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Réforme, Religion, et Republicanism?

The “Three Rs” of Education in Nineteenth-Century France.

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Abstract

The French Third Republic under Minister of Education Jules Ferry used public education to breach the sociopolitical divide between urban and rural France at the tail end of the nineteenth century. Ferry's calls for secularization, centralization, and "republicanization" were countered by the Catholic Church, local governments, and rural families.

In Third Republic France, an expansion of schooling contributed to secularization, increased literacy, and greater political awareness among rural citizens by the turn of the twentieth century. The Third Republic was established at a social and political tipping point amidst the disastrous Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871). France was militarily outmatched by Otto von Bismarck's forces throughout the conflict, but it the ignoble surrender of Emperor Napoleon III at the Battle of Sedan (September 1st, 1870) that electrified Paris. On September 4th, the frustrated Parisian public stormed a parliamentary meeting at the Palais Bourbon in protest of the current regime. Republican deputies took advantage of the outpouring of popular support and seized power, declaring the birth of the Third Republic with "virtually no violence to life or property."¹ The new government was poised to rehabilitate France's national spirit and salvage the country's reputation abroad. But preexisting domestic issues and sociopolitical divisions had been deepened by the war and subsequent transitional period.

For over a century, since the Revolution of 1789, urban and rural France had been developing along different trajectories. By the 1880s, in metropolitan areas such as Paris, the Republican party had failed to consolidate a socioeconomic platform, but the ideals of Republicanism were nonetheless status quo. In contrast, throughout the countryside, political awareness was scant, the Catholic church remained deeply entrenched, and many people spoke a dialect so removed from Parisian France as to be unintelligible. How did rural families respond to the tensions created by the rapid overhaul of educational policies throughout the 1880s, and in what ways did previous conflicts between the church and central and local governments,

¹William Fortescue, *The Third Republic in France 1870-1940: Conflicts and Continuities. The Third Republic in France 1870-1940* (2000. Reprint, simultaneously published in the US and Canada: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Library, 2002), 7.

compounded by a century of intermittent unrest, underscore the significance of education to the Third Republic's centralization project?

By WWI, the Third Republic achieved its goal of standardizing school curriculum and providing, even mandating, that all French children receive an education. Educational reforms, and the governmental supervision which accompanied them, had a profound effect on the relationship between urban and rural France. The influx of ideas from Paris to the rest of the country precipitated a decline in religious tradition. Communication increased between different regions of France as the government's efforts to nationalize citizens to a shared identity took effect. The Third Republic considered cultural as well as political identity in this equation, reasoning that, if the people of France could see themselves as connected to one another across local boundaries, they would be less resistant to centralization and more willing to enlist in the national military. Moreover, the national economy would be strengthened by an influx of new workers in entry level positions, facilitating the advancement of France within Europe (albeit at the expense of individuals who could not progress their own socioeconomic statuses.)

Did rural villages adapt under the Third Republic out of a genuine desire to be part of French "modernity?" Or did the state make it impossible for families to maintain a traditional way of life through legal ordinances and educational mandates? Secondary literature on the Third Republic raises these questions, but, while some scholars, such as Eugen Weber, Benedict Anderson, and Eric Hobsbawm, describe a successful state-run nationalization campaign through public education, others, including Deborah Reed-Danahay, Sara Ann Curtis, and Laura Strumhinger grant individuals more agency in the process. The latter set of scholars argue that villagers accepted the demands of the state only after rural France evolved to a point at which state reforms, including educational reforms, were useful in the context of rural life.

Primary sources provide additional insight into the French education debate. *L'École et la famille: Journal d'éducation, d'instruction et de recreation*, published twice monthly from 1876 to 1937, offers a wealth of information pertinent to the reception of Third Republic policies. The journal was based in Lyon, a diocese notable for a commitment to education characterized by near-total reliance upon the Catholic church and congregational schools. For each official act issued by Ferry, *L'École et la famille* published the document in full, and often, a letter in response. Religious questions were the focus of many articles within *L'École et la famille*, but the journal also evidences how citizens responded to the shifting political structure which resulted from increasing state presence in villages.² Textbooks, novels, songbooks, and the like from French classrooms offer a window into principles the Third Republic hoped to impart upon young citizens. Finally, census records provide concrete evidence of social change: the relative attendance rates at state lay schools and religious schools over time, as well as the growth of public schooling writ large.

From a political perspective, centralization did occur under the Third Republic, and village governments had no choice but to follow new laws. However, on the personal and social levels, rural families found ways to use schooling to their advantage, prioritizing education only when it improved their daily lives, and balancing resistance with acquiescence. Even after Ferry mandated universal education, families adopted state ideology to varying degrees, while preserving communal and religious values. The Third Republic had to contend with the legacy of several longstanding conflicts: between republicanism and monarchism, between liberalism and

² “L'École et la famille (Paris. 1876).” Database. BnF Gallica. (Lyon, 1876), <http://catalogue.BnF.fr/ark:/12148/cb32764384r>.

conservativism, between the waning power of religion and the rise of secularism. These sources of tension were at the basis of the education debate, dictating, on the one hand, the Third Republic's agenda for reform, and on the other, the source of rural resistance to state demands. The Third Republic's ambition to nationalize and unify urban and rural France remained unfulfilled despite the rapid influx of new students to schools because Republican ideals imparted to children in the classroom were countered by families that clung to tradition.

The Ferry Laws and the Legacy of the Catholic Church

Jules Ferry, the architect of Third Republic educational reform, became Prime Minister of France in 1880. He held this office between 1880 and 1881 and then resumed his post between 1883 and 1885; in addition, he acted as Minister of Education for three intervals spaced between 1879 and 1883. Ferry was a moderate Republican who leaned towards conservatism. The moderate platform of his time called for "the maintenance of the Republic and of manhood suffrage as the basis of parliamentary elections."³ In comparison, the radical Republican platform demanded retribution for the Franco-Prussian War, direct political action, and the institution of economic reforms beneficial to the working class. Ferry did promote social and economic advancement for the nation as well as equal representation for citizens. However, he was unwilling to sacrifice a degree of bureaucratic oversight on the part of the government, and he was determined to prevent radical groups from gaining influence.

The notable exception to Ferry's balanced political program was his educational policies.⁴ In fact, Ferry's push for "free, compulsory, and secular public education" matched the

³ Fortescue, *The Third Republic in France*, 30.

⁴ Fortescue, *The Third Republic in France*, 38.

educational agenda of the Paris Commune, a militant, far-left organization which had been defeated by the French National Assembly in 1871.⁵ While in office, Ferry authored over half a dozen laws developing new school curricula, defining qualifications for school instructors, and curtailing the power of religious officials in the classroom and beyond. Public schooling was designed to acculturate French children. Ferry wanted Republicanism to supersede any ties young “Frenchmen”⁶ felt to their villages, their religion, or even their own families. The Ferry Laws also offered a pretext for state oversight of local governing bodies across the nation, making it possible to enforce a Parisian model of governance far from the metropole.

Ferry’s laws can be grouped into two distinct categories: those which provided the government general oversight of education (including funding, curriculum, and enforcement of attendance), and those which opposed religious education to counterbalance the Catholic Church. His policies were also designed to address logistical hurdles that families and small-town governments had long used to circumvent state demands for mandatory public schooling. On March 15th, 1881, Ferry introduced reforms delineating a separation between religious and academic curriculum and publicly criticized the role of the Church in the classroom. The same year, he required for the first time that instructors have an official teaching credential or *brevet de capacité*. Most state instructors already had a *brevet*, but religious instructors, who had previously been allowed to teach based on informal *certificats de sage*, were left scrambling to acquire documentation.⁷ Ferry Law of March 28th, 1882 was more expansive, mandating free, compulsory, and fully secular public education across France. Ferry laid out material for

⁵ Fortescue, *The Third Republic in France*, 28.

⁶ Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1976), 241.

⁷ Sarah Ann Curtis, *Educating the Faithful: Religion, Schooling, and Society in Nineteenth-Century France*. (Dekalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000), 109.

instructors in detail. He also introduced plans for how local governments could partition funds to supply every village with a state school and instructor and enforced regular attendance. In addition, he rescinded the right for families to control the amount of time their children spent at school, as well as the right for fathers to demand a Catholic education for their children. Finally, he prohibited the presence of religious iconography in the classroom, while lauding Republican symbolism.

In 1886 Ferry passed another set of laws dealing with secularization and reinforcing his previous decrees, but the 1882 laws were perhaps the most consequential reforms of the Third Republic era. Ferry's desire to manage schooling to the most minute level was clear; he was unwilling to take the risk that either local governments or resistant families would limit the application of his methods. Prior efforts to expand *l'école républicaine*, or the Republican School, into the countryside met with opposition. In large part, this was due to the presence of the Catholic church, which remained well-established in rural villages. The conflict between church and state in France is traceable to the Revolution of 1789. The revolutionary period accompanied a radical break with both the nation's monarchical political system. But it was also when the power of the Catholic church, part of the traditional bedrock of French society, was first called into question. In the revolutionary National Assembly whose members "commit[ted] themselves to the recasting of the political system," bishops and clergy were represented as a block as the First Estate. However, as the Assembly tipped towards radicalism, this group became a minority, and new laws further marginalized religious officials.⁸ Church tithes and fees, both essential sources of funding, were abolished in August 1789. The Civil Constitution of the Clergy (July 1790) pointedly failed to designate Catholicism as the national religion of

⁸ Roger Price, *The Church and the State in France, 1789-1870: "Fear of God Is the Basis of Social Order"* 1st ed. (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 13.

France and “substantially reduc[ed] the number of dioceses.”⁹ Church property was nationalized, and, in combination with previous laws which had closed down monasteries and convents and “suppressed[d]...congregations in general,” the Civil Constitution made it clear that religious officials were not to be privileged under the Revolutionary government.¹⁰

In 1801 Napoleon Bonaparte, having seized power through a coup d'état, took steps towards “reconciliation” with the church and laid a basis for church involvement in education which would last until Ferry’s time. Napoleon wanted to loosen ties between the church and royalist or counter-revolutionary forces as well as to reintegrate religion as a source of “order [for] the masses.”¹¹ His Concordat, promulgated in 1802, redefined Catholicism as the most prevalent religious order in France (although Napoleon did maintain personal power over the church through the Organic Articles, which mandated state approval for Papal Bulls.) The “almost universal...religious practice” which had characterized French history had lessened with the tumult of the previous decade.¹² But the Concordat did revive Catholicism, and in the realm of education, Napoleon’s rulings were to have an enduring effect on the role of the church in the classroom.

Napoleon permitted religious teaching orders to assume control over “primary instruction...supervision of lay teachers by parish priests,” and additionally, encouraged “daily prayer and religious instruction” in public schools, two policies Ferry later criticized and revised.

¹³ Throughout the early 1800s, this precedent was carried forth in French schools even as the

⁹ Price, *The Church and the State in France*, 15.

¹⁰ Price, *The Church and the State in France, 1789-1870*, 15.

¹¹ Price, *The Church and the State in France, 1789-1870*, 22.

¹² Price, *The Church and the State in France, 1789-1870*, 24.

¹³ Price, *The Church and the State in France, 1789-1870*, 23.

nation experienced periods of unrest, revolt, and political upset. Indeed, “from the Napoleonic period to the Third Republic, there existed a broad consensus among lawmakers that the Catholic church should be an important partner in the provision and supervision of primary education.”¹⁴ Napoleon also implemented state supervision of Catholic (as well as Jewish) religious officials and institutions, setting a standard for bureaucratic control.

In contrast to Ferry, ministers of education bolstered the church’s power during the first half of the nineteenth century. Sarah Ann Curtis describes the relationship between church and state as mutually beneficial during this era. “The state made use of religious values and church institutions to uphold social order...the church allowed itself to be used in this way because such a role provided it [with] influence...[and] fit with its own rechristening mission.”¹⁵ In 1833, shortly after the July Revolution of 1830 established Louis Phillipe as ruler of France, Minister of Education François Guizot worked within the established network of the church to implement a series of regulations designed to prevent “social unrest” and secured the assistance of religious orders to encourage the development of schools in the countryside.¹⁶ Louis Phillipe was overthrown in 1848 and the nation was briefly governed by the Second Republic (1848-1851).¹⁷ The Second Republic was replaced in turn by Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, who would declare himself Emperor of France three years later. But while the political landscape of the nation shifted, the majority of citizens remained disaffected by the chaos in Paris, and in the countryside, daily life, and religious schooling, continued as usual. The Falloux Law of 1850, enacted during the Second Republic, further acquiesced to the church by granting religious

¹⁴ Curtis, *Educating the Faithful*, 24.

¹⁵ Curtis, *Educating the Faithful*, 175.

¹⁶ Deborah Reed-Danahay, *Education and Identity in Rural France: The Politics of Schooling*. 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 1995) <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511558108>, 145.

¹⁷ Price, *The Church and the State in France*, 58.

officials a direct role in oversight of public, non-religious, schools. All children were to receive some religious instruction unless their families prohibited it, and the law reserved for “ministers of religion...authority to direct [all] teachings.”¹⁸

The Guizot Law and Falloux Law ordered that communes of a certain size establish schools for boys and girls respectively.¹⁹ Despite these mandates, the state offered little in the way of funding, leaving local governing organizations to scrape together the requisite funds. As a result, the expansion of congregational schools, both “better funded and better equipped,” far outpaced that of their lay equivalents.²⁰ The tight-knit social environment of small towns meant that religious concerns were entangled with political and economic ones. Families hesitated to shift their allegiance away from the church, which acted as a social unifier, by sending their children to state schools.

With the elimination of religion from lay schools, congregational schools relied on “financial pressure” to encourage families to choose Catholic private schools.²¹ In some regions such as Roanne, “industrialists and landowners,” who helped drive the local economy, “threatened parents with unemployment...if they did not support congregational schools.”²² Moreover, communes possessing free private schools (which were almost exclusively religious) were exempted from the costly requirement to establish public schools. In public schools that existed prior to the Third Republic, educational materials were sparse. Per the Guizot Law, the state was intended to supply reading materials, but funds designated for schooling were often

¹⁸ Robert, E., *L'École et la famille : Journal d'éducation, d'instruction et de récréation* (15 Mars 1881). Database.BnF Gallica. Lyon, March 15, 1881. ark:/12148/bpt6k57225403.

¹⁹ Curtis, *Educating the Faithful*, 24-26.

²⁰ Laura Struminger, *What Were Little Girls and Boys Made of? Primary Education in Rural France, 1830-1880* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1983), 7-21.

²¹ Curtis, *Educating the Faithful*, 125.

²² Curtis, *Educating the Faithful*, 125.

redirected by village officials, leaving schools unable to provide for students. Children brought their books from home; in most cases, this meant that the majority of students were reading from the family Bible (a tradition Ferry would later discourage.) Instructors were poorly trained and poorly paid- a combination that provided little incentive for either teachers or students within the classroom. Most families held teachers “in low esteem,” and the position held connotations of physical weakness and poor social standing.²³ All this was in direct contrast to church schools of the time.

During the first half of the 19th century, nuns and priests who taught at congregational schools were directly recruited by well-respected Parish priests. This meant they were “recruited...from the same types of communities they served,” and therefore, “local inhabitants were less suspicious of their motives...more likely to accept them as cultural intermediaries.”²⁴ Even parents who sent their children to public schools at this time often demanded the approval of texts by church officials.²⁵ In addition, communes were required to designate or build schoolhouses using public funds, whereas the Catholic church funded congregational schools, which doubled as monasteries.²⁶ Little wonder that parents chose not to send their children, many of whom were needed at the home to begin with, to public school classrooms.

Sarah Ann Curtis, discussing the tension between French church and State, has argued that during the nineteenth century “both groups saw schools as vehicles for the dissemination of ideological codes.”²⁷ With pressure on both sides, in 1881 the “essential question” of whether

²³ Reed-Danahay, *Education and Identity in Rural France*, 118.

²⁴ Curtis, *Educating the Faithful*, 61.

²⁵ Struminger, *What Were Little Girls and Boys Made of*, 34-37.

²⁶ Linda Clark, *Schooling the Daughters of Marianne: Textbooks and the Socialization of Girls in Modern French Primary School* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1984), 5-9.

²⁷ Curtis, *Educating the Faithful*, 5.

religious teaching was compatible with the educational model envisioned by the state remained unanswered.²⁸ Whether as a result of Ferry's orchestration or a reflection of changing times, France was clearly trending towards a new precedent for public schooling. From 1863 to 1881, the number of boys taught by lay instructors in public schools increased while the number taught by religious instructors declined. Conversely, for private schools, the proportion of religious instruction more than doubled. (For girls, who were shepherded towards religious schools so that they might receive a moral education, the same pattern occurred at the turn of the twentieth century.)²⁹ Ferry was well aware of the church as an adversary, and as Catholicism became equated with “conservative and monarchial politics,” the Third Republic felt an impetus to wrest control away from religious officials.³⁰ While Ferry reserved a role nominal role for church schools in France, his policies favored lay education. His approach to secularization became more combative over time, moving from a rebuke of church meddling in education in his law of March 1881 to a condemnation of religion as a force against Republicanism by the next year. Fully secularized education was Ferry's goal from the outset, and after a series of moderate reforms, his Law of 1882 demanded the complete elimination of religion from public school curriculum. The trajectory of Ferry's reforms can be traced through the reprinting of his laws in *L'École et la famille*.

On March 15th, 1881, Ferry offered clarifications to a series of recent regulations related to the Guizot Law. His adjustments, published in *L'École et la Famille*, concerned the residents of Lyon due to their perceived anti-religious bent. In 1833, when the Law was first introduced, Minister of Education Guizot had included a caveat that “the wish of fathers of families will

²⁸ E. Robert, *L'École et la famille* (15 Mars 1881).

²⁹ Clark, *Schooling the Daughters of Marianne*, 12.

³⁰ Clark, *Schooling the Daughters of Marianne*, 13.

always be...consulted and followed... [in the matter of] participation of their children in religious instruction.”³¹ Families could document their stance on religion in a register created for that purpose, and schools had to comply with parental demands. Ferry acknowledged that religious education might be desirable for some parents but questioned whether “proselytism” had a place in the classroom.³² He contended that a register might encourage “blacklisting [those]...who did not agree with the majority opinion,” and therefore advocated for placing religious lessons, including “catechism, prayers, and lessons in history of the saints” at the beginning or the end of the school day, separately from other material.³³ Ferry also lamented how some students were compelled by their families to leave during the school day for Church services. He proposed that with his reorganization of lessons, students would maximize the amount of time they spent in the classroom. It was an unstated fact that this policy also increased the focus on state-mandated curriculum by restricting the amount of time during which religious material could be taught.

In 1881 Ferry declined to take the strict anti-religious stance that would characterize his later rulings. In part, he needed to avoid radical change which might destabilize the already tenuous relationship between church and state. Ferry’s early laws also acted as a platform upon which he could build towards more stringent secularization. As a case in point, Ferry initially reserved Thursday mornings (as well as Sundays) for the clergy to teach and assured that “during the week [preceding] the first communion...children [would be] at the disposal of their family and the clergy.”³⁴ However, his thinly veiled distrust and frustration with the meddling of church

³¹ E. Robert, *L'École et la famille* (15 Mars 1881).

³² E. Robert, *L'École et la famille* (15 Mars 1881).

³³ E. Robert, *L'École et la famille* (15 Mars 1881).

³⁴ E. Robert, *L'École et la famille* (15 Mars 1881)..

officials in a non-religious sphere of French life was evident. Ferry referred to religious teaching as “obligatory” and criticized the “regulations...explicitly or implicitly” placed upon public school teachers under previous Ministers.³⁵ School instructors were expected to attend church services and behaved in a manner that demonstrated the importance of religion in their daily lives. Most of the pressure for religiosity among teachers was not overt. But particularly in small towns and rural areas, parents were distrustful of anyone who distanced themselves from the church which remained integral to daily sociocultural life.

Also in 1881, Ferry took steps to make it easier for state instructors, rather than religious instructors, to find teaching positions by mandating that religious instructors apply for the *brevet de capacité* in order to teach.³⁶ The *brevet* was first developed in 1816 for male teachers and expanded to include female teachers in 1819. Instructors had to pass a rigorous examination process to demonstrate their capabilities.³⁷ Previously, church officials had only needed informal certificates to teach, and, as a result, one of the traditional strengths of the Catholic Church in education was its ability to offer a “superior supply” of teachers.³⁸ It was not until the rapid influx of state instructors under Ferry that “the Catholic alternative appeared inadequate.”³⁹ On paper, the *brevet* requirement did not disadvantage the Church, and there was no limitation placed upon the number of religious teaching positions available. However, Ferry was well aware that the rigorous preparation and application process for the *brevet* would antagonize

³⁵ E. Robert, *L'École et la famille* (15 Mars 1881).

³⁶ Curtis, *Educating the Faithful*, 109.

³⁷ Curtis, *Educating the Faithful*, 109.

³⁸ Curtis, *Educating the Faithful*, 61.

³⁹ Curtis, *Educating the Faithful*, 62.

teaching congregations whose members were accustomed to rapid placement without “the interference or delays of state requirements.”⁴⁰

The *brevet* policy was subject to debate in the French Senate. An article published in the Parian newspaper *L'Univers* in 1881 described a counterargument to Ferry's on the part of a Mr. Chesnelong, president of the general assembly of Catholic committees in France. The author spoke critically of Ferry, writing “Mr. Chesnelong defended his amendment...for the most conclusive reasons. Certainly, Mr. Jules Ferry...did not destroy his argument.”⁴¹ The writer asserted that religious teachers without *brevets* had still proven their capabilities through the number of students they “captivated” in their lessons, and that the letters of obedience currently used to affirm teaching qualifications were sufficient.⁴² The paper included a full transcript of the senate meeting between Ferry, Chesnelong, and a Mr. Bérenger (referred to within *L'Univers* as an “orator of the center left”). Chesnelong proposed that the “equivalences” to the *brevet* which religious officials had used since 1850 to obtain teaching positions remain viable. He added that “simplicity [and] humility,” the values of the church, “[did] not adapt well to the struggle to obtain the *brevet du capacité*.”⁴³ Bérenger concurred with Chesnelong, but Ferry, who “[did] not care” to hear dissenting opinions, brushed his argument aside.⁴⁴ “We will explain ourselves with regard what you call schools without God,” Ferry said.⁴⁵ He went on to suggest that ministers of worship should view the *brevet* mandate as an opportunity that would “open the

⁴⁰ Curtis, *Educating the Faithful*, 61.

⁴¹ Veillot, Louis, Pierre Veillot, and François Veillot. “L'Univers.” Database. BnF Gallica. Paris, April 02, 1881. [ark:/12148/bpt6k703708f](https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k703708f).

⁴² “L'Univers.” BnF Gallica. April 02, 1881

⁴³ “L'Univers.” BnF Gallica. April 02, 1881

⁴⁴ “L'Univers.” BnF Gallica. April 02, 1881.

⁴⁵ “L'Univers.” BnF Gallica. April 02, 1881

doors of secular schools...give them the religious education with which they are charged.⁴⁶ Ferry did not waver in the face of Chesnelong's questions, and he hinted that his subsequent laws might give rise to further conflict, saying "I do not want to anticipate a discussion that will come later on the occasion of another bill."⁴⁷

Ferry's speech to the senate and his writing in *L'École et la famille* both mentioned new laws such as the *brevet* mandate and the shifting public-school dynamic of France as a matter of course. However, a response in the Weekly Review of Lyon, published in *L'École et la famille*, made clear the hesitation of local governments and small-town families to embrace such changes. The diocese was deeply rooted in Catholic religious tradition with a population of practicing Catholics "among the highest in France."⁴⁸ Regional officials worked closely with religious leaders including parish priests, who were "not only instigators and supervisors of congregational schools" but "ceaseless fundraisers" for the area.⁴⁹ Economic as well as religious concerns encouraged the people of Lyon to embrace Catholic schooling. While far from Paris, Lyon, consisting of the departments of the Rhône and the Loire, had a robust local economy centered around textiles (silk trading) and manufacturing. Economic stability allowed townspeople to support the expansion of schools, and most parents saw congregational schooling as doubly advantageous: it was comparatively cheaper and provided children with a moral and religious education cohesive with their own values.⁵⁰ Unsurprisingly, the *Revue Hebdomadaire*

⁴⁶ "L'Univers." BnF Gallica. April 02, 1881

⁴⁷ "L'Univers." BnF Gallica. April 02, 1881

⁴⁸ Curtis, *Educating the Faithful*, 11.

⁴⁹ Curtis, *Educating the Faithful*, 18.

⁵⁰ Curtis, *Educating the Faithful*, 18-19.

took pains to reaffirm that Catholic practices in school would be protected in the wake of Ferry's circular.

“The religious question is badly treated...we hasten to direct the eye of instructors to the extract under which it maintains the recitation of prayers, of catechism, [and] the history of Saints at school, unless parents have *formally* made their contrary position known.”⁵¹ The *Revue* reframed Ferry's circular, meant to encourage secularization, as a mandate on the secure position of these religious elements in daily lessons. The response likewise concluded that schools must continue to teach religious subjects and that teachers could not “dispense with them.”⁵² The *Revue* declined to discuss other aspects of the circular, including Ferry's criticism of ministers or his suggestion that teachers establish independence from the church in the classroom. Ferry's stance on this second matter was clear: for teachers, he argued, new regulations would grant “personal independence...taken away...by certain interpretations of the law permitted by the prior imperial council of public education.”⁵³ This unsubtle jab at his predecessors was cast in the language of the 1789 Revolution. “Liberty of consciousness...is one of the foundations of our public law, and it cannot be called into question by the law of 1850 or by any other.”⁵⁴ Here, Ferry was alluding to provisions of the Falloux Law which allowed religious officials to assess whether lay teachers were demonstrating pious behavior and deference to the church.

Similarly, Ferry did not hesitate to remind teachers of the source of their liberty: the “free government” which allowed them to “consecrate” their independence.⁵⁵ The Third Republic took

⁵¹ E. Robert, *L'École et la famille* (15 Mars 1881).

⁵² E. Robert, *L'École et la famille* (15 Mars 1881).

⁵³ E. Robert, *L'École et la famille* (15 Mars 1881)..

⁵⁴ E. Robert, *L'École et la famille* (15 Mars 1881).

⁵⁵ E. Robert, *L'École et la famille* (15 Mars 1881).

pains to establish the church as an opposition power aligned with conservatism (and monarchism) rather than progress, and confinement rather than liberty. Ferry's use of religious terminology to describe teachers' ability to distance themselves from the clergy and the church, particularly in a line glorifying Republican government, cannot have been an unintentional choice. Ferry was drawing a parallel between teachers' right to choose religion and their right to choose a new future, that of the "civil servant."⁵⁶ Despite cautioning instructors against direct political involvement, his warning was underscored by the reminder that they were to be champions of Republican ideology. Teachers were therefore expected to toe a difficult line, balancing between the mandates of local councils, the wishes of parents, and newly minted demands placed upon them as "secular missionaries" carrying the torch of French nationalism. again, can you elaborate why you are using the word nationalism rather than citizenship, republicanism, secularism, etc.? ⁵⁷

The Third Republic had some success along these lines among public school instructors, especially by the turn of the twentieth century. Mona and Jacques Ozouf, analyzing the results of a survey of 4000 instructors from 1914, describe a "belief [among teachers] that the classroom was the very place where liberty and equality were taught."⁵⁸ They contend that, as Benedict Anderson has explained, the principles of "fraternity...civic spirit...the strength of [a country's] national soil" were embraced wholeheartedly by teachers while religious ties weakened.⁵⁹ Instructors expressed in their interviews a "cascade of equivalencies" from themselves, to their

⁵⁶ E. Robert, *L'École et la famille* (15 Mars 1881).

⁵⁷ Reed-Danahay, *Education and Identity in Rural France*, 12.

⁵⁸ Mona Ozouf, «La Belle Époque des instituteurs?». *Recherche & Formation* 20, no. 1 (1995): 11–15. <https://doi.org/10.3406/refor.1995.1288>.

⁵⁹ Mona Ozouf, Jaques Ozouf, and Lawrence D. Kritzman. "Le Tour de La France Par Deux Enfants: The Little Red Book of the Republic." In *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer, Vol. II: Traditions: 125-148. 1992. Reprint, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

profession, to the nation, “reconciled around freedom...equality...universal values.”⁶⁰ Because the standards for teaching and learning were nationally designed and enforced, teachers did not have to question the validity of their methods or the ideology they were espousing. This “triumph of Republican teaching” allowed teachers to believe they were contributing directly to greater social equality and political cohesiveness.⁶¹ Teachers were the mouthpieces of state ideology, and children as the recipients.

The Ozouf study was conducted retrospectively in the 1960s, but instructors were asked about their experiences prior to 1914. Throughout her analysis of the interviews within, Mona Ozouf raises the questions: did the instructors from the “Golden Age” of French teaching recognize it as such? How did they understand and speak about their work in their own time? The Ozoufs observed that most instructors declined to take a personal approach in their responses, choosing instead to position themselves within “the full portrait...the generality of values” of the profession.⁶² Mona Ozouf concluded that French instructors during the early 20th century shared a genuine collective vision. She compares teachers to citizens engaged in religious life or military service, in that they aligned themselves entirely with the values of the occupation beyond the classroom, and they lived in a manner which ensured “leisure at the service of the profession, private life that showcase[ed] public life.”⁶³ Certainly, some teachers may have embraced their roles as Republican emissaries to the countryside. But Ozouf’s portrait of peerless unity among educators is misleading.

⁶⁰ Ozouf, «La Belle Epoque des instituteurs,» 14.

⁶¹ Ozouf, «La Belle Epoque des instituteurs,» 14.

⁶² Ozouf, « La Belle Epoque Des Instituteurs,», 12.

⁶³ Ozouf, « La Belle Epoque Des Instituteurs,» 12.

Ferry indeed encouraged communication among educators to address the rising tide of dissatisfaction with new reforms. In March 1882, a circular to the Congrès Pédagogique (Educational Congress) acknowledged the recent structural changes in public schools and invited members to meet, discuss their opinions, and discuss the challenges they had faced to that point. The circular encouraged free discourse, “personal testimony,” and for professors to work towards “simple and practical” solutions.⁶⁴ Ferry’s confidence in his plans appeared unshakable, and he pointed to the “already appreciable results” of his methods and laws passed over the previous year. Notably, he called upon professors to apply “a new spirit” to solving the problem at hand or any nascent conflicts in the classroom.⁶⁵ This language reflected an impetuous impetus for teachers to operate according to the principles of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution and to impose order upon the world through loyalty to one’s principles, rationality of thought, and open exchange of ideas. But establishing the primary school classroom as the locus of a new “shared culture” was more difficult in practice than in theory.⁶⁶

Rural Values

On March 28th, 1882, Ferry published a comprehensive set of acts that mandated free and secular public schooling for every French child. The subject matter to be taught was carefully prescribed, and, while teachers were expected to be well qualified, the state dictated the content of lessons from above. Ferry rejected not just religious teaching but any religious symbolism in the classroom; every public school was to be a bastion of Republicanism. When

⁶⁴ E. Robert, *L’École et la famille: Journal d’éducation, d’instruction et de récréation* (1 Avril 1882). Database. BnF Gallica. Lyon, April 1, 1882. [ark:/12148/bpt6k5722631g](https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5722631g).

⁶⁵ E. Robert, *L’École et la famille*, (1 Avril 1882).

⁶⁶ Reed-Danahay, *Education and Identity in Rural France*, 25.

French children learned about the world, France was at the center: spatially, historically, and ideologically. Along with reading, writing, and literature, students were to learn “geography, particularly that of France” and “history, particularly that of France until today.”⁶⁷ Law and political economy, the sciences, and the arts, “drawing, modeling, and music” rounded out the curriculum.⁶⁸ Finally, young boys studied military exercises (and reenacted successful French battles). For girls, needlework was considered an adequate substitute. From a practical perspective, much of this curriculum was superfluous to daily rural life.

Eugen Weber has argued that “it was only when what the schools became relevant to recently created needs and that people listened to them...people went to school not because school was offered or imposed, but because it was useful.”⁶⁹ Families began to take an interest in state schools as academic knowledge became economically beneficial. For instance, individuals in areas with poor soil for crops were more invested in knowledge which might connect them to the city and opportunities for work and trade. Laura Strumhinger concurs that the peasantry did place a high value on complex skills such as embroidery, constructing farming implements, and agricultural tricks of the trade which held immediate value.⁷⁰ But this does not mean that schooling sparked national unity in the manner the Third Republic had envisioned. Most parents, and schoolchildren by extension, practiced what Reed -Danahay describes as a process of “cultural diglossia.”⁷¹ Through this balancing act, which each family practiced “selective [participation] in national institutions...while at the same time...reinforcing local identity and

⁶⁷ E. Robert, *L'École et la famille: Journal d'éducation, d'instruction et de récréation* (1 Mai 1882). Database. BnF Gallica. Lyon, May 1, 1882. [ark:/12148/bpt6k57226354](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:fr:bf-1-12148-bpt6k57226354).

⁶⁸ E. Robert, *L'École et la famille*, (1 Mai 1882).

⁶⁹ Weber, " *Peasants into Frenchmen*, 303.

⁷⁰ Strumhinger, *What Were Little Girls and Boys Made of?*, 34-47.

⁷¹ Reed-Danahay, *Education and Identity in Rural France*, 30.

social life.”⁷² As a result of strict requirements, students behaved as though they were part of a unified national culture, attending school regularly, and learning the content the Ministry of Education laid out for them. But when Ferry referred to his law of 1882 as “a *loi* which the country has so strongly claimed,” he failed to account for variance across the nation.

Ferry’s desire to manage schooling to the most minute level was clear. He was unwilling to take the risk that either local governments or resistant families would limit the application of his methods, and his policies addressed logistical hurdles that families and small-town governments had long used to circumvent state demands for mandatory public schooling. This is not to say that Ferry made it easy for rural villages to implement his reforms. From a practical standpoint, villages had neither the economic means nor the inclination to fund schools that would pull children away from the home. Act 18 of the Ferry Law referred to a “school fund” established in 1867 which would, in theory, provide all communes with the requisite funding to construct, fund, and encourage attendance at schools.⁷³ Despite this, funds were limited. Throughout the early 1880s, many communes but schools from the ground up to meet the demands of the *loi*. Deborah Reed-Danahay, studying the intersection of local tradition and national influence in the French classroom, made mention of a school constructed in Lavaille in 1881. She described it as a large but unappealing structure, centrally located, and “vividly represent[ing] the presence of the state.”⁷⁴ The children of Lavaille were born into farming families, and despite increasing rates of literacy, generational socio-economic advancement was not ushered in by universal education.⁷⁵ For this reason, even families that did not object to

⁷² Reed-Danahay, *Education and Identity in Rural France*, 30.

⁷³ E. Robert, *L'École et la famille*, (1 Mai 1882).

⁷⁴ Reed-Danahay, *Education and Identity in Rural France*, 12.

⁷⁵ Reed-Danahay, *Education and Identity in Rural France*, 29.

public schooling for religious reasons had reason to question the relevance of state education to their lives.

Reed-Danahay noted the “uniform curriculum” in French public schools of Ferry’s time and the strict “institutional and social constraints” laid down by the state.⁷⁶ Despite this, the degree of submission to state demands varied among families by locale, sometimes generating conflict that undercut the Third Republic’s goal of unification. The methods Ferry employed assumed that the French peasantry shared “the class culture (habitus)...social knowledge and symbolic capital valued by the school system, ” meaning that state-sponsored education would translate directly into a replication of state ideology among students.⁷⁷ In fact, “bourgeois ideology,” domestic gender roles, and other forms of social stratification that existed in the French metropole were experienced differently across the nation.⁷⁸ Reed-Danahay and Sarah Ann Curtis have both framed the tensions generated by educational reforms and secularization as the products of insider/outsider conflict in rural areas. While the division between state instructors (outsiders) and village schoolchildren (insiders) was evident, sometimes the line was blurred. Reed-Danahay suggests that “identification with French culture” did not always translate into “positive attitudes towards French education.”⁷⁹ Rural families might agree that academic skills taught in state schools were useful but reject the imposition of a hierarchical system that limited their individual freedoms.

⁷⁶ Reed-Danahay, *Education and Identity in Rural France*, 146

⁷⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, and Jean Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in education, society and culture*. (London: Sage Publications, 1977.), quoted in Deborah Reed-Danahay, *Education and Identity in Rural France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.), 26.

⁷⁸ Heywood, Colin, “On Learning Gender Roles During Childhood in Nineteenth-Century France,” *French History* 5 no. 4, (Oxford University Press, 1991.), 453.

⁷⁹ Reed-Danahay, *Education and Identity in Rural France*, 156.

Laura Struminger has described education during the Guizot era of the mid-nineteenth century as emphasizing “submission, obedience, and love of parents.”⁸⁰ In most households, both mothers and fathers contributed to childcare and farm work. Mothers were traditionally seen as responsible for demonstrating moral values, and fathers took on difficult physical tasks, but the concept that men and women should play separate roles in the family was not innate to village life. Colin Heywood describes how “mothers...[worked] beside their husbands” in the fields as well as within the home, and notes that “women [were] subordinate to men in some areas,” but possessed “very real control” in the domestic sphere and with regards to the “economic life of the family.”⁸¹ Heywood also references Laura Struminger’s scholarship. Struminger has noted how “school readers...imposed[d] certain aspects of middle class culture on peasant families,” and Heywood clarifies that villages had established gender roles prior to Third Republic schooling, but “they were not based on middle class divisions of labor...myths of the perfect mother and father.”⁸² School texts and lessons introduced and reinforced the ideas that men and women should behave differently, work different jobs, and grow up to serve their nation in different ways. Similarly, as schooling increased, the concept of a division between work/school and home/leisure developed in the countryside. This shifted the rhythm of the day so that it was no longer dictated by the needs and conditions of the outside world, but rather under the constraints of an educational timetable.

As children encountered ideas that were foreign to their parents, sources of tension emerged even within families. It was typical for rural families to be large. Older children had the

⁸⁰ Struminger, *What Were Little Girls and Boys Made of?*, 22-33.

⁸¹ Heywood, “On Learning Gender Roles During Childhood in Nineteenth-Century France,” 456-9.

⁸² Heywood, “On Learning Gender Roles During Childhood in Nineteenth-Century France,” 457-8.

responsibility of looking after their younger siblings, and as soon as they were able, children of both genders helped out home and around the farm. Family members relied upon each other, and collective values were central to family life. Ferry's public schools encouraged children to identify with the nation to an escalating degree, and therefore, encouraged students to differentiate themselves from their families and roles in their communities. Even before the Third Republic, schools had encouraged among students a "spirit of independence," but teachers in the 1880s strove to impart a "corresponding notion of duty to the nation which implied deference to the status quo."⁸³ Weber notes that the traditional model of class and class consciousness does not apply to rural France before the 1880s. The Third Republic viewed the peasantry as a proletariat class and feared that dissatisfaction with the government might cause this class to unite and rise up in revolt. However, as Weber elaborates, there is no evidence that peasants identified with each other past the narrow borders of their hometowns. In most cases, peasants experienced "tensions between groups engaged in different activities...rival villages [or] sections of villages," and the actions of the government were beyond the scope of their concerns.⁸⁴ By the same token, for each person, fitting into one's role in the nuclear family and insular community of the village was essential. The idea of individualism, political or otherwise, was promoted in public schools, but antithetical to rural life. Moreover, collectivism was promoted when in the context of the nation, but not among villagers themselves, as this would have been detrimental to the unity of France as a whole. Under the Third Republic, parents were therefore compelled to have their children educated in a way that contradicted their own beliefs.

⁸³ Struminger, *What Were Little Girls and Boys Made of?*, 22-33.

⁸⁴ Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*, 247.

The French Language Question

Language was another point of contention within families. David Bell asserts that the Revolution of 1789 marked the point at which people across France first came to equate “the legal category of nationality and the cultural fact of language.”⁸⁵ If someone learned to speak Parisian French, as opposed to the various *patois* dialects spoken throughout the countryside, it was “a sign of full assimilation” into the new political system.⁸⁶ In the 1880s, the Third Republic incorporated this principle into public schooling, conducting lessons solely in French. This meant that children oftentimes received instruction in a language their parents could not speak, a language of “superior otherness.”⁸⁷ At home, children had to choose which language to communicate in; sometimes, siblings from within a family might speak French among themselves, while their parents could not join in the conversation. The Third Republic’s insistence on using French was an early limiting factor for the state’s education goals. French was becoming a majority language by the 1880s, but “the pressures of environment...worked to protect and enforce the use of local speech.”⁸⁸ In response, schoolmasters resorted to harsh punishments in an attempt to enforce linguistic conformity among students. For instance, in Brittany, children caught speaking Breton might be “put on dry bread and water” or given a token of shame to carry with him until he overheard a fellow student not speaking French and “denounced him.”⁸⁹ Children learned to speak only in French rather than face shameful reprisals

⁸⁵ David A. Bell, “Lingua Populi, Lingua Dei: Language, Religion, and the Origins of French Revolutionary Nationalism,” *The American Historical Review* 100, 1405.

⁸⁶ David A. Bell, “Lingua Populi, Lingua Dei: Language, Religion, and the Origins of French Revolutionary Nationalism,” *The American Historical Review* 100, no. 5 (December 1995): 1406. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2169864>.

⁸⁷ Struminger, *What Were Little Girls and Boys Made of?*, 34-47.

⁸⁸ Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*, 312.

⁸⁹ Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*, 313.

from instructors. At the same time, by encouraging students to point out deviance on the part of their friends on behalf of the schoolmaster, linguistic policies damaged close relationships between children and emphasized rigid state regulations.

Outside the classroom, linguistic reforms were directly linked to the religious debate at the root of Ferry's policies. David Bell frames the Third Republic's effort to stamp out linguistic diversity as an answer to the church's use of patois when "addressing the peasants on religious issues."⁹⁰ It bears noting that there was no explicit link between patois and counterrevolutionary ideology. Bell argues that the Third Republic "invented [the language] problem," then increased centralization of rural France to resolve it.⁹¹ The Third Republic challenged the church on two levels: with secularizing policies, and through what Eric Hobsbawm has referred to as "invented tradition—" a process of myth-making and nationalization intended to place French identity at the center of all citizens' consciousnesses.⁹²

The Third Republic mythologization of French history began with a reframing of the events of the Franco-Prussian War which had so shaken the confidence of the nation. Jörg Lehmann has described France's defeat as "the impetus for a reform of the country's school system aimed at enabling it to provide a higher education."⁹³ However, education was grounded in French history alone: in primary schools, lessons excluded mention of other European states; at the university level "a new generation assumed that task of...restoring a sense of national

⁹⁰ Bell, "Lingua Populi, Lingua Dei," 1422.

⁹¹ Bell, "Lingua Populi, Lingua Dei, 1418.

⁹² Eric Hobsbawm, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.), 271, quoted in Deborah Reed-Danahay, *Education and Identity in Rural France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.), 111.

⁹³ Jörg Lehmann, "Civilization versus Barbarism: The Franco-Prussian War in French History Textbooks, 1875-1895." *Journal of Educational Media, Memory & Society* 7, no. 1 (2015): 51.

pride...reminding [citizens] of France's historic grandeur.⁹⁴ Lehmann focuses on the idea of "revanche," a concept based around a nation's reclamation of lost territory (in this case, France's Alsace and Lorraine.⁹⁵ He contextualizes "revanche" within Republican schools. The Third Republic lauded itself as the center of "civilizing progress," and educational reform was therefore justified in order to help France advance and reclaim its place of prominence in Europe.⁹⁶ Jaques and Mona Ozouf have eloquently explored this theme in a famous French primary school book, *Le Tour de la France par Deux Enfants*, in relation to this narrative. "What *Le Tour de la France* [did] was to shift the focus of militancy...the text teaches that a country's greatness depends not on the extent of its territory but on the strength of its national soul."⁹⁷ France could not unwrite history, but the Third Republic could "compensate...the pain of defeat" with the promise that "work and moral progress" would bring "immanent justice for the future."⁹⁸

The Ozoufs describe *Le Tour de la France* as a text absent of religion. The young children within the story experience "fraternal as opposed to religious emotion, oath as opposed to prayer."⁹⁹ *Le Tour de la France* and other stories of its ilk illustrate Benedict Anderson's argument that nationalism is a cultural production and that governments often work to supplant religious ties among individuals with similar strength of sentiment for the idealized nation.¹⁰⁰ Anderson's theory of "imagined communities" has been deeply influential to the historical study

⁹⁴ Lehmann, "Civilization versus Barbarism," 52.

⁹⁵ Lehmann, "Civilization versus Barbarism," 53.

⁹⁶ Lehmann, "Civilization versus Barbarism," 53.

⁹⁷ Mona Ozouf and Jaques Ozouf, "Le Tour de la France par deux enfants," 132.

⁹⁸ Mona Ozouf and Jaques Ozouf, "Le Tour de la France par deux enfants," 134.

⁹⁹ Mona Ozouf and Jaques Ozouf, "Le Tour de la France par deux enfants," 134.

¹⁰⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. (London: Verso, 1993).

of nationalism writ large and bears particular relevance in the case of French education. Through his framework, nationalism is not, as one might assume, a strictly political creation. Nationalism must be regarded as a product of “the large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which, as well as against which – it came into being,”¹⁰¹ and the concept of a nation is not fixed, but shifts and adapts to changing conditions and perceptions among citizens over time. While nationalist thought is beneficial to a centralized government and can act as a unifying force, laws or political mandates alone are unlikely to engender nationalist sentiment. Rather, individuals must form an understanding that they are connected to others beyond the confines of their locality. The concept of “Frenchness” was less clearly defined for peasants than Ferry might have assumed. Regional identity was important in rural France, but less so than one’s role in the village social sphere and economy. National identity was an afterthought.

The Third Republic government needed to manufacture a sense of homogeneity to overcome these sociocultural barriers. Once again, Ferry saw the path to an “imagined community” through educational policy. By teaching the same material in every classroom across France, the state could ensure the uniform transmission of ideas among the populous. The issue of linguistic diversity, which prevented clear and efficient communication from metropole to countryside, could be mitigated. And children could be raised with the understanding that their role was to serve the nation as active citizens, with political awareness and a desire to fight for the Enlightenment ideals upon which the French Republic had been founded. One of the greatest limitations to ubiquitous primary education was easy to recognize but difficult to address. Some families, disinclined to lose help around the home, simply refused to send their children to

¹⁰¹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 12.

school.¹⁰² Ferry's solution was to delegate national policies to the local level. France was following in the footsteps of other European nations during the nineteenth century; the use of education to bolster national unity was not a novel idea. However, the rigorous legal structure Ferry developed set France apart, and the state's will-that every child from every household receive a French education- was enforced through legal ordinances mandating attendance.

Act 5 of the Ferry Law of 1882 established municipal councils to monitor attendance in local schools. The mayor of each canton (township) was the head of his council, and delegates were assigned to larger councils that might oversee multiple cantons. It was the mayor's responsibility to give all families notice 15 days before the start of the school year so they could enroll their children. In turn, families the law required families inform the mayor if children were going to be publicly or privately taught and enrolled; if a child was going to be absent from school, "parents or responsible persons [had to] make know to the director reasons for his or her absence."¹⁰³ Here too, Ferry's law was strict, and only "sickness of the child, death of a family member," or similarly "exceptional circumstances" were "legitimate grounds" for missing class.¹⁰⁴ Under some circumstances, such as a move, parents or guardians could request up to 3 months of school absences for their children. Any absence of more than 15 days had to be approved by the child's instructors."¹⁰⁵ If a student was absent for several days without explanation, his or her father would be brought before a town hall commission to "remind him of the text of the law and explain to him his duty."¹⁰⁶ If the situation reoccurred, the father's name would be taken down on a registration list to be posted publicly on the door of the town hall. The

¹⁰² E. Robert, *L'École et la famille*, (1 Mai 1882).

¹⁰³ E. Robert, *L'École et la famille*, (1 Mai 1882).

¹⁰⁴ E. Robert, *L'École et la famille*, (1 Mai 1882).

¹⁰⁵ E. Robert, *L'École et la famille*, (1 Mai 1882).

¹⁰⁶ E. Robert, *L'École et la famille*, (1 Mai 1882).

same procedure took effect if a child left school, unless parents provided information proving that their children would be attending another institution or homeschooled in the future.¹⁰⁷ Certainly, a father could ignore the summons to appear, and those opposed to state schooling might take little notice of their name on a list. However, Ferry's law added stricter legal provisions: at a third offense, fathers were brought before a justice of the peace and charged with "police penalties."¹⁰⁸ Parents remained responsible for choosing whether their children would attend public school, private school, or be taught at home, but Ferry destabilized the role of the father as the sole arbitrator of his children's educational future.

A set of Ministerial Circulars, published in Lyon in 1900, discussed the relationship among parents, state, and school. The letters themselves were written in 1882 and directly addressed the Ferry Laws. One, written in September by Minister of Public Instruction and Fine Arts J. Duvaux, recalled that "the freedom of the father of a family, as you know, is complete...for the immense majority of families, the choice is made long before the start of the school year."¹⁰⁹ But this did not excuse parents from state oversight. The circular went on to say that each father had to submit a "statement [for each] individual child," a process which the author referred to as a "vast investigation."¹¹⁰ The economic ramifications of the Ferry reforms were also noted. The circular pointed out the number of students unable to receive an education because their village or municipality did not have a schoolhouse. The circular noted that "the material and financial situation was...a matter of political will and family opinion" when it came

¹⁰⁷ E. Robert, *L'École et la famille*, (1 Mai 1882).

¹⁰⁸ E. Robert, *L'École et la famille*, (1 Mai 1882).

¹⁰⁹ BnF Gallica. "Ville de Lyon. Loi Sur l'enseignement Primaire Obligatoire (28 Mars 1882). Circulaires Ministérielles Relatives à l'application de Cette Loi." Database. imp. nouvelle lyonnaise (Lyon), 1900. ark:/12148/bpt6k57855554, 12.

¹¹⁰ BnF Gallica. "Ville de Lyon. Loi Sur l'enseignement Primaire Obligatoire (28 Mars 1882), 13

to education.¹¹¹ Duvaux added, “this material obstacle is, you know, the only one which opposes the complete and immediate application of the law.”¹¹²

Despite opposition from parents, local governments, and most pressing, the Catholic Church, it is clear that the wishes of the central government won out by the twentieth century. Secularization took hold as congregational schools were defunded and religious instruction was eliminated systematically from state schools. In 1890, an administrative bulletin published statistics for “successful secularizations” between November 1st, 1888 and October 31st, 1889.¹¹³ 104 schools were secularized “by obligation” according to Ferry’s 1886 law, while an additional 88 were secularized “optionally” at the demand of municipalities, and 71 at the demand of the office of administration.¹¹⁴ The bulletin also included the number of public schools secularized and mentioned the classes at congregational schools which had been “confined to lay assistants” under Ferry’s policies.¹¹⁵ Over the following years, these trends continued. Curtis notes that “those who still practiced their faith in late nineteenth-century France may have done so in more devout and orthodox ways,” but, but WW1, the predominance of Catholic schools had faded into memory.¹¹⁶

A second administrative report was published for Ferry’s benefit by the Minister of Public Instruction and Fine Arts, Armand Fallières, in 1889. Fallières, who later served as president of France from 1906-1913, began with an overview of Ferry’s laws. “The fundamental

¹¹¹ Curtis, *Educating the Faithful*, 119.

¹¹² BnF Gallica. “Ville de Lyon. Loi Sur l’enseignement Primaire Obligatoire (28 Mars 1882), 14.

¹¹³ “Enseignement primaire. — Statistique des laïcisations effectuées du 1er novembre 1888 au 31 octobre 1889.” *Bulletin administratif de l’instruction publique* 47, no. 906 (1890): 657–58.

¹¹⁴ “Enseignement primaire. — Statistique des laïcisations effectuées du 1er novembre 1888 au 31 octobre 1889.”

¹¹⁵ “Enseignement primaire. — Statistique des laïcisations effectuées du 1er novembre 1888 au 31 octobre 1889.”

¹¹⁶ Curtis, *Educating the Faithful*, 174.

laws of 1881 and 1882 on freedom and obligation...the laws of 1883 and 1885 on school buildings...the grand law of 1886 and the regulatory offices it created.”¹¹⁷ He acknowledged that it was difficult to judge the long-term effects of such recent reforms, but expressed hope for the future of France based on the patterns of change in his records. For instance, he praised the establishment of 47 normal (training) schools for male and female instructors, the expansion of secondary education, and the vast expansion of primary education.¹¹⁸ Between 1882 and 1887 alone, almost 4,000 new schools were built in response to Ferry’s policies, almost all of which were public state schools. The overwhelming majority of new schools were secular, and Fallières attributed this development to both “substitution of secular personnel for congregational personnel” or construction of new public lay schools. In contrast, the number of congregational schools decreased over the same time period.¹¹⁹ For Fallières, these trends represented “indisputable [proof of] progress...completion [of] legislative work...[and] administrative and pedagogical organization of the entire department.”¹²⁰

Some of the changes ushered in during the Third Republic era are not evident in records or statistics. The period can be best understood by looking at the multiple levels of tension and conflict generated by Ferry’s educational reforms. Ferry’s policies were intended to increase bureaucratic centralization within France, but his willingness to make demands on village governments antagonized local mayors, who responded by seeking loopholes in his plans. For Ferry himself, the Catholic Church was the greatest impediment to French progress. Education remained a traditional stronghold of the church in rural France, and religious instructors were

¹¹⁷ Armand Fallières, “Rapport au Président de la République relatif à la statistique quinquennale de l’enseignement primaire.” *Bulletin administratif de l’instruction publique* 45, no. 858 (1889): 459–63.

¹¹⁸ Fallières, “Rapport au Président de la République”

¹¹⁹ Fallières, “Rapport au Président de la République

¹²⁰ Fallières, “Rapport au Président de la République

well respected for their ability to educate children while (parents hoped) setting them on the path towards heaven. However, Ferry saw the church in a different light, as a stronghold of monarchism, and by secularizing public schools, he limited the influence of religion on the nation as a whole. Religious reforms sparked outrage among parents. However, there were other reasons for families to reject Ferry's education plan: it was costly, state instructors were foreign, and Republican ideals went over the heads of villagers more concerned with their next harvest than the concept of a "French" nation.

Could Ferry have anticipated, as France emerged wounded from the Franco-Prussian War, the transformation he would set in motion? It was advantageous that he held office during an era of rising nationalism, and as each European state strove to develop a distinct identity among its citizens, Ferry's vision for the French Republic was realized with remarkable success, although not without limitations. Napoleon III did prove to be the last monarch of France, and Republicanism was cemented as the basis of the French government. France was also forced to a point of reckoning with the role of Catholicism, and the modern pull of secularism proved dominant. Local governments gave in to the will of the state, and new schools were rapidly built and staffed with well-trained instructors. However, it is erroneous to suggest that rural France played no role in this evolution.

As the nation became more centralized and interconnected, it was advantageous for villagers to adopt practical aspects of education. Literacy and mathematical skills were relevant both within an agricultural economy and at the local level. Parisian ideas, introduced in classrooms, through textbooks, and in news bulletins, sparked interest in the affairs of the nation among people who had been previously uninformed and disinterested. Parents saw opportunities for their children to advance in society, and children, perhaps for the first time, were nurtured as

individuals and encouraged to pursue personal and professional interests. Ferry's educational reforms were meant to rigidly enforce Republicanism, secularism, and nationalistic thought. By casting every public-school classroom as a microcosm of the nation, the Third Republic created through law an "imagined community," in which the boundaries of urban and rural France faded away, and the future of the nation could be written anew.¹²¹

¹²¹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 1993.

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