

**An Empire Divided:  
Religion, Republicanism,  
and the Making of French  
Colonialism, 1880–1914**

*J. P. DAUGHTON*

**OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS**

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*Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation;  
and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand . . .*

—MATTHEW 12:25



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## THEY SHALL CAST OUT DEVILS

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## Introduction: Empire in an Age of Discord

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*And he said to them: Go ye into the whole world and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved: but he that believeth not shall be condemned. And these signs shall follow them that believe: In my name they shall cast out devils. They shall speak with new tongues.*

—Mark 16:15–17

*The republican party has shown . . . that [France] cannot just be a free country; that it must also be a great country exercising all the influence it has on the destiny of Europe, that it must spread this influence in the world, and carry everywhere it can its language, its customs, its flag, its arms, its genius.*

—Jules Ferry, 1883

*For what is wedlock forcèd, but a hell,  
An age of discord and continual strife?*

—William Shakespeare, *Henry VI, Part 1*

In late 1899, Monsieur Julia, a minor colonial administrator in rural Madagascar, was having trouble with a local French Jesuit missionary named Père Delmont. In a series of reports to his superior, Julia complained that Delmont had repeatedly interfered with official colonial business. First, Delmont obstructed the administration's pursuit of justice by telling witnesses to give false testimony to help clear two Catholic converts accused of theft. The priest went so far as to sit in the courtroom to make sure the witnesses stuck to the fictitious script, even though the evidence against the accused was overwhelming.<sup>1</sup> Several weeks later, Julia discovered that for five months Delmont had been assuring local villagers that, by working to build the mission's new church, they were fulfilling their labor obligations to the colonial



**Map 1.1.** The French empire, c. 1914

government. One Malagasy Christian told Julia that the people worked for Delmont because “like cattle, [we] go where we are led when we are told it is for the government.”<sup>2</sup> The administrator was disgusted by the missionary’s presumptuousness. He penned a letter to his superior pointing out not only that Delmont had unlawfully exploited these laborers but that the missionary had not even received official permission to build the church in the first place.

Julia’s troubles with Delmont did not end there. He accused the priest of stealing a pile of telegraph poles—property of the French colonial government—to use in the construction of a chapel.<sup>3</sup> This crime carried with it symbolic, as well as practical, significance: not just a means of colonial communication and control, telegraph poles were emblems of French progress and technology. Making matters worse, Delmont perpetrated the crime in order to build what many French republicans in 1899 saw as a temple to clericalism and superstition. The missionary, on the other hand, believed he had put the wood to excellent use, erecting a building where France could pursue the one true *mission civilisatrice*—or “civilizing mission”—by converting one soul at a time.

By Christmas of 1899—just a month after Julia had started his investigation—relations between the mission and the colonial administration, the two most powerful French influences in the region, had broken down. This dispute in a relatively remote corner of Madagascar eventually involved both the governor-general of the colony and the regional bishop. Julia’s immediate superior expressed exasperation to Governor-General Joseph Gallieni, writing that he, too, had tried to find common ground with the Jesuits, though they “clearly indicated their desire to inflame the questions I wanted to conclude amicably.”<sup>4</sup> Nor could he stop Julia from threatening the mission. Gallieni ordered Julia not to pursue any charges against

the priest and asked the bishop to rein in Delmont. After three months of negotiations and heated exchanges, Julia and Delmont finally made peace. The missionary wrote the administrator a conciliatory letter, praising him and offering to work with him. "And why should it be otherwise?" Père Delmont asked. "Are we not Frenchmen working for the greater good of our common mother, dear France? *Vive, vive, vive la France!!!*"<sup>5</sup>

The archives of French colonialism are filled with stories of disagreement, conflict, and reconciliation like these exchanges between Monsieur Julia and Père Delmont. From 1880 to 1914, the French empire was a place of many uneasy relationships, not just between Europeans and indigenous populations. As this incident in Madagascar shows, French men and women—officials, merchants, colonists, officers, soldiers, and travelers—were regularly divided both on basic questions of colonial policy and on issues of national allegiance and patriotism. No altercations were more heated (nor ideologies more divergent) than those between Catholic missionaries and their critics. In the case of Julia and Delmont, from what seem to have been minor disagreements over law, labor, and lumber emerged starkly different views of communication, civilization, and ultimately colonialism.

In his peacemaking letter, the missionary posed a rhetorical question that this book will explore in detail: between 1880 and 1914, were all Frenchmen in the colonies working for a "common mother" called France? If so, was the *mère-patrie* a religious Catholic or a secular republican? Did France want to convert pagans to the glory of Jesus Christ or to the possibilities of technology and rational economics? And what of France's colonial populations: were converted indigenous Christians—such as the ones Delmont tried to defend in court—friends or foes of the French colonial administration? When Delmont cheered, "*Vive la France!*" just *which* France—and *whose* France—did he have in mind? The answers that men and women, in both France and the empire, supplied to these questions had significance well beyond the colonial world, reflecting broader attitudes about France's political and cultural heritage and its moral role in world affairs.

This book tells the story of how French people with markedly different backgrounds, moral codes, and political perspectives shaped colonial and national politics between 1880 and 1914, the most intense period of colonial expansion in French history. The anger and animosity felt by the likes of Julia and Delmont resulted from a great paradox at the heart of French colonialism during the early Third Republic. Starting in the 1880s, the colonial lobby—a rather haphazard group of republican politicians, businessmen, adventurers, and scholars—invoked a *mission civilisatrice* as a rallying cry to motivate an ambivalent nation to acquire and invest in overseas possessions.<sup>6</sup> A promise to reform, educate, and improve the livelihoods of France's new colonial populations, the civilizing mission embodied the spirit of the French Revolution and the specifically rational, secular ideals of the Enlightenment. But as the boundaries of the empire expanded, few politicians or colonial

lobbyists were willing to pay (or ask taxpayers to pay) for the programs they promised. Instead, they regularly turned to the most convenient and inexpensive alternative to implement their programs: Catholic missions.

While in some ways logical, the decision to rely on Catholic missionaries was politically and ideologically fraught for everyone involved. The new interest in colonial conquest coincided exactly with the climax of republican anticlericalism in France. Many republicans who tirelessly sought the eradication of all Catholic influence at home found themselves depending on missionary expertise to facilitate—and even justify—their rule abroad. For their part, most missionaries were less than enthusiastic about their new partnership, as well. But a variety of factors motivated leaders of the divided groups to nurture an informal, if rocky, entente. Thus, from the 1880s to the First World War, the daily operation of the so-called republican civilizing mission in the French empire was regularly carried out by the republic's sworn "enemies"—Catholic religious workers—many of whom not only had serious reservations about colonialism but also were openly hostile to republicanism.

Administrators concerned with political harmony in the possessions tried to repress their distrust of all things Catholic by repeating a popular republican dictum of the day: "Anticlericalism is not an item for export." Officials in Paris and high-ranking administrators abroad concealed, either willingly or under orders, any misgivings they might have had about Catholic workers. But, as the following chapters will show, such official repression of anticlericalism was not always effective, especially among lower-ranking administrators in the field, as in the case of M. Julia. Nor could the official position effectively control the many "nonofficial" or "third-party" critics of the Catholic missions, such as journalists, Freemason and radical colonists, and Protestant missionaries. A similar dynamic governed missionary behavior: bishops and missionary superiors regularly instructed their workers to stay clear of the administration altogether. As Père Delmont deftly exemplifies, however, many religious workers in the field still protested policies and undermined colonial authorities by writing inflammatory letters, newspaper articles, and books, and by organizing demonstrations. Such sparring reveals the competing concerns of distinct groups of Frenchmen who struggled for influence and moral authority over the same colonial populations.

While upper echelons of both the administration and the mission hierarchies strove to keep relations amicable despite long-standing differences, the lines from an old missionary song—"When a Frenchman in a foreign land sees a Frenchman, he feels his heart beat"—often rang flat in the early decades of the Third Republic.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, as this book will show, distrust and disagreement led Frenchmen to level the most serious of charges at one another—accusations that included slave trading, sexual impropriety, treason, murder, and the physical destruction of entire societies. The divergent, often antithetical motivations of missionaries and their critics led to heated—even violent—disagreements over the nature of France's relationship to the

world, the form colonialism would take, and the very meaning of French civilization. In the first thirty years of its republican incarnation, the French empire was a place of unexpectedly deep divisions.

The friction between missionaries and republicans can only be fully appreciated against the backdrop of the long history of religious conflict in modern France. Starting in the eighteenth century, reformers scornful of the power and wealth of the monarchy and the Catholic Church imagined a society freed from the yoke of these conservative institutions. They aimed to build a new society governed by liberty and based on secular moral codes, rituals, and icons. While they wanted their new nation to have a culture all its own, ironically many secularists impressed by the pomp, ceremony, and liturgy that Catholicism offered turned to religious practices for inspiration.

In the wake of the French Revolution, early incarnations of a republican vision took shape with remarkable speed.<sup>8</sup> In terms of political legitimacy, the power of the people replaced divine right. National holidays, such as the *Fête de la Fédération*, competed with Christian holy days. In one of the more famous images of the revolutionary era, the Declaration of the Rights of Man appeared as new commandments, inscribed on two great stone tablets, and trumpeted by an angel of reason. Revolutionaries converted the church of Sainte-Geneviève in Paris into the Panthéon, which would act as a secular shrine of the nation. In its hallowed crypt, secular France would honor its own prophets, heroes, and martyrs. The republic that the Revolution had brought to life was France's messiah; accordingly, calendars started anew at Year I.

The republican desire to create a secular nation that emulated Catholic practices was born not of admiration but of resentment and often hatred of everything the Church stood for. The historian Owen Chadwick tells how one such critic dreamed of strangling the king with the intestines of the last cleric.<sup>9</sup> While such violent fantasies were perhaps not the norm, virulent republican opposition did not wane after the era of revolution. The process of sanctifying republican ideals lasted for more than a century and encountered countless bumps along the way.<sup>10</sup> In place of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, republicans offered the promise of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Even when not in power, republicans intervened in religious education, encouraging students—as one midcentury political cartoon showed—to memorize Voltaire instead of the catechism.<sup>11</sup>

For modernizing republicans, the Church opposed everything they cherished, most notably Progress itself. Standing before the legislative assembly in 1849, Victor Hugo condemned the Catholic Church for this very reason: "Every step made by the European mind has been made in spite of it," he insisted. "Its history is written in the annals of human progress, but it is written on the reverse side." The more religious corners of the audience groaned with astonishment.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, Hugo's assessment was not completely

unreasonable; fifteen years after the speech, the papal *Syllabus of Errors* denounced much that the modern world had to offer, including liberalism.

By the second half of the century, Catholicism had become the largest front in a Franco-French war. Struggles between Catholics and secularists came to the fore of French politics from the beginning of the Third Republic. The very concept of “anticlericalism” was an invention of the 1870s—an indication of how politicians considered the Church to be their main political, social, and cultural adversary.<sup>13</sup> Republican rhetoric shifted gears, accelerating from contempt and critique to all-out battle, gaining venom and vitriol. In 1877, Léon Gambetta, a towering figure in the founding of the Third Republic, changed the nature of the debate by thundering, “Clericalism—there is the enemy!” before the National Assembly. Many historians suggest that Gambetta’s anticlericalism had more to do with unifying republicans against a common foe than with attacking the Church. But while divisions in town squares may have been characterized more by “second-rate insults” than by serious ideological debate, the result of Gambetta’s war cry was to turn Frenchmen against one another for decades to come.<sup>14</sup>

Gambetta’s call signaled the beginning of what James McMillan has termed a French *Kulturkampf*. Two Frances—one religious, one republican—coexisted in the same country, under the same law, but subscribed to significantly different values.<sup>15</sup> The list of offenses that republicans leveled at clerics was long, often colorful, and severe. They considered clerics to be anti-individual, antiliberal, superstitious, and irrational. *Religieux* were said to be products of the Middle Ages, servants of the Inquisition, slavers and torturers who lived in a dark and distant past and answered to a foreign prince at the Vatican. As ultramontanists, they were said to be traitors incapable of patriotism, offering their allegiance only to the pope. Republican criticism grew even more intense when Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish captain in the French army, was wrongfully accused of espionage in 1894, pushing France to the brink of civil war. The ensuing “affair” drove many republicans to blame the retrograde institutions of the *ancien régime*—the army and the Church—for being out of step with the ideals of the modern republican nation. The polemics of the Dreyfus affair emboldened radical republicans to demand the complete separation of Church and state in 1905, a year before Dreyfus was fully exonerated.

Many Catholics, particularly clerics, were no more charitable in their assessment of republicanism. From the age of revolution forward, antirepublican Catholic commentators argued that liberal gains were a sign of France’s fall from grace. France’s defeat in the Franco-Prussian war in 1870 and the ensuing violence of the Paris Commune were proof that God was punishing the nation for its rampant immorality. With the founding of the Third Republic, Catholics struck back at the attacks of Gambetta and his supporters, driving the political wedge between the two camps even deeper. Priests denounced republicans as godless sinners who served Satan by sullyng France’s traditional role as “the eldest daughter” of the Catholic Church.

During the years of the Dreyfus affair, right-wing polemicists, of whom Édouard Drumont is only the most notorious, often stooped to xenophobia and racism, accusing the republican left of cowering to its own foreign influences, namely, Freemasonry and a manipulative international Jewish elite. The growing wave of reaction, however, proved to be more a symptom of political desperation than a sign of a strengthening ideological movement.

By the late 1870s, moderate republicans had won legislative power and launched an offensive to dismantle the Church's hold on the nation. To help solidify their gains, republicans replaced the Virgin Mary with Marianne, secular France's beloved symbol, and started to populate every village and government building with statues of republican saints. No battleground was more pivotal than education; and creating primary schools that were compulsory, secular, and universal became *the* republican priority. In the early 1880s, under the leadership of Jules Ferry, the government forced religious workers out of public schools and expelled the Jesuits—as well as more than five thousand teachers from other male orders—from France.<sup>16</sup> It was a first step in a project to achieve what Pierre Chevalier calls “the separation of Church and school.”<sup>17</sup>

The goal of republican education policy was not to put teaching orders out of business altogether, a move that many feared would lead to serious social unrest. Rather, republicans embraced a policy of *laïcité*—the desire to remove all symbols of and references to religion from public education, and to teach moral lessons based entirely on secular values to the nation's future citizens. More than a question of political preference, Ferry deemed *l'école laïque* to be a necessary condition of the republic's survival.<sup>18</sup> It was central to the republican goal of conquering the French countryside. Public schools would teach peasants to speak proper French and to appreciate the political ideals necessary for citizenship. History and science would cleanse children of the superstitions of their parents and village priest. Liberating France from the outdated hierarchy and dogma of the Catholic Church was an essential component of the government's civilizing process. For more radical republicans, a degree of comfort came only in 1905 when the Church was formally separated from the state. Only then did it seem that secular republican civilization had proved victorious in the war of the two Frances.

For the republican faithful, the desire to see secular civilization trammel the regressive practices of Catholicism was not simply a domestic goal; civilization belonged everywhere and to all mankind. Just as pious men and women believed God had chosen France to deliver Catholicism to the world, ardent republicans considered their own liberal ideas to be the nation's gift to humanity. Republican values were every bit as universal—or so their sponsors claimed (regularly turning a blind eye to the women and non-Europeans excluded from its most basic promises)—as faith or salvation. And, like their Christian forebears, these values were eminently exportable. Spreading them became the central tenet of the ideology behind republican colonialism.



By the 1880s, many republicans saw colonialism as an important yardstick (along with weakening the Church) of their political success. What France accomplished abroad reflected the nation's potential at home. "The conservation of the colonies," Alexis de Tocqueville had written in the 1840s, "is necessary to the strength and greatness of France."<sup>19</sup> This line of reasoning gained adherents after the Prussian defeat of 1870 and the subsequent loss of Alsace and Lorraine. Eager to rebuild French prestige, pro-colonial republicans argued that imperial expansion would make or break France.<sup>20</sup> "It is through expansion, through influencing the outside world," Gambetta said, "that nations persist and last."<sup>21</sup> In 1882, Paul Leroy-Beaulieu, a leading colonialist commentator of his day, wrote that success in the colonies was "for France a question of life or death." Should it fail, he prophesied, France would be as insignificant in European affairs as Romania or Greece.<sup>22</sup>

But not all republicans, nor all Frenchmen, were so sure. Many on the left saw colonies as a waste of money and effort that distracted attention from pressing social issues at home. In the early 1880s, a republican deputy in the Assembly shouted that colonies were "a hallucination, a deceptive, perilous dream" that heaped an unnecessary burden on the nation.<sup>23</sup> Conservatives concurred, though for very different reasons. They deemed strength on the continent—including the recovery of Alsace and Lorraine, and facing down British and German industrial might—to be the best recipe for national rejuvenation.

To persuade these critics, colonialists pointed to the benefits of developing French industry and commerce overseas. The bible of French colonialism was Leroy-Beaulieu's *De la colonisation chez les peuples modernes*, first published in 1874. Leroy-Beaulieu, who drew on John Stuart Mill's *Principles of Political Economy*, argued that colonization was an inevitable by-product of economic, political, and cultural development.<sup>24</sup> "Savages and barbarians emigrate sometimes," Leroy-Beaulieu wrote, but "only civilized people colonize."<sup>25</sup> France needed colonies, he continued, both as economic and demographic outlets for expanding markets (which would in turn make France competitive with its continental rivals) and as destinations to which excess capital and labor could emigrate (to help ease social tensions at home). Leroy-Beaulieu's work had a deep impact on political debate. It was the sort of background reading that led Jules Ferry to proclaim, "Colonial politics is the daughter of industrial politics."<sup>26</sup>

Talk of industrial politics might have convinced a few capitalists' minds, but it captured no one's imagination. In 1889, colonialists met at the Universal Exposition in Paris to discuss how best to inspire an apathetic nation to adopt a vigorous imperial policy. In addition to educating the public about colonialism's political and economic benefits, the colonial lobby determined to appeal to Frenchmen's love of country and their belief in the value of spreading civilization.<sup>27</sup> They adopted the rhetoric Ferry had used for almost a decade: as a "superior race," France had a right to conquer "inferior races"

because it had a *duty* to civilize them.<sup>28</sup> Ferry's somewhat awkward equation, promoted by the colonial lobby, formed the basis of the republican civilizing mission.<sup>29</sup> Spreading republican ideals, culture, know-how, and technology was inseparable from colonialism itself; putting "uncivilized" regions of the world on the road to progress was, according to colonialists, France's chief goal.<sup>30</sup> Beneficiaries of French science, reason, business, and politics, the new possessions would be what Tocqueville had called "monuments to the glory of our fatherland."<sup>31</sup>

The appeal to civilization was politically expedient in the 1880s for it provided both a moral justification of and a patriotic motivation for expansionism. It was also a familiar concept. With its origins in the eighteenth century, the idea of civilization had influenced republican social programs throughout the nineteenth.<sup>32</sup> By the founding of the Third Republic, according to Eugen Weber's famous assessment, republicans viewed the process of forging a new nation as "the civilization of the French by urban France."<sup>33</sup> The concept would be no less important to the forging of a new empire.<sup>34</sup> The colonial civilizing mission promised to abolish slavery, to advance humanity through education, to reform immoral cultural practices, to stamp out superstition, and to equip colonial societies with political and economic institutions and laws.<sup>35</sup> Pro-colonial politicians and writers were less forthcoming about specific ways of implementing their mission, that task being ultimately left to administrators in the field.<sup>36</sup> But that made it no less important: for many, the depth of the nation's republican roots would be best measured by the successes of the civilizing mission.

Republicans were by no means alone in their desire to export French values around the globe. Throughout the long nineteenth century, France led the world in the production of Catholic missionaries. Century's end was the golden age of the missions, when two-thirds of the approximately 14,000 priests working outside of Europe were French.<sup>37</sup> These priests were joined by other French *religieux*, such as teaching brothers and sisters, bringing the total number of Catholic religious workers abroad to approximately 58,000 in 1900, according to one missionary estimate.<sup>38</sup> Assisting in the French effort were many thousands of indigenous priests, brothers, and sisters. This considerable undertaking was supported by more than a million French men, women, and children who, according to the rules of subscription to missionary organizations, donated money and prayers to religious workers around the world. With networks of churches, schools, orphanages, leper colonies, and hospitals, Catholic missions were engaged in one of the single largest private French endeavors outside of Europe.

Missionaries worked and lived side by side with large groups of indigenous people, typically building far closer relationships with local peoples than administrators, merchants, or colonists did. It was common for individual missionaries to work in a single town or region for years and even decades, becoming fluent in local languages and customs, and immersed in

politics. To millions of converts worldwide, missionaries were confidants, teachers, doctors, and nurses. They offered spiritual guidance and participated in the rituals that helped define communities, such as baptisms, marriages, deaths, and funerals. And they were often leaders in their communities, acting as advisers and advocates.

Not all missionary work, of course, was benevolent. Some missionaries—as later chapters will make clear—dominated their neophytes under what can be best described as a regime of terror, resorting to intimidation, violence, and even slavery to defend their local power. Missionaries' mere presence in a community often led to devastating social unrest, as conversions could turn neighbors against one another and split villages and towns. Local political authorities regularly felt threatened by the relative wealth and power of the missions and responded by violently attacking their Christian converts. In Indochina, for example, conflict between Christian and non-Christian villages cost 40,000 lives in the 1880s alone.<sup>39</sup> Whether loved and respected or detested and targeted, French missionaries were at the forefront of their nation's encounter with the world. Weighing the supposed benefits of missionary work against its apparent drawbacks became one of the most volatile political issues in the empire in the decades before the First World War.

Catholic missionary goals around the world often mirrored republican ones, but their motivations were drastically divergent. Like those of their secular compatriots, missionaries' agenda included working to educate converts, to reform "immoral" practices like bigamy and cannibalism, to end slavery, and to improve the spiritual and economic lots of the communities in which they worked. But collaboration with republican authorities was always complicated. Religious workers were traditionally driven neither by liberal ideals of progress nor, initially, even by a desire to spread civilization. Rather than prophets of revolutionary values, missionaries saw themselves as "soldiers of God"; instead of agents of colonial enterprises, they were "colonizers of souls."<sup>40</sup> Missionaries wanted first and foremost—not surprisingly—to save souls by converting people to Catholicism. In so doing, they carried on old Christian traditions that stood starkly at odds with the beliefs of their secular republican compatriots. Religious workers sought to expand the frontiers of Catholicism and establish the Church's hierarchy across the globe—an apocalyptic vision to many a devout secularist.

In view of their sheer numbers, organizational support, and the profound impact they had on indigenous communities, a history of the French empire without religious missionaries is akin to a history of the Great War without the trenches. And yet missionaries remain either ignored or greatly misunderstood in most histories of French colonialism. Despite a recent fascination with empire, historians have not addressed the many paradoxes of religious work in an era of republican anticlericalism, or the complex relations between missionaries and colonial regimes.<sup>41</sup> This trend is particularly striking in the work of many scholars influenced by the concept of cultural imperialism,

who have portrayed missionaries as simply one of a litany of forces that helped establish a distinctly “modern,” bourgeois form of European hegemony.<sup>42</sup> For such scholars, missionary sources are indistinguishable from other journals, novels, and reportage produced by lay Europeans, all of which reflect the dominant bourgeois interests that drove Europeans to categorize, understand, and ultimately control non-European societies.<sup>43</sup> As a result, French missionaries are regularly—and, considering the political context of the *fin de siècle*, ironically—lumped together with efforts to establish secular republican rule in possessions around the globe.<sup>44</sup>

A central contention of this book is that ignoring missionary work or conflating it with secular programs has resulted in an overly uniform, monolithic image of French power and colonial relations. For anticlerical republicans who worried about their own colonial authority, Catholic missionaries posed a considerable threat. Many argued that missionary work would not aid expansion but rather threatened to undermine it. Certainly, both missionaries and republicans sought “an appropriation of the world,” but their aspirations for that world were in many ways antithetical.<sup>45</sup> More than simply differences of outlook, divisions among Frenchmen influenced not only the shape of colonial policies but also how colonialism was experienced. Indigenous populations understood and experienced colonial rule not as an undifferentiated force but as one filled with contradictions, uncertainties, and even overt discord. As the following chapters demonstrate, to consider religious missions as indistinguishable from colonial power is to ignore the deep fissures in the foundations of colonialism that indigenous societies exploited in their interaction with their European rulers.<sup>46</sup>

This story does not begin and end with missionaries. Rather, by focusing on Catholic evangelizing, it contends that missionaries are essential to understanding *republican* attitudes toward colonialism, as well. A number of studies have portrayed the French colonies as “laboratories of modernity” where scientists, architects, and theorists experimented with liberal projects of social change.<sup>47</sup> But, in practice, policies were far from systematic or scientific. From the 1880s to the First World War, administrators in the empire, who both followed orders from Paris and responded to events on the ground, were infrequently guided by ideology. No example makes this more apparent than the policy dealing with missionary work.

Regardless of the anticlerical tone of domestic politics, pro-colonial republicans quickly learned that France had a history of using Christian missions to further national interests abroad that could be traced as far back as Charlemagne’s commitment to protect the Holy Lands. More recently, the Vatican granted Napoleon the role of protectorate of the missions under the Concordat of 1801. Virtually every nineteenth-century French government used the protectorate as a convenient moral and political justification of foreign policy. The Third Republic, despite its anticlericalism, was no exception: as

the imperial race heated up in the second half of the nineteenth century, France's commitment to its Catholic missionaries became a key issue in international affairs. Merchants and businessmen often supported the protectorate, believing that official intervention on behalf of missionaries would open up new lands to French business and political interests. As a result, pro-colonial republicans who fought for legislation that would limit religious work at home found themselves arguing that missionary efforts abroad strengthened France's position in world affairs. Gambetta himself respected the long-standing "diplomatic traditions" in regions where France had a religious protectorate.

As the historian Pierre Guillen points out, for supporters of colonial expansion, any reason for French involvement in foreign affairs was a good reason. Thus, in 1876, Gambetta could announce apparently without irony that France must support its "Catholic clientele in the world"—the world, that is, outside of France.<sup>48</sup> The man who would thunder that clericalism was the enemy would add the caveat that "anticlericalism was not an item for export." In the mid-1880s, the equally anticlerical Jules Ferry argued, with his mind on Indochina, that the protectorate of the Catholics "was a foot that we must keep in the affairs of the East, a serious tradition, a moral power." Ferry even called on France to expand its Catholic clientele by extending its protectorate to Egypt and Ethiopia in an attempt to counter British and Italian influence.<sup>49</sup> Some of the most avid cleric baiters apparently saw no hypocrisy in voicing their devotion to the protectorate of the missions if it served the imperial needs of the day.

Despite the certainty with which Gambetta and Ferry spoke, attitudes of republican politicians in Paris toward missionaries were as divided as republican support for the colonies. In fact, imperialism forged strange political alliances in the 1880s, as no single party claimed a policy of expansion as its own.<sup>50</sup> More fervently anticlerical deputies and commentators condemned what they considered the "clerical spirit" at the Quai d'Orsay, France's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>51</sup> It was not a hard accusation to make: in the first decades of the Third Republic, the Quai d'Orsay did not simply tolerate Catholic projects; it actively funded them. The Quai d'Orsay regularly paid for missionary travel to and from the colonies, particularly for teachers and nursing sisters, and helped finance missionary schools, orphanages, leper colonies, and hospitals around the globe. Such subsidies were meant to underwrite humanitarian services, not evangelizing. But officials certainly knew that, for missionaries, the two were never separated.

Facing staunch criticism, the foreign ministry steadfastly defended the logic of its position. From a political standpoint, supporting missionaries avoided unnecessary conflict, not only with the large indigenous Christian populations in the empire but with the Vatican, as well. It also placated the republic's military, as many officers imagined their own work abroad to be historically and ideologically linked with the Church's overseas missions.

The protectorate also had undeniable economic advantages: missionaries taught French, making commercial interactions easier and limiting the influence of the English. The Quai d'Orsay believed the missions spread French influence not only in the empire but also in other regions of the world. For example, the Quai d'Orsay supported the missions in the Ottoman Empire, one of the most developed Catholic enterprises in the nineteenth century, as key tools for spreading French influence there. The investment paid off: the presence of 150 French Jesuit schools in Syria and Lebanon helped justify the French mandate after the First World War.<sup>52</sup> Best of all, missionaries worked almost for free. In 1896, Foreign Minister Gabriel Hanotaux restated what others had said for at least a decade: to replace missionary workers around the world with lay staffs would come at a price the state could little afford to pay.<sup>53</sup> For the foreign ministry, anticlericalism was not for export in large part because the tariff was far too high.

But for critics of religious proselytizing, the Quai d'Orsay's rationale made no sense. In their minds, the republic could ill afford *not* to shut down the Catholic missions. While anticlerical republicans might have welcomed the exodus of religious Catholics from French soil, a wide range of politicians, journalists, and colonists argued that, just as clerics endangered the authority and prestige of metropolitan France, missionaries in the possessions threatened republican colonial rule. Establishing and maintaining control in the colonies, these critics insisted, was already difficult enough without having to worry about plots and conspiracies devised by antirepublican missionaries and their crowds of converts. Echoing other colonial anxieties, republican criticism of missionaries often drew on racial imagery. Across the empire, critics insisted that missionaries were more "savage" and "barbaric" than even the most uncivilized indigenous populations. In retort, Catholic missionaries often vaunted their converts' behavior as far more civilized than that of the radical, Freemason, and Protestant riffraff that peopled the empire.

More than mere differences of opinion, this book argues that the criticisms and condemnations that shaped much of the interaction between missionaries and their detractors are essential to understanding the formation of colonial policies. As missionaries and anticlericals coexisted in the possessions, the views and projects of each shaped and informed the other. Republican critics of religious workers regularly defined their own goals largely in opposition to missionary work. In response, the missions often challenged the morality and practical benefits of certain republican proposals. Equipped with a language of discord dating back at least to the French Revolution and given new vitality during the Dreyfus affair, missionaries and republicans continually assessed the moral and political authority of their adversaries' actions. Colonial administrations were often in the middle, playing the role of mediator: holding to the policy of religious neutrality, officials encouraged missionaries and their critics to respect one another, intervening only in the most serious affairs.



Colonial administrators rarely escaped these conflicts unscathed. Finding it impossible to enter the fray without becoming targets of criticism themselves, administrators often ended up having to defend their policies to their own colonists. For example, critics of the missions regularly demanded to know why laws implemented to limit Catholic projects in France were not applied to the colonies, as well—a complaint aimed at the administration more than the missions. And when criticism from Protestants or radicals pushed colonial officials to take steps to weaken the missions, missionaries demanded to know why the administration was undermining the civilizing work—being carried out by religious workers—at the heart of the government's own colonial rhetoric. Far from being local complaints, such criticisms of the colonial administration were regularly picked up in the metropolitan press, spurring angry letters to editors and becoming fodder for speeches on both sides of the political aisle.

This uncomfortable symbiosis—between missions, their critics, and administrators in the middle—reveals the extent to which colonizing and civilizing were far more convoluted than a simple application of universal truths and ideological goals. For example, when radical critics of the missions called for the opening of secular schools in places like Indochina and Polynesia in the early 1900s, they were not only expressing their age-old commitment to *laïcité* and spreading republican *civilisation*. The call for secular schools was also a direct critique of missionaries and the religious education they offered. Critics railed that corrupt missionaries, concerned wholly with catechism and personal power, failed on every level—to form colonial citizens, to spread French authority, and even to teach their students French. Critics insisted on more secular schools not only as a means of educating children but also as a way to undermine the worrisome power of the missions.

This book argues, therefore, that the main impetus for developing republican civilizing programs was neither a purely liberal ideological nor a “humanitarian” one. Rather, civilizing policies were commonly wrought in the fires of religious resentment and political confrontation. Clashes between missionaries and their critics abroad spurred republican politicians in Paris to call for policies to defeat the missions. Anticlerical republicans in the National Assembly, for example, jumped at the opportunity to denounce publicly the alleged missionary dictatorship over the inhabitants of the Gambier Islands in Polynesia, or to excoriate missionaries in Vietnam for teaching their students Latin but not French. Such invective lent further legitimacy to the republican tirade against the Church in France. Radical politicians could use accusations of missionary wrongdoing not simply as an opportunity to reflect on the state of colonial policies but also as a chance to wax about morality, progress, and other liberal concerns.

Starting in the 1900s, with the polarization of French domestic politics during the Dreyfus affair, attacks on the missions pushed the colonial and

foreign ministries to give ground on their “anticlericalism is not for export” policy. Support of missionary endeavors gave way to new, increasingly restrictive policies (such as ending colonial subventions for missionary schools or eliminating sisters from the ranks of nurses in colonial hospitals). But most colonial administrators still refused a full-scale assault: missions in many parts of the empire, after all, enjoyed the support of thousands, sometimes tens of thousands, of followers—a portion of local populations they did not want to alienate. Officials and politicians, therefore, often responded to the outcry against the missions by demanding better funding for state-run schools and health care programs—two fields missionaries traditionally dominated. Republicans took steps not to outlaw missionaries but to minimize the empire’s reliance on them by creating more official or overtly republican programs to provide services alongside the missions. In this way, the controversy over Catholic missionaries’ presence in the empire actually precipitated republicans’ commitment to civilize on their own secular terms.

By examining the array of factors that shaped the civilizing mission, this book argues that what is often called French “colonial ideology”—the ideas behind, motivations for, and implementation of programs designed to reform and develop colonial societies—was in fact much less an extension of revolutionary republican values than a set of individual projects defined by degrees of dissent, debate, competition, and collaboration between people both at home and abroad. Differences of opinion over strategies of colonizing—in the Delmont-Julia case, whether poles should be used for a chapel or a telegraph system and whether labor should be used to build a church or a colony—forced administrators, missionaries, colonists, local inhabitants, and others to present, critique, and defend plans for expansion and control. Thus a multiplicity of voices and influences—not a single set of political ideals—shaped French rule. The civilizing policies ultimately adopted were neither strictly republican nor Catholic. Instead, they were shaped by the anxieties and aspirations of a variety of French men and women faced with the challenge of living with one another and ruling large indigenous populations.

The missionary movement also played a vital role in shaping popular perceptions of the empire at home. As the century came to a close, the republican impulse to eradicate clerical influence increased rather than diminished, forcing all Catholic organizations to respond to the radicalization of France’s political leadership. The campaign against Catholic organizations culminated in three particularly devastating laws. First, the 1901 Law on Associations shut down dozens of religious organizations, and a 1904 law prohibited *religieux* from teaching in France. These laws left thousands of priests and nuns without work or homes and drove some 30,000 into exile abroad.<sup>54</sup> Then, in 1905, a parliament dominated by radical republicans definitively separated Church and state. An array of historians has examined the political divide between



reactionary Catholics and anticlerical republicans at this time.<sup>55</sup> But the colonial context adds a new dimension to the study of this period that witnessed both the political triumph of secular republicanism and a renaissance of Catholic spirituality. The combined effects of colonial divisions and a polarized political climate pushed the major French missionary organizations to redefine their long-standing traditions and motivations or else face legislation that would put an end to their work.<sup>56</sup>

With an increasingly loud call to outlaw Catholic religious work in the empire, missionaries could no longer afford to remain neutral in matters of colonial politics. At stake was far more than the careers of thousands of missionaries. Religious workers considered themselves to be modern-day apostles. In the tradition of Saint Paul, missionaries believed they proved the vitality of Jesus' church on earth by spreading "truth"; thus they interpreted any threat to their work as an attack on Catholicism itself.<sup>57</sup> The response of missionaries to the challenges of anticlericalism and imperialism was in some ways unexpected in this era of discord. Under the guidance of the *Oeuvre de la propagation de la foi*, France's leading missionary organization, the movement rewrote its rhetoric and redefined its goals to coincide more closely with the republican colonial project.

In a massive campaign to reshape the image of the movement, organizations produced travelogues, histories, and journals, and sponsored public ceremonies and exhibitions that showed Catholic missions committed to serving republican projects. Spreading civilization, which missionaries had long considered simply a fortunate by-product of evangelizing, came to the fore in Catholic propaganda as the movement's chief goal. From the 1890s forward, missionary publications increasingly chronicled the lives and tribulations of missionaries committed not only to God but also to the *patrie* and a specifically French civilizing mission. Unlike the antirepublicanism and anti-Semitism of reactionary Catholics in France, missionaries ultimately helped shape the language of *ralliement*—the pope's call to France's Catholics to accept the nation—as they moved into national politics by embracing the cause of colonialism.

The rapid metamorphosis of a centuries-old movement traditionally concerned only with questions of conversion, spirituality, and faith reveals the power of the colonial experience to change even the most intractable of European institutions. As many of the debates in the following chapters will reveal, patriotism became a potent force in the colonies. Accusations that missionaries were traitors to France often inspired long and emotional defenses. Whether or not their patriotism was genuine, missionaries quickly realized that colonialism was a reality, and that administrators had the power either to aid greatly the cause of evangelizing or to put an end to it entirely. Suspicion over missionaries' allegiance to the nation, therefore, was one of the driving forces behind the effort to redefine religious work to coincide with the official effort. The retooling of the missionary movement into a

colonizing, as well as evangelizing, force reverberated well beyond the missions. By addressing new realities, the movement brought hundreds of thousands of its supporters in France into colonial politics, as well.

The huge community of Catholics represented an important political body in fin de siècle France. Historians of France have long argued that the empire never had a large popular following. But when measuring attitudes toward empire, historians have ignored how missionary supporters viewed France's interaction with the world, opting instead to focus solely on popular secular and official republican representations.<sup>58</sup> Pious supporters of Catholic missionaries represent a significant, unexplored dimension of how Frenchmen understood their empire as well as their *mère-patrie*. From the early nineteenth century, readers of missionary journals, annuals, and books understood the non-European world as a place to be evangelized. As missionaries redefined their role within the new colonial order, supporters at home saw France's place in the world in a new light.

With the shift of focus from evangelizing to civilizing, missionary publications became more overtly patriotic, increasingly extolling the links between the greatness of God and the glory of France. Readers were encouraged to admire missionaries as both Christian and national heroes. The shift in missionary rhetoric also included a more blatantly racial conceptualization of evangelizing. For much of the nineteenth century, missionaries associated "savagery" primarily with "paganism." Nonbelievers could be "saved" from their debauched ways through conversion to the One True Religion and the moral transformation that followed. But with the introduction of civilizing as a central part of their vocation, missionaries increasingly portrayed savage behavior as being linked to culturally and racially determined practices, not simply to a lack of faith. As a result, readers of missionary publications began to see and understand the empire as a place in need of both evangelization and civilization. Now readers learned that many of the world's populations needed Christ to overcome not only their paganism but also their cultural and racial inferiorities. The redefinition of missionary goals, therefore, represented a significant shift in the popular perception of the empire for a large number of French men, women, and children.

In August 1914, when France went to war, the cacophonous wrangling of the Catholic right and the republican left was overwhelmed, if not entirely silenced, by the thunder of artillery. Historians still debate the sincerity of the *union sacrée*—the unspoken agreement between longtime political foes to work together for the war effort—with some casting doubt on whether animosities were truly put aside for the greater good of the nation.<sup>59</sup> But there is reason to believe that the *union* in the colonies was more genuine. Missionaries working abroad volunteered to return to France to work as chaplains or translators for colonial troops—a move welcomed by many government officials. A good many missionaries paid for their new commitment to the *patrie* with their lives. In the years before the digging of trenches on the western

front, missionaries had faced an organized, outspoken, and empowered opposition calling for their demise. During the war—and certainly in its aftermath—missionary allegiance to the colonial effort and France was less often questioned.<sup>60</sup>

Conflicts between missionaries and their critics continued into the 1920s and beyond. But the features that made for such intense conflict between 1880 and 1914—republican anticlericalism, the heated polemics of the Dreyfus affair, the financial and political pressures of a vigorous republican policy of expansion, and the climax of the Catholic missionary movement—changed significantly after the war. The fact that many soldiers turned to religion to understand and cope with the destructiveness of the war helped pave the way for more peaceful relations between the Church and the republic.<sup>61</sup> In the interwar years, debates over missionaries continued, but in a different key, lacking much of the intensity of the prewar period and revolving around new issues and concerns, such as the rise of nationalist and anticolonial movements.

While the point of departure is discord, this story ultimately explores one venue—the empire—where, in an age of division and polemic, Frenchmen chose reconciliation and cooperation, if not mutual admiration. Despite vocal criticism from many anticlerical republicans, the colonial administration ultimately defended the presence of Catholic missionaries abroad. And, as a result of the retooling of the missions' chief goals, by the First World War, there was a considerable portion of the French population committed to both Catholicism and the republic's colonial cause. Historians have long focused on how the polemics of domestic politics locked Catholics and republicans in an intractable confrontation. But, by looking to the empire, a new picture emerges. The challenges of colonial expansion in the years 1880 to 1914 reveal not how solid but rather how malleable and fragmented Catholic and republican ideologies really were. Though rife with dissension and aggravation, the experience of colonialism forced French men and women to redefine their nation's moral goals and objectives in ways that helped bridge the most important political and cultural divisions in France—divisions that had plagued French society since 1789.

Finally, this book reconsiders the formation of the French nation within an international context. Since the publication of Eugen Weber's *Peasants into Frenchmen*, studies of how the French came to define their nation in the nineteenth century have been firmly rooted in the soil of metropolitan France. Weber has inspired endless debate and a library of studies on the effects and limits of the modernization of a rural country into a polity of cosmopolitan sophistication.<sup>62</sup> Complementing a body of literature that has tried to relocate the locus of debate, this study insists that French identity was shaped not only by experiences at home but also in a variety of locations where men and women defined their moral and political positions within an international and often contentious context.<sup>63</sup> Conflict over colonial policy and the