

Women and the Revolution:

The Intersection of Gender and Secularism in 18th-Century France

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The French revolution radically redefined the role of women, and began to make space for women to play a more significant role in civic society. For much of French history, the Catholic Church dictated women's roles as mothers and domestic workers. With the rise of secularism in France during the French Revolution and the Enlightenment, women's roles were reevaluated and a debate emerged on women's place in the public and private sphere. Although there was much lasting legislative change for women's rights during this period, the Enlightenment and French secularization provided for the possibility of future equality. There is significant overlap between the secularization of France, Enlightenment ideas, and deliberation of women's rights during the French Revolution. By assessing the works of prominent thinkers at the time, like Voltaire and Rousseau, and their impact, we can better understand the history of gender equality in France.

In pre-revolutionary France, the Catholic Church and the Monarchy had a symbiotic relationship, and together strongly circumscribed the role of women. The Catholic Church expanded the monarchy's influence, legitimizing its rule as one of divine right approved by the Catholic Church. Before the French Revolution, the king was regarded as God's representative on Earth. He was a sovereign by God's mandation, and "in this respect...his power was "absolute"...the king was answerable to no one but God."¹ In turn, the Catholic Church derived much of its power from its immense wealth and its relationship with the monarchy. It was the

¹ "Louis XIV 1638 – 1715," Château de Versailles, accessed August 4, 2024, <https://en.chateauversailles.fr/discover/history/great-characters/louis-xiv#the-royal-family>.

largest landowner in France, and “oversaw hospitals, primary, and secondary education.”² Ideas the Catholic Church had on women or other populations in France were therefore largely considered incontrovertible; their control over education meant they controlled what and how information was taught, and subsequently, how the public viewed social matters. Legally, after the withdrawal of the Edict of Nantes (a document granting rights to specific religious minorities) all French men and women were Catholics.³ When the Edict was overturned, many religious minorities, such as Protestants, fled France, further strengthening the Church’s position. So long as the “Estates-General remained in abeyance, the quinquennial General Assembly of the Clergy stood out as the only representative body covering most of France and treating with the king and his ministers as an independent force.”⁴ The monarchy was also heavily dependent on taxes and loans from the Church, and a few of the chief ministers of France were also members of the clergy.⁵ As a result, the Catholic Church wielded great power in France.

The mutual relationship between the church, nobility, and the monarchy was further strengthened by the fact that many leaders within the church were the younger sons of nobility. Younger children of nobility often became “secular or regular clergy; daughters deemed unmarriageable were consigned to a nunnery.”⁶ This intertwined pre-revolutionary affiliation also meant that the revolutionaries saw the Church and nobility as both complicit in the subjugation of the populace and therefore entities that needed to be overturned during the Revolution. Women’s roles in the public sphere had previously been defined by these entities

² "Catholicism in France," Harvard Divinity School, last modified 2014, accessed August 4, 2024, <https://rpl.hds.harvard.edu/faq/catholicism-france#>.

³ Derek Beales, "The French Church and the Revolution," *The Historical Journal* 46, no. 1 (2003): 2, JSTOR.

⁴ Beales, "The French," 2.

⁵ Beales, "The French," 2.

⁶ Beales, "The French," 2.

jointly considered part of the *ancien régime*, the old system, and thus both had to be reconsidered.

With its power, the Catholic Church generally relegated women to domestic or service duties. In the Church itself women were allowed important, yet still subservient roles, but outside the Church, women were generally “active in traditional activities such as charitable works extended to the poor, the sick, and to prisoners, motherly duties concerning the religious education of children, or housewifely responsibilities for the observing of Catholic practice in the household.”⁷ Catholic women were “expected to be silent, chaste and more or less confined to the household, their identity submerged in that of a husband, father or master.”⁸ Women were meant to be reliant on the male presence in their households, and independent women were seen as being “particularly objectionable,”⁹ even more so if they congregated on political or religious grounds.

The French Revolution resulted from a myriad of still debated factors, eventually leading to the radical reconsideration of the monarchy and the clergy, a reevaluation of gender, and the establishment of a republic. In the 1700s France was a major European power, but suffered a rising economic crisis throughout the later half of the 18th century, culminating in 1789. These crises resulted from several deeply ingrained structural problems, including economic inequality.¹⁰ France at the time could be divided into three main sectors; the clergy, the nobility, and the peasantry. The nobility, or the second estate, paid few taxes, while the Catholic Church,

⁷ Laurence Lux-Sterritt, “Virgo becomes Virago’: Women in the Accounts of Seventeenth-Century English Catholic Missionaries,” LERMA, Université d’Aix-Marseille I, Hal Open Science, last modified September 12, 2014, accessed August 8, 2024, <https://hal.science/hal-01063764/document>.

⁸ “17th century men made misleading gender claims, says Oxford historian,” University of Oxford, last modified November 29, 2016, accessed August 8, 2024, <https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2016-11-29-17th-century-men-made-misleading-gender-claims-says-oxford-historian>.

⁹ “17th century,” University of Oxford.

¹⁰ Smith College, “The French Revolution (1789–1799),” Climate in Arts and History, accessed August 2, 2024, <https://www.science.smith.edu/climatelit/the-french-revolution-1789-1799/>.

the first estate, was completely exempt from taxation.¹¹ The economic burden fell mainly on the Third Estate, the peasantry. Wealth and power were held extremely unequally in France at the time, something increasingly becoming obvious to the Third Estate. Anti-monarchical ideas had already been brewing in France, in part because of the Enlightenment, and this inequality only worsened political tensions. The King held an Estates-General, a meeting of all three estates to try and solve this crisis.¹² The Third Estate, because they were outnumbered, could not implement any significant changes, and walked out in protest.¹³ They formed the National Assembly, an assembly aimed at providing accurate representation of the people,¹⁴ and created a spark that began the Revolution.

The intellectual foundations of the Revolution, however, were developed earlier with the Enlightenment. Originating in France, the Enlightenment (1685-1815) was a sweeping movement across Europe that emphasized logic and rationality over the traditional, older, often religious ways of thinking. Science and logic was offered as a solution to many of the problems that plagued 18th century Europe, and education was highly emphasized as a way of decreasing the large disparity between social classes.¹⁵ Another distinguishing factor of the Enlightenment was its opposition to monarchical, absolutist, and religious hierarchical structures and ideas.¹⁶

The Enlightenment helped define how the new French Republic viewed the role of women in society. Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, major leaders in the Enlightenment, contributed heavily to the discussion of the Catholic Church's role in the Revolution. Voltaire and Rousseau's ideas helped rationalize the revolution and French secularism, and, despite the

¹¹ "THE LONG," Swansea University.

¹² Harrison W. Mark, "Revolt of the Parlements," World History Encyclopedia, last modified April 14, 2022, accessed August 2, 2024, https://www.worldhistory.org/Revolt_of_the_Parlements/.

¹³ Pelz, "The Rise," 43.

¹⁴ Pelz, "The Rise," 43.

¹⁵ Brian Duignan, "Enlightenment," Encyclopedia Britannica, last modified July 29, 2024, accessed August 2, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Enlightenment-European-history>.

¹⁶ Duignan, "Enlightenment," Encyclopedia Britannica.

thinkers having opposing views on the topic, their ideas reevaluated how women were to be seen in the new republic.

François-Marie Arouet (1694 - 1778), commonly referred to as Voltaire, attacked Christianity and heavily valued individual freedom. His novella, *Candide*, features the titular protagonist, Candide, who serves as a vehicle to explain Voltaire's opinions on the Catholic Church which Voltaire believed was one of society's fundamental problems. In *Candide*, the old woman, daughter of Pope Urban X and a princess, is kidnapped and eventually saved by a eunuch; the old woman, speaking of the eunuch, says, "he had been sent to the Emperor of Morocco by a Christian power...instead of taking me to Italy he conducted me to Algiers, where he sold me to the Dey." Voltaire, while never explicitly condemning the Roman Catholic Church, demonstrates the hypocrisy and cruelty of the Church through *Candide*. Popes are not allowed to have intercourse and therefore should not have biological children. Voltaire alludes to the hypocrisy of the Pope and Church through the old woman being the Pope's daughter. The eunuch, despite being a religious man, still sells the woman into slavery for profit. A Grey Friar, a Roman Catholic friar, steals Candide's and Cunégonde's (Candide's aristocratic love interest) money and jewels. A later character in *Candide*, a prostitute named Paquette, is seduced by a Grey Friar. The Grand Inquisitor, a figure in the Catholic Church, uses religious force to try to sexually share Cunégonde, and also orders that heretics in *Candide* be burned alive. The Grand Inquisitor is another metaphor for the Catholic Church; Voltaire comments on these darker forces of the Church which use God as a weapon to subjugate other characters. The Christian characters in *Candide* are one dimensional, cruel, and foolish; they misuse power and often sin. Voltaire was highly critical of the Catholic Church believing it to be fundamentally flawed, but, despite this, he also believed that some form of religion may be necessary in society. Voltaire once said

(translated from the original French), “If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him.” The later generations influenced by Voltaire would also share similar ideas; Voltaire, by sharing critical views on the Church, helped cement the idea that the Church had no place in civil society.

Voltaire portrays women as victims of the clergy, subject to often violent or sexually driven crimes by churchmen, ultimately subjugated by the church. Despite the women in *Candide* enduring suppression, they are often placed in positions of relative power with agency and possess mental acuity equivalent to their male counterparts. Cunégonde manages to survive her unfortunate circumstances. Originally a noble, she is reduced to servitude, stabbed, raped, and sold into slavery, but eventually reunites with Candide. She contains many character flaws, including her willingness to betray Candide, but is independent and self-motivated. Her personality and role in society as a determined and successful woman is the antithesis of the domestic roles encouraged by the Church. She does what she needs to survive, losing her innocence and purity in the process. Though no longer beautiful and rich at the end of the story, she still escapes her circumstances and marries Candide. The old woman in the story also manages to survive difficult circumstances and remains loyal to Cunégonde, providing sage advice and remaining faithful throughout their adventures. Implicit in Voltaire’s characterizations, are that these women are intelligent, able to make their own decisions and equal to men. The female characters are rational actors thereby bolstering the notion that women, more generally, had the capability to play a more significant role in society.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712 - 1778), like Voltaire, heavily criticized the Catholic Church in his writings; he, however, did not share Voltaire’s views on women. Although he believed in the separation of church and state, he still believed that religion, generally speaking,

had a role to play in society. He believed in freedom of religious belief and the societal division of the public and private spheres, categories that became critical to defining France's belief of secularism. In his book *On the Social Contract*, Rousseau articulates his dislike of Christians, finding them servile and naturally dependent. He writes, "Christianity preaches only servitude and dependence. Its spirit is so favourable to tyranny that it always profits by such a *régime*. True Christians are made to be slaves, and they know it and do not much mind: this short life counts for too little in their eyes."¹⁷ Christians, he argued, could not efficiently run a society because they are not concerned about their life while on earth—their only goal is getting to the kingdom in heaven. He proposes a kind of social religion or civic society, rather than one based on God and the intangible, one with a sense of shared beliefs on how people should behave towards each other in society. He writes, "there is therefore a purely civil profession of faith of which the Sovereign should fix the articles, not exactly as religious dogmas, but as social sentiments without which a man cannot be a good citizen or a faithful subject... The dogmas of civil religion ought to be few, simple, and exactly worded, without explanation or commentary."¹⁸ Rousseau believed in a distinct separation of church and state, and that with this relegation of powers into a private or public sphere, society would encourage its members to think independently and rationally, creating a more egalitarian country. He believed in freedom of religion, however, as long as it did not disturb civic life. He writes, "Tolerance should be given to all religions that tolerate others, so long as their dogmas contain nothing contrary to the duties of citizenship."¹⁹ The Catholic Church, he argued, was outdated and hindering society. However, unlike Voltaire, Rousseau believed in a more limited role for women, with women relegated to the private sphere

¹⁷ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On The Social Contract*, trans. George Douglas Howard Cole (Innovative Eggz LLC, 1913), 120, accessed August 5, 2024, https://www.google.com/books/edition/On_The_Social_Contract/L1YOAQAIAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0.

¹⁸ Rousseau, *On The Social*, 121.

¹⁹ Rousseau, *On The Social*, 122.

and kept away from public life. In his book *Emile, Or Treatise on Education*, he imagined that women think less rationally than men, are less capable of deep thought, and their rightful place was in the house. They are intellectually lesser beings, he reasoned, and should therefore receive a different education, leaving logical thinking to men. He says, “The moment it is demonstrated that man and woman are not and ought not to be constituted in the same way, either in character or in constitution, it follows that they ought not to have the same education... The first and most important quality of woman is gentleness, and she ought early to learn to suffer every injustice, and to endure the wrongs of a husband without complaint. But in order to make a young woman docile, it is not necessary to make her unhappy, and she should be indulged in all innocent amusements, such as dancing and singing.”²⁰ A woman should accept any abuse her husband doles out, he postulates, because a woman should be naturally gentle and forgiving. He goes on to write, “A man says what he knows, and a woman what will please, and so one needs knowledge and the other taste. In the use of speech girls should be trained to be discreet and pleasing... Woman has more spirit and man more genius; woman observes and man reasons... Thoughtful men should not marry women incapable of thinking, but a simple girl, rudely brought up, is preferable to a wife of learning and wit, who would make of her house a literary bureau.”²¹ The qualities that to Rousseau defined women, such as impatience, frivolity, and foolishness were ones devalued in an ideal enlightened society, whereas Voltaire found qualities in women, such as intelligence, that were valued and would allow them to participate, more thoroughly, in an enlightened, secular society. Because Rousseau thought that women’s role was, by nature, a supporting one, he believed women should play different roles in civil society

²⁰ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile Or, Treatise on Education*, ed. William Harold Payne (Appleton, 1905), 267, accessed August 5, 2024, <https://www.google.com/books/edition/Emile/NalZAAAAYAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0>.

²¹ Rousseau, *Emile Or, Treatise*, 298.

than men. Men, the more intelligent, rational sex, he posited, should be legislating and, more generally, participating in civic affairs. Like Voltaire, he still believed in a rational post-Monarchical secular society, but, unlike Voltaire, he concluded that men, as the rational gender, should be the ones participating in that enlightened society, as women did not possess the capacity or intelligence to do so. Voltaire and Rousseau represent two sides of the Enlightenment debate about the role of women. This intellectual debate became particularly important when French society was reorganized during and after the French Revolution.

The Revolution and the secularization of France, animated by Rousseau and Voltaire's conflicting ideas, benefited women in some ways. Divorce, for example, was officially legalized on September 20, 1792, allowing women to divorce on equal terms, and with mutual consent or with one spouse suing for divorce, sometimes simply because of an "incompatibility of temperament...[it] was not based on any double standard of sexual morality that would have put women at a disadvantage."²² It also made divorce affordable and equally available throughout France. In the pre-revolutionary era, due to the Catholic Church's influence, divorce was illegal. Women were forced to remain in abusive situations and remain economically dependent on their husbands. A woman often had to forgo her dreams of education or political opinion because she was unable to do so without her husband's permission. In some extreme cases separation was permitted by the Church before the Revolution but even this scenario favored men. A wife committing adultery faced the prospect of spending the rest of her life in a convent; a husband faced no real consequences.²³ Marriage was used as another tool to further patriarchal structures. The legalization of divorce on equal grounds was indicative of a larger cultural shift in the

²² James Chastain, "Divorce and Women in France," Ohio University, last modified February 20, 1999, accessed August 6, 2024, <https://sites.ohio.edu/chastain/dh/divorce.htm>.

²³ S. Spencer, "French Women and the Age of Enlightenment," Bloomington: Indiana University Press, last modified 1992, accessed August 8, 2024, https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/3/oa_edited_volume/chapter/3628661.

French people's mindsets. The most significant change, however, stemmed from the lacunae left by the Catholic Church during and after the Revolution in defining social roles, which forced Enlightenment thinkers and later generations to reconsider the issue of women's rights and redefine their roles.

The Enlightenment also provided women a vehicle to participate in public life through salons. At the time they still had "designated roles in society, particularly as mothers and wives,"²⁴ but many found ways to access the ideas of the Enlightenment while still fulfilling these roles. Salons were social gatherings hosted by influential, wealthy Parisian women that allowed intellectuals to converse and exchange ideas. They were a place to connect writers to publishers and to develop ideas that helped fuel the Revolution.²⁵ These salons helped women become intellectual equals with men, and were incredibly important for expanding the possibilities of women. Women were privy to important discussions about Revolutionary ideas in the salons, held positions of academic influence, and because these gatherings took place at home, it gave the impression that they were still fulfilling their domestic duties, enabling them to engage with the wider, intellectual world. Salons played an important role in the development of Enlightenment ideas and opposition to the Monarchy and Catholic Church.

Men alone did not contribute to ideas on the rights of women in society. A notable female thinker was Olympe de Gouges (1748-1793), a female playwright famous for her pamphlet *Déclaration des Droits de la Femme et de la Citoyenne* (Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen), modeled after the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. In the pamphlet she argued that women have the same rights as men, and had a worthwhile role in society. Famous

²⁴ "Women from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment," The Saylor Foundation, accessed August 6, 2024, <https://resources.saylor.org/wwwresources/archived/site/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/HIST201-8.2.3-WomenRenaissancetoEnlightenment-FINAL.pdf>.

²⁵ Merriman, "HIST 202."

revolutionaries, like Pierre-Gaspard Chaumette and Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, still did not believe women should have an active role in politics, and others, like Marie Jean Antoine Nicolas de Caritat, Marquis of Condorcet, believed that they should be afforded the same rights as men. Enlightenment thinkers were divided. By 1799, the end of the Revolution, women were “no longer excluded from possibilities of inheriting...[and were] awarded...the right to share equally in communal property,”²⁶ and from August 1790 onward, were no longer being seen as underage minors in the eyes of the law. Women, however, did not receive full legal rights until much later, after structural changes made in the Napoleonic era.

The Enlightenment and revolutionary period played a significant role in shaping the perception of women in France. The change was not uniformly one of increased freedom to participate in civil society free of domestic duties; instead, it was a complex change stemming from conflicting points of view about women among Enlightenment thinkers. It’s important to note that while the literature evaluated for this paper about the convergence of Enlightenment ideas, the Catholic Church, and women’s rights was substantive, there is not a lot of information readily available about how French lower class women perceived the Church. The influence the Enlightenment had on the eventual secularization of France is also heavily documented, and there exists substantial literature on the topic that helped formulate the paper. The two thinkers evaluated, Voltaire and Rousseau, are both elite French Enlightenment thinkers, and their views may not adequately reflect the views of lower class Enlightenment thinkers at the time. Although they affected later thinkers, it is difficult to assess the social class of those impacted and what their ideas of women and secular society were.

Voltaire and Rousseau influenced how later generations approached the question of women’s rights. The Napoleonic Era reversed many changes that occurred during the

²⁶Spencer, "French Women," Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Revolution. Divorce became harder to obtain. It became increasingly difficult for women to legally handle money and indeed, it took around 150 years for women to receive nearly equal rights, a process that is not yet fully complete. For a brief period following the Revolution however, women's rights became a subject of intense debate, and some even regarded women as intellectual equals. Many Enlightenment thinkers thought of the female as separate from her domestic identity, and as a being worthy of equal respect as men. With the collapse of the Church and the monarchy, Enlightenment thinking provided new possibilities for the role of women. With secularization, France had removed the religiously defined roles women had in society, letting their involvement be subject to dialogue and discussion, changes that would have been impossible without the social and intellectual upheaval of the French Revolution. Women's rights are still being debated in France today, and many of the arguments brought up during the Revolution reverberate. French women only gained the right to vote in 1944, and in 1965, received the right to open personal bank accounts and the right to work without their husbands permission. By examining the intersection of the Enlightenment, France's secularity, and women's rights, we can better understand the history of female suffrage and eventual equality in France.

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