

Honors History Proposal
Submitted by _____

1. Title

The Failure of a National Religion: Abbé Grégoire and The Constitutional Church in France 1795-1801.

2. Abstract

My project is on the Catholic Church in France during the late French Revolution and in particular, the Constitutional Church, a schismatic product of revolutionary reform. The Constitutional Church attempted to mitigate conflict between high and low clergy and create a National Religion free from Papal domination and answerable to the State. The period after State support disappeared under the Directory (1795-1799), necessitated extraordinary efforts by men such as the Abbé Grégoire to keep Republican Christianity alive before the Concordat of 1801 with the Papacy. Grégoire's struggle and idealism provide the framework for understanding this unique institution, its origins, and its demise.

3. Statement of the Problem

Was the aim of the Constitutional Church to provide a National Religion and how did this aim accord with state policy? This project will attempt to demonstrate that on both an institutional and theological level, the Constitutional Church provided an ideal blueprint for a revolutionary religion acceptable to the greater number of French citizens. This aim remained of paramount importance to the leaders of the Constitutional Church. However, the wavering policies of the State and the reactionary policies of the refractory clergy, those who remained loyal to Rome, forfeited the chance of marrying theological and institutional reform in the Church. Of particular interest to the study is an examination of the religious policies of the Directory and how these policies affected the Church. While answering the main questions through a review of the history of the Constitutional Church, this project will also address the idea of a revolutionary religion and attempt to

historical emphasis tends to address the relations between the Consulate and the Papacy or on the rapprochement with the refractory clergy. The denouement of the Constitutional Church is seen as an inevitable event with little insight into the struggles to maintain the Church by its adherents.

As a final testament to the dearth of research in this field, a survey of the *Annales de la Revolution Française*, the premier journal of French Revolution studies, reveals only eight articles specifically on the Catholic Church in the entirety of the Revolution published in the last twenty years and only two on specifically the Constitutional Church in the last fifty years. The subject area is ripe for new interpretation.

5. Significance

The significance of this project lies in its attempt to bridge the gap between the ancien regime and the nineteenth-century Church. A study of the Constitutional Church during the Directory years of the Revolution is a study of a watershed in Church/State relations. Two centuries of debate on the role of the Church in society, the role of the lower clergy in the Church, and the infiltration of Enlightenment or liberal ideology into the liturgy of the Church can be viewed in microcosm during this brief six-year span. The time period is both dramatic enough to be riveting yet calm enough to allow one to view the clergy in the act of rebuilding after the excesses of the Terror. One is able to see without the distraction of sensational violence into the efforts of a few constitutional bishops to preserve their church. In their struggle with government policy and public opinion a uniquely Republican version of State/Church conflict emerges.

The pre-revolutionary model of the Catholic Church was built along class lines. The higher clergy (bishops, canons, and abbots) came invariably from the nobility, while the lower clergy (parish priests, vicars, and monks) came from the lower classes, primarily the educated peasantry or bourgeoisie. The aim of the Constitutional Church was both a spiritual and an institutional reform of the Church meant to mitigate the economic and administrative injustice of the old system and align the clergy along more egalitarian lines. To differentiate between these two aims is difficult especially when one considers the views of

their church during the Directory. Several secondary works will bolster my research, what follows is an examination of primary sources.

To develop the concept of a National Religion as it pertains to this study, it will be necessary to clarify what this term means. The focus of this paper is primarily the Catholic ideal of a virtuous society in-line with the teachings of Jesus, which is able to invigorate the State as well as the individual. To develop this concept research will be conducted into several areas. These include the writings of Edmond Richer (1560-1631), for whom 'Richerism' was named. He provided the Gallican Church with a rallying doctrine against Papal supremacy, and the lower clergy with a interest in Church administration. One of his major works, *Vindiciæ doctrinæ majorum scholæ Parisiensis*, is available in Bailey-Howe Special Collections, although Inter-Library Loans has access to English translations of his complete works. To study the Enlightenment's contribution to the concept of civil virtue especially as it pertains to the Church, I will consult Voltaire's *Lettres Philosophiques* and Rousseau's *Du Contrat Social*. Reading of Robespierre's speeches to the convention on the Cult of the Supreme Being, a synthetic attempt at a National Religion, and his letters, all available in Microform format at Bailey/Howe, will help develop the concept of Republican virtue and contrast the revolutionary cult's understanding of a National Religion with the concept as the Constitutional Christians understood it. The broad societal goals of the constitutionalist clergymen themselves are best studied in the speeches of Abbé Gregoire available in edited form in the book, *L'Abbé Grégoire Évêque des Lumières*, and in the speech of Abbé Coupé before the convention. These sources together may demonstrate that there was an inherited patriotic and egalitarian ideal of virtue that had the power to reinvigorate the nation. This ideal was a prime motivator for Christians, Deists, and Atheists alike and that the preservation of this ideal was of paramount importance to the Constitutional Church.

The study of institutional reform of the Church consists of tracing the changes in the economic and political structure of the church from the ancien regime to the Concordat. Analyzing source material such as

allow the reader to see distinct goals and accomplishments as well as the failures of the main players as they tackled specific projects such as the reinitiating of Episcopal meetings of the Constitutional clergy. Their lives will be set in the rich mélange of Revolutionary France to generate personal empathy for their efforts and their ideals. A parallel overview of the events of the Directory reveal a timeline with dramatic punctuations nicely placed to facilitate the discussion of the topics above and create a compelling story.

Throughout the project several primary source documents in French (and English where available) will be used in conjunction with secondary sources in both English and French. Recourse to Inter-Library Loan services is necessary for the complete copies of the Constitutional Church Journals and some texts of the Abbé Grégoire, all of which are housed at the Center for Research Libraries at the University of Chicago.

The end result of this research is to create a readable story of the Constitutional Church that touches on broad themes in both religious and revolutionary history while bringing the reader closer to fascinating figures in history and their beliefs.

7. References

The following is a partial bibliography of works consulted in the preliminary research.

Primary Sources

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8. Project Advisor's Initials

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