift in focus for the Catholic Church, which proved to be exactly the transformation she needed to survive the challenge of modernity.

The 19th century was a time of tremendous turbulence and change for the Catholic Church, just as it was for the rest of Europe. Over the course of a hundred years, the Church had transformed from a monolithic institution whose spiritual and temporal powers were deemed utterly inseparable, into a socially conscious organization concerned with aiding the poor and providing moral guidance. While at the beginning of the century the Church had deemed its political power essential to its survival, by the end of the century this branch of her power had all but vanished, and yet, the Church nonetheless endured the struggle by reinventing itself and redefining her priorities. Similar to the events in Bismarck’s Germany, but to a larger scale, the Church had ceased to exist as a secular power, becoming relegated to the private life of its congregation. Throughout Europe, religion would cease to serve as the means by which people identified themselves, and while allegiance to one’s state or nation came to take primary importance, religion transformed into an organization that was purely voluntary and was in many ways “analogous to clubs of stamp-collectors only doubtless larger.”

Nonetheless, the 19th century is best characterized as a transformation rather than a diminution for the

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Catholic Church in Europe. By ceasing to emphasize the political nature of her relationship to the congregation, the Church was finally able to shift focus to the social issues that had plagued Europe throughout most of the century, ushering in a new phase in the history of Catholicism and the birth of the modern Church.
Bibliography


