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Women and Religion in Nineteenth-Century France

Joan W. Scott



European University Institute  
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**Abstract**

This paper explores the connections made between religion and women by French secularizers in the nineteenth century as a way of understanding the effects of what Max Weber called "disenchantment." It asks how differences of sex figured in anti-clerical writings (particularly those of Jules Michelet). And it argues that the conflation of women and religion, an aspect of their simultaneous privatization and their designation as "irrational," helped secure the place of the difference of sex as the ontological ground for political and social organization in the nations of the West from the seventeenth century onwards.

**Keywords**

Women and religion; Max Weber; "disenchantment"; Jules Michelet; anti-clerical writing; political and social organization.

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Writing in 1908, the French suffragist Hubertine Auclert refused the idea—regularly used to deny women the vote—that enfranchising women would mean more votes for the church party. The idea that religious sentiments disqualified women was “a bogeyman, as imaginary as the ones used to scare little children.”

Why are believing women treated more strictly than believing men? Men aren't asked for their philosophical ideas when they are given a ballot: priests, pastors, rabbis are treated no differently than free-thinkers (Auclert, 1908: 56-7).

The attribution of religious sensibility to women as a group, she argued, was a pretext. Religious men were allowed to vote because they were men; women were denied the vote because they were considered inferior beings. The hypocrisy of secularizers on this issue infuriated her: they were perpetuating religious teachings about women's inferiority even as they refused the suffrage to women because of their supposed religious attachments: “To secularize France is not only to cease paying for the teaching of religious dogmas, it is to reject the clerical law that follows from these dogmas and that treats women as inferior” (58)<sup>1</sup>.

Auclert put her finger on the problem I address in this paper: the fact that secularization, despite its promise of universal equality, made women's difference the ground for their exclusion from citizenship and public life more generally. But I will suggest that it was not, as Auclert averred, because religious ideas about women were left in place. Instead French secularizers offered what they took to be entirely new explanations for women's difference from men, rooting them in nature and biology rather than divine revelation. It was in the name of science, not religion, that women were consigned to a private sphere in the anti-clerical discourses of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The result—the subordination of women in the public/political domain, the celebration of their maternity, and their consignment to home and family—surely resembled the church's teachings<sup>2</sup>. But the differences in the justifications offered by clericals and anti-clericals are important to consider. Attention to them enables us to understand something of the effects on the Western imaginary of what Max Weber called “disenchantment”—the substitution of rational calculation for magical invocation—as they were articulated in secular ideologies and the social and political processes they sought to implement. In addition, they give us insight into the subjective identifications of secular subjects and into the ways in which the difference of the sexes figured in that identification<sup>3</sup>.

These secular ideologies assigned women and religion to a private sphere that was at once spatial (the home, the church) and psychological (an interior realm of affect and spiritual belief), both promising consolation for the public world of rational calculation and competitive individualism. The conflation of women and religion was an aspect of their simultaneous privatization and their designation as “irrational” and it helped secure the place of the difference of sex as the ontological ground for political and social organization in the nations of the West from the seventeenth century onwards. As the lines of distinction between political institutions and religious belief were altered in this period, so the difference of the sexes mattered more and more. Of course, these differences had mattered in the past; any number of religious, medical, legal, economic, and political discourses based

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<sup>1</sup> See also, Hubertine Auclert 1881.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Seeley 1998: “Though in many different ways, both skeptical republican and devout Catholic men affirmed their political and religious identities by tying Catholic faith and ritual to a private female sphere. Be it for purposes of denigration or worship, both encoded the faith in terms of women's domestic, reproductive, and child-rearing functions.” (891)

<sup>3</sup> In the work of important theorists of secularism, reference is made to a singular secular subject—gender does not figure in the theorization. See, for example Asad, 2003, and Warner, 2010. My argument is that differences of sex and sexuality matter in these identifications; there are only secular subjects.

their claims on the differences between women and men. But the privatizing of the passions—both religious and sexual—and their assignment to distinctive spatial arenas made for a more thoroughgoing clarification than had existed before. The vast historical production spurred by Second Wave feminism in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s demonstrates this over and over again: historically, secularization was not synonymous with women’s emancipation, but with the articulation of new justifications for their exclusion from male public worlds.

This is an important point to make these days because the word secularism is bandied about loosely in public debate, with little attention to its variable and complex history. Especially in discussions of Islam and its treatment of women, the secular, the modern, and sexual liberation are touted as the “primordial values” of progressive, democratic states, while the religious, the traditional, and the subordination of women designate arenas of authoritarian backwardness. My work on the secular side seeks to challenge that simple opposition, arguing—as historians are wont to do—that things are more complicated than these Manichean characterizations suggest<sup>4</sup>.

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What better way to explore these complications than by first turning to the work of Max Weber? I take Weber, not only because I’ve been asked to give a lecture that carries his name (though that was surely a consideration), but because he was such a shrewd commentator on the history I want to explore. Weber was by no means an uncritical champion of the processes he described. “Intellectualization and rationalization are not increases in knowledge,” he wrote (in *Science as a Vocation*), but merely the substitution of “calculation” and “technical means” for magical thinking. The “disenchantment of the world” brought with it a certain impoverishment: “Precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life either into the transcendental realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal human relations” (in Gerth and Mills, 1998, 155). Here is Weber again (in *The Sociology of World Religions*): “The general result of modern forms of thoroughly rationalizing the conception of the world and of the way of life, theoretically and practically, in a purposive manner, has been that religion has been shifted into the realm of the irrational” (1998, 281)<sup>5</sup>. Weber described the changes that accompanied “the growing rationality of conceptions of the world” (1998, 275) in terms of the separation of spheres, not only the “private” and the “official,” but the economic, political, intellectual, scientific, artistic, erotic—different forms of human thought and activity, complementing one another and compensating for what was lacking in the dominant arenas of public life. Authority in this changed world came neither from charismatic leaders, nor patriarchal traditionalists, whose rule had consisted of “‘personal’ not ‘functional’ relations” (296). “Bureaucratic rule was not and is not the only variety of legal authority, but it is the purest...[T]he ‘jurisdictional competency’...is fixed by *rationally established* norms, by enactments and decrees, and regulations, in such a manner that the legitimacy of the authority becomes the legality of the general rule, which is purposely thought out, enacted, and announced with formal correctness” (299).

What I want to take from Weber as characteristics of secularization are the assignment of religion to the private and the irrational; the legitimation of authority in the immanent rules of

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<sup>4</sup> To characterize my approach as “post-secular” (as has recently been done by some scholars) is to misrepresent it, to confuse critique with attack. In the guise of a certain leftism, these scholars mislabel critical engagement with concepts and their premises as unacknowledged imperialism. They accuse those of us interested in a critique of the secular with somehow romanticizing the religious while bashing the secular and so reproducing the very secular/religious opposition we are seeking to displace. In fact, our work, even if only on the secular side, seeks not to invert the binary, but to displace it. See *boundary* 2 40:1 (Spring 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Of course, not all religion was antithetical to modernity. Indeed, as Weber points out, protestantism prepared the way. The “Protestant Ethic” meant that labor was performed as if it were an absolute end in itself. In *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (1964) Weber gives the example of women workers (he calls them “traditionalists”) who resist more efficient methods of work. He compares them to “girls having a specifically religious, especially a Pietistic background.” In their case, “the chances of overcoming traditionalism are greatest on account of the religious upbringing.” (63)



bureaucracy rather than in the transcendent powers of a father—be he a god or a feudal patriarch; the separation of spheres; and the compensatory functions of the private spheres for the public.

There is yet another aspect to add to this list which allows us to address Hubertine Auclert's challenge—that is the way in which “disenchantment” led to an increasing emphasis on differences of sex. Weber did not address this directly, though his observations point us in the direction of an explanation. In much of his work he refrained from the sharp distinctions of gendered roles that many of his colleagues embraced, refusing to use the terminology they did. Those ideologists of secularism talked obsessively and anxiously about masculine and feminine, men and women, locating the consolations for the fragmenting effects of rationality in the idealized domestic household, inhabited by the family, and infused with the affective spirit and values embodied in the wife and mother. In their writings, women embody the sentimental, the artistic, and the enduring values of tradition, providing a refuge from worldly preoccupations, promising the wholeness that individualism has denied to men. Durkheim is perhaps the best example. For him sexual and social differentiation evolved simultaneously. In the remote past, he noted, the differences between men and women were hardly apparent. The sexes were of the same size and performed the same functions. Women, like certain female animals, actually took pride in their warlike aggressiveness. Sexual relations were casual (“mechanical”); there was no such thing as conjugal fidelity. The coming of the division of labor changed all of this. Woman “retired from warfare and public affairs and consecrated her entire life to her family.” As a result, “the two great functions of psychic life...[were] dissociated,” women becoming specialized in “affective functions,” men in “intellectual functions” (Durkheim, 1964, 60).

Weber offered a different reading, more concerned with the psychological consequences of the fact that “the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life.” In modern societies what were once holistic relations (characterized by communal experiences of “brotherliness”) have become splintered. The separate spheres Weber refers to (in his writings on religion) are not so much locations in space as they are interior states of being. He conceives of these as tensions within individuals, who, in the external, highly rationalized realms of economics and politics, yearn “inwardly” for less material forms of fulfillment which they find in the spheres of esthetic and erotic life. “Art is salvation from routines of everyday life and especially from increasing pressures of theoretical and practical rationalism” (342). As for sexual love, “the boundless giving of oneself is as radical as possible in its opposition to all functionality, rationality, and generality. It is displayed here as the unique meaning which one creature in his irrationality has for another, and only for this specific other” (347).

But Weber was skeptical about the ability of marriage to measure up to its idealized depiction:

From a purely inner-worldly point of view, only the linkage of marriage with the thought of ethical responsibility for one another—hence a category heterogeneous to the purely erotic sphere—can carry the sentiment that something unique and supreme might be embodied in marriage; that it might be the transformation of the feeling of a love which is conscious of responsibility throughout all the nuances of the organic life process, ‘up to the pianissimo of old age,’ and a mutual granting of oneself to another and the becoming indebted to each other (in Goethe's sense). Rarely does life grant such value in pure form. He to whom it is given may speak of fate's fortune and grace—not of his own ‘merit’ (350).

Marriage was an imposition of rational purpose on the irrationality of sexual desire (initially a priestly attempt to tame the wild eroticism of orgiastic sects, but now divorced from its religious origins). “[T]he knowing love of the mature man...reaffirms the natural quality of the sexual sphere, but it does so consciously, as an embodied creative power” (347). Human biological reproduction, in other words, takes the place of divine origin and loses some of its erotic force in the process. Sex as “embodied creative power,” becomes an agent of historical continuity and in this way is harnessed by rationality in an attempt to fill the vacuum of causality left by the loss of a world view that guaranteed life beyond death<sup>6</sup>. Reproduction assured by marriage then becomes the highest aim of sex; it substitutes for the immortality once promised by a heavenly afterlife. Immortality is now assured by

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<sup>6</sup> Edelman 2004

generational continuity—traits and ideas passed down through the ages (these days, in the form of one's genetic legacy). This continuity insures not only familial posterity, but the future of the nation-state. In this way intimate erotic relations are 'rationalized' in the public interest.

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The theorists of secularism offered biology as the new ground for life and they focused on women as the agents of reproduction—women were nature, the source of life itself. But biology offered none of the reassurance that enchantment had. Despite heated debates about spontaneous generation<sup>7</sup>, scientific dissection of ova and embryos, detailed analyses of the workings of female reproductive organs, investigations into disease and its etiology, there was no accounting for death—or perhaps it's better to say that death lay beyond reason's calculations or control. Wrote Weber, "Viewed from a purely ethical point of view, the world has to appear fragmentary and devalued in all those instances when judged in the light of the religious postulate of a divine 'meaning' of existence." "Science has created this cosmos of natural causality," he continued, but "has seemed unable to answer with certainty the question of its own ultimate presuppositions"(355). The lack of certainty is displaced onto a search for "inner-worldly perfection" in terms of "culture," but this endless pursuit of new entertainments confirms not only the "meaninglessness of death," but the "senselessness of life itself" (356), "...culture's every step forward seems condemned to lead to an ever more devastating senselessness." Desire—for pleasure, for knowledge—is endlessly pursued and never entirely satisfied. "[T]he stronger the more systematic the thinking about the 'meaning' of the universe becomes, the more the external organization of the world is rationalized, and the more the conscious experience of the world's irrational content is sublimated"(357).

Weber's diagnosis suggests an enormous, only partly acknowledged, anxiety; a quest for meaning held in place by the sublimation of all that escapes the rationalizing impulse. The two most crucial of these escapees are death and sex, whose psychic sublimation, I suggest, requires the literal subordination of women. Anxiety about death is displaced onto a rational (scientific) preoccupation with women as the perpetrators of life (they are at once the antithesis of death and its potential agent). So, too, the irrationality of sex is disciplined when it is contained in marriage and directed to the bearing and raising of children who represent immortality, the endless perpetuation of the life which guarantees the future of the nation.

Weber points out that the disciplining of sex by marriage was an aspect of early religious teaching, but I don't think the same impulses are at work in the secular insistence on the institution of marriage. In secular discourses marriage becomes a way of socially embodying the difference of sex; of establishing men's rational control over the processes that threaten to elude them; of displacing inner psychic conflict onto the material bodies of women. This insistence on the difference between women and men also addresses another aspect of disenchantment—the loss of a transcendent affirmation of men's power. Here we need to supplement Weber with a bit of Freud and Lacan, since Weber notes inequalities in (what he refers to as) the erotic relationship, without however defining them in terms of gender. He says that there is a brutal dimension to the erotic relation: "It is far more the most intimate coercion of the soul of the less brutal partner. This coercion exists because it is never noticed by the partners themselves" (348). Never noticed, I would add, because it is taken to be the natural way of conducting sex. In Lacanian terms, the asymmetry of partners is established in the contrast between masculine and feminine positions. ("There is no sexual relationship.") The more "brutal" partner enacts the masculine fantasy of possession of the phallus (Lacan 1977).

The historical dimension of this is that as theological and monarchical power wane, the phallus—the signifier of desire instituted by lack—loses its concrete referent. Sovereignty is now located in abstractions: individuals, the people, the state and its representatives. In this context, possession of the phallus is open to all; the question is how to affirm it. The penis is at once an obvious and a poor substitute. All those sovereign abstract individuals seeking confirmation of their

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<sup>7</sup> See the article by John Farley and Gerald L. Geison (1974) on the controversy between Félix Pouchet and Louis Pasteur in the 1850s.

power and affective compensation for their abstraction in the absence of the “enchantment” (attraction, charm, pleasure) of religious belief. What is the status of desire (whose desire?) in the time of rationality? These anxious questions are the psychic aspect of Claude Lefort’s description of democracy: “In my view, the important point is that democracy is instituted and sustained by the *dissolution of the markers of certainty*. It inaugurates a history in which people experience a fundamental indeterminacy as to the basis of power, law, and knowledge, and as to the basis of relations between *self* and *other*, at every level of social life...” (Lefort 1988, 19). An insistence on clear differences of sex, I argue, became a way to secure the status and dispel the psychic anxiety of those who wielded power (at home and in the public sphere).

The interesting thing is that the strict separation of the sexes insisted on in theory never entirely does the job because—as we shall see in the case of Jules Michelet—all attempts to impose and hold in place the boundaries of difference between the sexes are bound to fail. Freud and Lacan have taught us that the sexual division of human beings cannot be symbolized, however much we try to do it. The story of gender—of the attempts to attribute and to fix meanings for differences between women and men—is the story of failed efforts at the regulation of “unruly” psyches. This doesn’t make the efforts any less intense; in fact it might be said that the strictness of normative regulation is a function of the ultimate impossibility of enforcing the rules.

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In the secularizing discourses of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, rationality was attributed to men; irrationality to women. It was men’s brain that represented the seat of their presumed rationality. (This despite questions raised by scientists and phrenologists alike about its integrity as a singular organ)<sup>8</sup>. The brain was at once the concrete embodiment and the elusive site of men’s conscious rationality, the locus for their self-mastery and their ability to possess women’s bodies. Women were “the sex,” the repository of all that was irrational. The inner tensions Weber described were in this way displaced outward onto the bodies of women. Durkheim, citing Le Bon, articulated this fantasy when he reported that “with the progress of civilization the brain of the two sexes differentiates itself more and more. According to Le Bon this progressive chart would be due both to the considerable development of masculine crania and to a stationary or even regressive state of female crania. ‘Thus,’ he says, ‘though the average cranium of Parisian men ranks among the greatest known crania, the average of Parisian women ranks among the smallest observed, even below the crania of the Chinese, and hardly above those of the women of New Calendonia’” (Durkheim, 60). (I can’t go into the ‘civilizational’ aspects of this comment here; suffice it to say that the question of ‘whose was bigger’ was racialized as well as gendered)<sup>9</sup>. Jules Michelet (about whom more in a minute), upon seeing drawings of the female reproductive system, concluded that “Man is the brain, woman the uterus” (Borie, 1980, 157-8). To her, the actual reproductive function, to him the management of her and so of life itself.

The association of women and religion that so irritated Hubertine Auclert was one aspect of this binary representation. The separation of spheres, as Weber described it, involved the privatizing of religion and eros, their designation as irrational. Both were said to provide the intimacy and passion lacking in the public realm, the sublime spiritual consolation that compensated for the crass rational calculations of public life. What Weber doesn’t say explicitly is that irrationality, intimacy, passion, and spiritual sensibility were deemed feminine attributes.

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<sup>8</sup> On early theories of the brain, see Thomson 2008.

<sup>9</sup> On racial theory in this period, see Daughton 2006 and Curtis, 2010. Anti-clericals in this period countenanced missionaries’ work in the colonies even as they expelled the Jesuits from teaching orders at home. It was believed that missionaries would provide the moral uplift that colonial subjects needed.

Olwen Hufton identifies the Revolution of 1789 as the moment that established the link in republican political discourse between women and religion in France.<sup>10</sup> The actions of counter-revolutionary women in peasant villages, those who defended non-juring priests and clandestinely practiced Catholic rituals for baptisms and burials, she says, “provided the evidence for the politicians of the Third Republic to withhold the vote from women” (Hufton, 1989, 66). It was certainly during the dechristianizing campaign in Year II of the revolution that the example of resistant village women became synonymous with women in general. So, while one comment from a *représentant en mission* was directed at a specific group of women (“And you, you bloody bitches, you are their [the priests’] whores, particularly those who attend their bloody masses and listen to their mumbo-jumbo” (Cited in Cobb, 1961, 450)), another extended the condemnation to women as a whole (“Remember, it is fanaticism and superstition which we will be fighting against; lying priests whose dogma is falsehood...whose empire is founded upon the credulity of women. These are the enemy” (Tallet, 1991, 26)). In this view of things, women were the knowing consorts or the inevitable dupes of treasonous clerics. In either case, it was their sex that accounted for their actions. This belief fueled anti-clerical discourses in the many decades that followed. Despite the facts that, throughout the nineteenth century, men predominated in church leadership, and the Ultramontane and monarchical parties consisted of powerful men in established political positions, women were considered the soft spot, the potential fifth column, in the republican secularizing campaign.

The opposition between rational patriotic republican men and their unreliable, unreasonable women usually invoked statistical evidence on its behalf. And it is certainly true that the French Catholic Church drew increasing numbers of women to religious congregations and lay charitable activity over the course of the century. The ratio of men religious to women religious changed dramatically, from 3:2 in 1803 to 2:3 by 1878; and the number of nuns increased tenfold from about 13,000 in 1808 to 130,000 by the end of the century. Well after the removal of clerical teachers from public schools in the 1880s, the religious education of young children, particularly girls, remained in the hands of Catholic sisters. And the church recruited large numbers of married *bourgeoises* to its philanthropic associations, making (in the estimation of one historian) the “charitable lady...among the most ubiquitous public figures in the nineteenth century city [Paris] that most epitomized the modern age” (Curtis, 202, 156)<sup>11</sup>. This was a role denied them according to the tenets of secular domestic ideology. The recruitment of women was, to be sure, the result of a concerted effort on the part of church authorities to undermine the secularists, but it succeeded by appealing to exactly the image of women the secularists endorsed—one that emphasized their subordination to male authority, their role as agents and reproducers of morality, their self-sacrificing, caring maternal instincts, and their intuitive spirituality. In an odd inversion of causality, the stereotyping provided by republicans may well have helped to produce the very alliance they most feared. At the very least, it did little to counter the terms of the church’s appeal to women. But that may have been beside the point. Above all, the anti-clerical portrayals of the dangerous susceptibility of women worked to equate masculine identity with republicanism.

This they did not only in their depictions of women, but in their characterizations of the priests with whom the women were said to consort. Thomas Kselman notes that “republican ideologues had great difficulty in reconciling their political principles with their attitudes toward women, and they struggled to express the role women would play in a society that finally embraced the ideals of 1789. The clerical conspiracy with women, hatched in dark and secluded church corners, provided a fantastic outlet through which they could envision the threats to their political and domestic happiness” (Kselman, 1998, 606). I would add that the conspiracy they imagined also worked to enhance the vision of their own masculine rationality, and of the heterosexual division of labor upon which it was based.

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<sup>10</sup> This is not to say that women were not already (during the Ancien Regime) identified as evincing greater religiosity than men (see Kreiser 1975, Tallet 1991, Thomas 1965), only that in the discourses of anti-clericalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Revolution of 1789 was taken to be an originary moment.

<sup>11</sup> The information on women and the Catholic church can be found in: Clark 1984, Curtis 2002, Digiorgio 1993, Gibson 1993, Harrison 2007, Langlois 1996, Mills 1998, Seeley 1998, Stone 2000.

Throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, there was in France an intensifying struggle between clericals and anti-clericals in which the question of women figured prominently. Secular republicans adorned their city halls with busts of Marianne in the same years that church authorities revived the cult of the Virgin Mary; historians of the Middle Ages produced what Zrinka Stahuljak (2013) calls “pornographic archaeology”—accounts of the perverted sexual escapades of supposedly celibate priests and nuns—even as Catholic recruitment of women religious grew by leaps and bounds. The issue of priestly celibacy was very much on the minds of the anti-clericals, who denounced it as a violation of the natural (hetero) sexual inclinations of women and men. Celibate women were especially deviant in this view since they had forsaken maternity and the creation of family that were presumed to be their biological destiny. Judith Stone suggests that celibacy figured prominently in anti-clerical denunciations because it was one of the few clear differences between republican and clerical views of women. “Republicans were caught in the contradiction of denouncing the subordination demanded by the church and, at the same time, supporting the subordination of wives to husbands” (Stone, 2002, 126). The subordination of wives to husbands had to do at least in part with a psychic imperative: establishing the basis for phallic power (rationality, futurity, control of life and its meaning) in the male brain, which in so many representations stood in for the idea of scientific rationality. Scientific rationality, in turn, became a way of establishing the naturalness of all divisions of labor (and so of inequalities in society), and of which the sexual division of labor was the cornerstone.

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Nowhere is this more evident than in the writings of Jules Michelet, the great historian of the French nation and an ardent anti-clerical. Michelet was born in 1798, in the waning days of the French Revolution; he died in 1874, in the early years of the Third Republic. In addition to vivid histories of the lives of kings and courtiers, revolutionaries and their enemies, he wrote inflammatory moralizing treatises on love, women, and the family, as well as denunciations of the perversities and evils of priests, confessors, bishops and other representatives of the Catholic church. In his quest for knowledge about women and their bodies, he attended lectures on gynecology and embryology at the Collège de France, and he obsessively monitored his young second wife’s monthly rhythms with the persistent attention of an experimental scientist. His writings on these topics drew criticism as well as praise and I don’t offer them as evidence that all of France shared his opinions (Michelet, XVIII, 1985, 655-747). What they do illustrate is the ways in which the attention to biology as mastery of life itself was expressed in anti-clerical discourse. The anti-clericals located the proof for women’s dependence on, and subordination to, men in their biology; and they joined women and religion as a problem for secular husbands to address and control. Michelet is not only symptomatic of the more generalized anxiety about life, death and sex that accompanied the “disenchantment” Weber described. He also reveals the difficulty, if not the impossibility of inhabiting fixed categories of male and female—or, in Lacan’s terms, of establishing a firm hold on the ever-elusive phallus.

Michelet’s writings on women, the family, and the church were directed at husbands. *Du Prêtre, de la Femme, de la Famille* (1845) opens with a shocking announcement. “It was generally thought that two people were sufficient for a marriage, but that has changed. The new system...has three constituent elements.” These are “the man, strong and violent; the woman, a creature weak by nature; the priest, born a man and strong, but who wants to make himself weak so as to resemble a woman...and so interpose himself between them”(vi). As result of this invasion, “our wives and our daughters are raised and governed by our enemies” (14). These enemies are at once political—they represent the past and so are obstacles to progress—and personal—they are adept at the art of seduction, in effect cuckolding husbands whose distractions at work have made them strangers to their wives and children (309).

Most of the book is devoted to exposing the machinations of priests, starting with Jesuit confessors in the sixteenth century, tracking the “ardent” letters exchanged between these men and the women they counseled, and ending in the nineteenth century, when the sons of peasants replaced the learned men of the religious orders of the past. If in the seventeenth century, the likes of Fénélon and

Bossuet charmed and seduced with their cultured intellects, the *curés* of the nineteenth century practiced the cunning and perseverance of the peasant cultures from which they came. In both cases, confessors manipulated the “soft and fluid natures of women,” appealing to their passion, love of children, and need for affection. Intoning the language of devotion, they, in effect, became lovers: “you can’t always tell who is speaking, the lover or the confessor” (69). In Michelet’s fantasized scene of seduction, the two achieve an intimacy denied the rightful husband. In a dark corner chapel of the church, “this emotionally agitated man, this trembling woman, sitting so close to one another, talk in hushed voices of the love of God (214). She is “on her knees,” with head bowed before the priest as he listens to her confession. Learning her most intimate secrets, those unknown even to her husband, he achieves mastery, and thereby “recovers his manhood...and while she is weak and disarmed, he lays upon her the heavy hand of a man” (228). The relationship deepens and, inevitably, “for the soul to be truly yours, one thing is lacking...the body” (271). But the “voice of concupiscence” (270) is seemingly deflected by the priest onto love for God. “How fight against a man who disposes of paradise, and beyond that, hell, to make himself loved?” (279). How, in other words, claim the phallus from this man who will go to any length to disposses the republican husband of his wife?

The man of God has insinuated himself into the republican husband’s private domain of sex and family. Even if the conquest is only spiritual (and this scene conjures much more), the husband is compromised. The priest now has knowledge of the intimate details of the marriage, and “of your most secret weaknesses,” which he most certainly shares with his colleagues. As he passes you in the street, humbly nodding at you, Michelet says to his reader, he turns away and silently laughs—such is the imagined humiliation visited on the husband betrayed (230). Himself less than a man, the priest nonetheless succeeds in emasculating the legitimate head of the household.

The priest who achieves his manhood in the company of other men’s wives is a problematic figure. The celibate life is artificial (“absurd, impossible,” against nature (27)) and the demeanor of these men (in skirts) is feminine. “The tactics of the confessor weren’t all that different from those of a mistress” (34): they practiced tender flatteries and the arts of innocence (47); like women, Jesuits loved children (37). Fénelon, Michelet tells his readers, was “as delicate as a woman,” tender and penetrating at the same time (142). Having studied women closely, these men become like them, crossing gender boundaries in unacceptable, even dangerous ways. The danger has many aspects, including the priest’s “hatred” for women’s natural roles as wives and mothers. He wants them only as lovers, lovers of God (277); for Michelet, this means the embrace not of life (with all of its reproductive possibilities), but of death (241, 334). As the husband’s rightful place is the defender of life, so the priest represents its mortal antithesis.

The full implications of this conquest of women for the church are nowhere more evident than in convents—the negative counterparts to the family home. There “the heart of a woman, of a mother, the invincible maternal instinct, which is the foundation of a woman, betrays itself” (253). The betrayal comes not only from the celibate life, but from its violations. Lurid stories of sex between priests and nuns detail aborted pregnancies and murdered babies, buried in clandestine graveyards. Ruled by the figure of a monstrous lesbian—a tyrannical woman, a devil incarnate, who imagines she can govern like a Bonaparte (260)—the nuns suffer enormous deprivation. Only the intervention of a male confessor alleviates their pain—restoring, in Michelet’s depiction of it, something akin to an appropriate gendered division of labor. “Far from being opposed to the confessor in this place, my wishes are with him...in this hell, where law never penetrates, he is the only person who can offer a word of humanity” (260). Here the fraternity of men, representatives of the law, overcomes the nightmare of a domestic scene ruled entirely by women.

What can be done to reclaim women for their husbands? How can the secular men to whom Michelet appeals turn their wives away from the lure of the church? The reasons for their inaction are clear: “victims of the division of labor, often condemned to a narrow specialization,” modern men have become strangers to their wives and children, leaving the affective terrain to the Jesuits (301). But it is imperative that they now take heed: “Secularists, as we all are—magistrates, politicians, writers, solitary thinkers—today we must do what we haven’t yet done: take in hand the cause of women” (xxiv). The “cause of women” is not their emancipation in political terms, rather it has to do

with acquiring intimate knowledge of the kind science offers, an appreciation of the flows and rhythms of women's biology, the differences that shape their minds and bodies. The scientific pursuit becomes a way of confirming masculine desire (and so possession of the phallus) and of gaining access to the great mystery of women's desire. Knowledge of the source of her weakness—woman “is a sick person...a person wounded each month, and who suffers almost continually from the wound and its scar” (Amour, 221-3)—will enable the republican husband's mastery in two registers. On the rational, scientific side, he will have intimate knowledge of his wife's body (and so of the source of her emotions); in the (unconscious) psychic register, her evident and repeated castration will confirm his possession of the phallus. (His thought processes, unlike hers, are said to be untouched by the ravages of a cyclical biology.) The affirmation of his strength will bring her back to his side: “On the day when your dear ones feel that you are a man of the future and of magnanimous will, the family will come round. Your wife will follow you everywhere if she can say to herself, ‘I am the wife of a strong man’” (xxvi).

Michelet's writing firmly—and for generations—secured the representation of a connection between women and the church, even as he appealed to husbands to change things by regaining control of the private side of their lives. This control would be aided by laws against the clergy (which he consistently advocated), but the intimate side required a different kind of effort. Above all, it demanded science, the study of woman's radical difference: “She is nothing like us. She thinks, talks, and acts otherwise. Her tastes are different from our tastes. Her blood does not flow like ours; sometimes it rushes, like a storm's downpour. She doesn't breathe like us...She doesn't eat like us... Women have a different language” (Amour 61-2). Knowledge of this difference required not only cerebral effort, but, more importantly, compassionate identification. And it is here that one finds evidence of the external displacement of that interior splitting Weber talked about. For Michelet, reclaiming one's wife from the priests is not simply a matter of restoring domestic harmony, but of redirecting the love, of which only she is capable, away from God to its proper object, her husband. “Here is the wife's mission...to repair her husband's heart, protected and nourished by him, she nourishes it with love” (Amour 67). She is the loving mother who completes his otherwise fragmented soul, reunion with her repairs the ravages of individuation. Without her there is no satisfaction, no confirmation of his potency.

At the same time, this delicate, wounded creature needs the protection of a mother herself. And here Michelet's advice to young husbands is to offer that solace in the bedroom: Say to her, “I am for you, I am you. I suffer with you...Take me as your mother and your child. Give yourself to me...you are my wife and you are my child” (90). In the privacy of the marital bed, in physical union with his partner, the husband enacts an incestuous Oedipal scene (“take me as your mother and your child”), finding in that fantasy the wholeness that otherwise eludes him. (Michelet referred in his journals to marriage as “the most permissible of incests”) (Cited in Orr, 1976, 83). It is no wonder that the priest's presumed access to this knowledge is seen to compromise the husband's masculinity! And it is telling, though not surprising, that Michelet counsels husbands to perform the priest's role he has so scathingly denounced (as inappropriately crossing gender boundaries, assuming feminine attributes), but now in the secular, and appropriately erotic, effort to unite body and soul, wife and husband with an eye to the nation's reproductive future.

Commenting on this aspect of Michelet's writing, Roland Barthes refers to it as “Michelet's lesbianism.” “Michelet turned himself into a woman, mother, nurse, the bride's companion. In order to force his way into the gynaeceum more surely, not as a ravisher, but as a spectator “ (Barthes, 1987, 152-3). For Barthes, “the Gaze” renders Michelet neuter. But I think that seeing is, for him, a way of acquiring knowledge that has at least two aspects. It enables an identification (between subject and object) that muddies the boundaries of sexual difference (and so has a neutering effect). In addition, it suggests the difficulty of acquiring scientific knowledge of the other from “outside.” But it also attempts domination (the mastery of the subject over the object he sees), which serves (if only in fantasy) to clear things up. But even the fantasy of merger has its limits, as another lament indicates: “What then are these objects that charm us?” he writes of women. “Pleasure will fool you; you will never be able to achieve this union that is the chimera of lovers. In despair you will tear with your teeth at the adored body in which you cannot lose yourself “(Cited in Orr, 1976, 74-5).

In Michelet's border crossings (as lover, mother, husband, friend) one glimpses the confused psychic processes that his moralizing tracts seek to contain. Or, to put it another way, we see how the articulations of gender strive to fix meanings for differences of sex that cannot be pinned down because they psychically elude symbolization<sup>12</sup>.

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The secular project, as I have used Michelet to exemplify it, situated itself against religious influences in the state and the home. But it did so in ways that disappointed feminists such as Hubertine Auclert. Differences of sex were fundamental to the vision the secularizers offered; it was the masculinity of republican men that was at stake. The women who could assure it were the captives of priests; they had to be reclaimed for their proper role as wives and mothers, those whose bodies would reproduce the nation and whose love would guarantee its future.

The secularizing campaign meant not only juridically enacting the separation of church and state, but offering a rational substitute for religious belief. Woman's body was man's consolation and also the source of life itself. Instead of the biblical account of Genesis, there was, by the nineteenth century, gynecology: life as a spontaneous, autonomic product of women's reproductive cycle (Borie 1980). Women as Nature, Nature as Woman—there was no outside source for life. Nor for thought. That came from science, from man's ability to abstract and divide, to rationalize life by identifying its divisions of labor. Science was, after all, the subordination of Nature to man's will, to the calculations and techniques that were the source of their own authority, whereas women's greater sensitivity and proximity to birth and death predisposed them to the temptations of religion. The masculine/feminine opposition secured the opposition between the secular and the religious, displacing the question of life's meaning onto the reproductive function of the sexual relation and banishing death from the equation. It would take many generations of feminist objection to unsettle, if not overturn, this gendering of what had become an article of faith in the secularizing process.

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<sup>12</sup> Here Kaja Silverman's observations about the figure of the mother as an originary figure of desire are apt: "The mother does not constitute the full stop of meaning. She classically provides the signifier for a more primordial loss: the loss of what Lacan variously calls 'presence,' 'being,' or the 'here and now.' ...What she stands in for psychically cannot provide this function since it is precisely what escapes signification. Although serving as the support for libidinal symbolization, the mother is consequently devoid of semantic value. It is not she who gives all of the other signifiers of desire their meaning; it is rather, *they* that determine what *she* can mean. To go 'backward,' libidinally speaking, also is not finally to touch 'ground'; it is instead to apprehend the groundlessness of all signification." (2003, 13)



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