Thérèse of Lisieux: God's Gentle Warrior

THOMAS R. NEVIN

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Thérèse of Lisieux

Thérèse of Lisieux

God's Gentle Warrior

THOMAS R. NEVIN

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS
2006

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press, Inc., publishes works that further
Oxford University's objective of excellence
in research, scholarship, and education.

Oxford New York
Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in
Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

www.oup.com

Oxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press

Frontispiece: Thérèse in 1895, the year of "Vivre d'Amour,"
the *offrande*, and her first autobiographical manuscript.
Copyright Office Central de Lisieux.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Nevin, Thomas R., 1944–
Thérèse of Lisieux : God's gentle warrior / Thomas R. Nevin.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN-13 978-0-19-530721-4
ISBN 0-19-530721-6
1. Thérèse, de Lisieux, Saint, 1873–1897. 2. Christian saints—France—
Lisieux—Biography. 3. Lisieux (France)—Biography. I. Title.
BX4700.T5N48 2006
282.092—dc22 2006004339

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

For Bonnie and Jim and Mike

. . . que les enseignements de Jésus sont contraires aux sentiments de la nature, sans le secours de sa grâce il serait impossible non seulement de les mettre en pratique mais encore de les comprendre.

This page intentionally left blank

Preface: Not Another Hagiography

She has had enough of those, this very young woman who came to prefer bitter things to sweet and who, when told toward her life's end that she was not a good nun, responded: ''To hear on my deathbed that I'm not a good nun, what joy! Nothing could please me more.'' This book departs from conventional treatments of Thérèse of Lisieux while keeping in focus the Catholic spirituality from which she grew and which she transformed during her life of twenty-four years.

It is addressed to the widest possible audience: first, to those who love and revere Thérèse and are interested in knowing more about her informative backgrounds; also and especially, to those of Christian faith who have found themselves either in spiritual darkness or indifference and are seeking the inspiration and guidance which she provides; and, not least, to those who feel or even affirm themselves to be outsiders to Christianity, including people who, in the secular spirit of the age, are inclined to respond to the very notion of sanctity with skepticism or scoffing. It is with the bitter, the dismissive, and the contemptuous that Thérèse sat down toward the close of her life.

At the beginning of this book, I sketch a background which usually finds no place in theresian studies but which seems both obvious and essential for approaching her. I review French Catholicism as it was during her time, particularly in the three generations preceding it. In that way, we are reminded of how Catholicism in France, reeling from the seismic blows of the Revolution and the Napoleonic aftermath, struggled to adjust itself to a rapidly ascendant and vaunting secularism. Scholarly studies of the Church in

nineteenth-century France abound, depicting so-called *déchristianisation* in regional statistics and sociological shelvings. While giving them due nods, I prefer to give more attention to particular voices. As Voltaire, Diderot, and Rousseau portended the French Revolution, Chateaubriand, Lamennais, and Renan—each of them devoutly errant Christians—carried on its message but in inadequate, not to say perverse, ways.

Heeding them is not arbitrary. Thérèse, although a seeming latecomer to this story, plays a vital role in its unfolding because, sublimely free of intent, she rescued Catholicism from the doldrums into which it had sunk under the vigorously anticlerical Third Republic by answering in her fashion the claims of the postrevolutionary writers I have just named.

Rather than iterate the story of her life in strict sequence, I have chosen to recount it in a chapter's summary. It is complemented by another chapter which tells her mother's story, known to us in fifteen years of correspondence (never translated into English) up to the time of her death in 1877. As a kind of diary of a provincial bourgeoise and an industrious businesswoman, this account has its own value for anyone interested in how women fared before the articulations of modern feminism, but its particular worth for the present study is that it affords a close view into the home life from which Thérèse emerged. She had much in common with her mother but surpassed her into a void. At the time of this writing, both parents await beatification.

I have given an entire chapter to the Carmelites themselves, as an order and as a conventual community at Lisieux. As she was a Carmelite of the Discalced, or sandal-wearing, Order, it is helpful for us to know how Thérèse's conventual life was shaped and how she created a new perspective within it. At the same time, it is only fair to note that she could not have gone so far as she did without the daily presence of her Carmelite sisters. In their various ways, they informed her spirituality and, even by occasional resistance, gave it impetus. I consider her famous "little way" as a personal discovery and a communal enterprise, however aware or otherwise Thérèse's natural and spiritual sisters were about their parts in it. Much that we find in her writings derives from the Spanish Carmelite tradition and from the prescriptive texts of the order: the Carmelite Rule and Constitutions, the *Papier d'Exaction* as the protocol of daily life, the *Direction spirituelle*, and Madre Teresa's letter from Avila to her world of sisters, the *Camino de Perfección*.

This chapter also draws heavily upon the inexplicably neglected obituary notices known as *circulaires*, written by prioresses in Carmels around France and in French-speaking Carmels abroad. I have read more than four hundred of these portraits composed between the spring of 1888 and the summer of 1897, the span of Thérèse's time at the Lisieux Carmel. As they were read at meal times in the Carmel and were available for reading in the Carmel library, we know that Thérèse learned from them. Many could be called sketches of her own spirituality. Many are about young women as zealous as she, who,

like her, died young. Some clearly gave inspiration to her writing, including the title of her best-known poem. These sisters, too, took the little way.

It was she, nonetheless, who revitalized Christianity itself. It would not be amiss to claim that she is the most beloved woman in modern history, certainly among Catholics. But she is both too easily embraced and too easily dismissed: a saint of common people, presumably, accessible to everyone and without the challenging (medieval) baggage of mysticism. (Even in the Carmel of her time, there was a kind of prejudice against the mystical life, as it was presumed to be *illuminisme*, Swedenborgian, and suspect.) She is one of us and, being so, she says that sainthood is for anybody. So say her devotees. And, by the same turn, she is sometimes dismissed as a simpering, if not simple-minded, creature, a mediocrity in intellect. Vita Sackville-West, in her "study in contrasts," *The Eagle and the Dove*, judged Teresa of Avila "highbrow" to the "lowbrow" Thérèse. Snobbishness aside, I have found some Catholics, including religious, put off by Thérèse because of her imputed flawlessness. She is the paradox of an extraordinarily ordinary person, a nobody who attained an arcane perfection. The problem for snobs might be the ordinariness, for others, the perfection. In the end, she turns out not to be one of us. People, like democracies, might feel the allure of the exceptional, but they will also hate it and seek to pull it down.

In this book, Thérèse is neither ordinary nor perfect. She appears with the flaws of greatness, both less and more than she has been taken to be. I have drawn, however, upon the documentation provided by some who knew her, the *Procès Informatif Ordinaire* (1910–1911) and the *Procès Apostolique* (1915–1917). On this end of that story, she has become a doctor of the Church, a fact that merits any number of examinations, and indeed, intellectualizing studies of her as a theologian keep coming in daunting abundance, though mostly in French. Well meant, some have a grim earnestness or, as Thérèse would say, they tend to crack the head and dry the heart.

In four of the book's chapters, apart from the biographical sketch, she has four profiles: as a writer sketching herself; as a dramatist and poet writing for the community; as a tubercular patient; and as an improvisatory theologian who effected what I am bold to call a Copernican change in Christian spirituality. Treating her as a theologian has become respectable, but the angle from which she is viewed in these pages may seem to some readers something else. I hope, in any case, to have taken at least a little inspiration from my subject's own *audace*.

As in any study of a life, there is a point where an ineffable mystery blocks the way to any certainties and because this study is up against the far greater mystery of divinity, I have sufficient cause to be humble. Prompted by a priest, Thérèse claimed only one spiritual director, Jesus, and said of him that he did not need books. The implication is devastating: do we need to read her? Does anyone need yet another book about her? Has everything been said? Is the

icon with the roses not enough? Do we need to be reminded that roses bear thorns?

This book, preponderantly, is about the thorns amid those roses. As the Jesuits are fond of saying, there are many avenues to God (though an eminent Jesuit found within these pages insists that there is only Thérèse's way), and I believe there are many avenues to Thérèse. As mine deals substantially with her tunnel vision, this might be called a subterranean essay. It is not a story of faith and hope triumphant but of a darkness that left faith and hope wholly obscured from affirmation. It is about a void in which many people, Christians and others, find themselves today. Because she occupied darkness and void to the end of her life, Thérèse, as the Quakers would put it, speaks to our condition. Even so, and amazingly, at no time did she become an atheist.

She once said that she sought only the truth. A comparable sobriety seems required of anyone who dares to write of her. That extends to the cold and clammy facts of her medical history. I was once told that death left Thérèse's body uncorrupted. In this book, however, tubercular toxins render her intestinal tract gangrenous: more than corrupted, she is decaying before she dies. That may be an unsavory fact, but it remains a fact. When she was disinterred from a public cemetery in September 1910, only a few bones were still intact; the rest was dust. And yet the casque holding this dust has drawn countless thousands every year as it travels to lands far distant from France. Thérèse has an enduring global status, especially in the Southern Hemisphere countries, where Catholicism seeks new life, even as it is losing its old one in the Northern.

Another fact is that she died without belief in heaven, the terminus of the Christian faith. She also died without hope of getting there. What she kept to the end was a resilient love for God, even in her knowing that God was the creator of the darkness in which she was situated to the end.

Pope Leo XIII, at whose feet Thérèse once knelt, said upon opening the Vatican archives to scholarship that the Church had nothing to fear from the truth. I believe that is still the case. I hope that this book, no matter its degrees of success or failure, has moved in that direction.

All citations from Thérèse come from the *Oeuvres complètes* published by Le Cerf in 1992, with occasional references to the multivolume centenary edition, known as the NEC, and its extensive, invaluable notes. I have given each quotation first in the French and then in my own bracketed English so that the reader of French or the reader of a preferred translation can take issue with me. Except for secondary literature, cited in footnotes, the source is given parenthetically after the English. Unavoidably, every translation amounts to an interpretation. All translations are mine with the exception of the New Testament, here in the Authorized, or King James, Version, preferred for its

poetry over today's banal renditions. Citations from the *Imitatio Christi* come from the translation by the once-notorious Lamennais, the edition Thérèse herself used without worry.

Of Thérèse's writings, I have given primacy to her autobiographical manuscripts, known simply as A, B, and C. Familiarly titled *The Story of a Soul*, they are the texts with which to begin and end any study of her. My sometimes cursory treatment of her other writings should not be construed as a slighting of them. Thérèse remains her own best commentator, and the writings inform one another richly. The poems might even be called prayers and the letters not infrequently become poetry in their flights of inspired imagery. The autobiographical texts are themselves three letters to three women. All her writings share a certain exhilaration, a brio of adolescent fervor conditioned by the fact that Thérèse had within Carmel's and her cell's walls only one evening hour every day in which to write. Hence, the compaction, direct and ever lucid.

A few words are due about lexical and related texts. In establishing likely denotations of words as Thérèse would have known and used them, I have consulted two contemporaneous sources: the first, a dictionary published in 1897, the year of her death: Louis-Nicholas Bescherelle's *Nouveau dictionnaire classique de la langue française*. The reason is simple: in our preponderantly secular "post-Christian" age, some words have lost a resonance they had only a century ago. An example is *anéantissement*, a weighty word in this study, which means according to Larousse (1993 edition) and *Le Petit Robert* "destruction, extermination, or annihilation." Well and good, but Bescherelle includes this entry: "Dévot [Devotional] État d'abaissement volontaire devant Dieu," a voluntary humbling of oneself before God. No modern dictionary carries such a denotation. Akin to that word is *néant*, which *Robert* generously glosses with citations from Pascal, Racine, and Lamartine and which Larousse identifies in the Sartrean void as that which is opposed to metaphysical being. From Bescherelle, we cull the theresian sense: "vide de l'âme, absence d'amour de Dieu," a void of the soul, an absence of God's love. Armed with such semantics, we can approach the obscurities of Thérèse's last months. Bescherelle's dictionary straddles admirably some chasms in diction opened by the contest between republicans and Christians, oppositions which animated France late in the nineteenth century.

The other source is generally recognized as the greatest of all French dictionaries and a monument in itself to philological endeavor, Émile Littré's four-volume *Dictionnaire de la langue française*, in an edition of 1883–1884. (Bescherelle's first edition spanned 1843–1846 and Littré's, 1863–1872.) Littré's value lies in the vast archaeological strata he established in the literary developments of words, including etymological notes. Where Bescherelle, a popularizer, is wide, Littré is deep. He, for example, indicates that the junction

of love and *abandon*, one of the most important words in theresian semantics, goes back to the virtual beginnings of French literature, to Marie de France. From Littré, someone could compose a veritable lexicon of Carmel as it evolved from "the Spanish mothers" who brought the Discalced Order into early seventeenth-century France.

For the discussion of Thérèse and tuberculosis, I have read (and I cite) extensively the medical literature of the generation of doctors who were treating her as well as recent texts on pathology. How was this disease diagnosed and treated in the 1890s? What was the quality of treatment given at Carmel? Is it even certain that Thérèse had it rather than another sort of pulmonary infection? Does it matter? Yes, because tuberculosis sustained, as we shall see, a macabre aura about it, an almost sanctifying glamour. It helps to establish as clearly as we can the nature and course of Thérèse's physical suffering, much of it iatrogenic, because her spiritual itinerary moved closely with it. In brief, how did she deal with acute affliction and impending death? In discussing her theological development, I draw on sources demonstrably vital to her, such as the mystical literature of Carmel (San Juan de la Cruz, primarily) but also on texts she never read, such as the Thomist *Summa* and the *Theologia Deutsch*. Protestants such as Luther and Bonhoeffer have also informed my perspective. I have attempted to "read" her within a broad Christian continuum. It is not difficult to establish that, like some other saints, she is almost too unruly to be safe. Even those churchmen who write to prove that she can be fitted onto the procrustean bed of dogma do not deny that one of her prime epithets is *audace*, or daring. This study indicates how far that word went with Thérèse from Lisieux.

The selective annotated bibliography identifies books I consider informative, reliable, helpful, or dispensable, and to which readers, taking issue with my perspectives, might wish to repair for support or reassurance. A caveat: almost all of Thérèse's writings are accessible in English translations but most of the secondary works cited are available only in French. Although the best of all commentators on Thérèse is Thérèse, that happy fact does not quite overcome the inherent problems in crossing from one language into another.

It is a pleasure to thank those who have helped me as I pursued the Carmelite way and Thérèse's particular and audacious movement along it: Frs. Steven Payne and John Sullivan of the Institute for Carmelite Studies in Washington, D.C., for help in securing texts and addresses; Fr. Conrad de Meester, elder statesman of Carmelite writers on Thérèse, for charitable criticisms and insights; the staffs of *travailleuses missionaires* at the Foyer Martin and the Ermitage de Sainte-Thérèse at Lisieux for their hospitality and singing; and the Religieuses Oblates de Sainte Thérèse of the Maison Natale, Alençon, and the Oblates at Les Buissonnets, Lisieux, for their guidance and information.

For information on Fr. Pichon, S.J., I wish to thank his biographer, Mary Frances Coady. For helpful discussions, I am indebted to Fr. Philip Endean of Campion Hall, Oxford, and to my colleagues Sister Mary Ann Flannery, Dr. Doris Donnelly, the Reverend Donald Cozzens, and especially Dr. Hélène Sanko, for her memories of growing up in Third Republican France, with many details pertinent to the educational and medical practices of Thérèse's own time.

Fr. Matthias, of the Discalced Carmelite Friars at Holy Hill, Wisconsin, kindly supplied me with copies of the Martin family correspondence published in the *Vie thérésienne*, the indispensable journal for Thérèse's many admirers.

I am indebted to John Carroll University for a research leave and to the Grauel Fellowship Fund for supporting it. I owe much as well to my assistant at the computer, Cheryl Kelley.

I wish especially to thank Caroline Zilboorg of Clare Hall, Cambridge University for facilitating my lectures there on Thérèse over the course of four years, 2000–2003; Françoise Lejeune of the Université de Nantes for inviting me to lecture on Thérèse at a conference there (June 2001) on women and war; and the organizers of the Hawaii International Conference on Arts and Humanities, Honolulu, where I spoke on the *circulaires* of Carmel (January 2005).

The prioresses at the Carmel at Montigné (Bretagne) and the Carmel at Nantes (Loire-Atlantique) generously provided the records and annals of their communities in the time of Thérèse. I wish to thank them for their time, assistance, and hospitality.

I have also been kindly welcomed to discuss Thérèse and this writing with sisters of the Carmel proximate to the Jesuit university where I teach and write. Their enthusiasm, their informed insights about Thérèse and Carmelite life, and especially their prayers have been deeply gratifying.

By far the greatest debt I owe is to the archival staff at Lisieux's Carmel, who with unstinting efficiency provided me with the extraordinary materials of the Archives du Carmel. The staff also shared many perceptions and insights about Thérèse and a great deal about Carmelite life and tradition during the many weeks of my research there. I appreciated instruction in the delivery of *recto tono* for the reading of *circulaires* and demonstrative application of the *ventouse* as a device for treating tuberculosis. Two members of the staff read the entire manuscript and provided an abundance of detailed corrections and candid criticisms. Their charitable and keen attention immeasurably improved the final drafts. As Carmelites, they prefer to remain hidden and forgotten.

Finally, I wish to thank Cynthia Read and the staff at Oxford University Press, Theo Calderara, Julia TerMaat, and Stacey Hamilton, for their enthusiasm, assiduity, and steady good cheer.

Let me impress upon the reader that wrongheadedness, mistaken judgment, or errant interpretations of facts are entirely my production and my responsibility. As this is, among much else, a book about self-humbling, it is almost a pleasure to say that every one of its errors, whether unintended or willful or wicked, comes only from me, its author.

Contents

This page intentionally left blank

Abbreviations

A	The first autobiographical manuscript, 1895
AC	Archives of Carmel, which include all the *circulaires* cited
B	The second autobiographical manuscript, 1896
C	The third autobiographical manuscript, 1897
CF	*Correspondance familiale, 1863–1877*, letters of Zélie Martin (Lisieux: Carmel de Lisieux, 1958)
CG	*Correspondance génèrale* of Thérèse of Lisieux (Paris: Cerf, Desclée de Brouwer, 1974)
CS	*Conseils et souvenirs* of Thérèse of Lisieux (Paris: Cerf, Desclée de Brouwer, 1973)
DE	*Derniers entretiens* of Thérèse of Lisieux (Paris: Cerf, Desclée de Brouwer, 1971)
HA	*Histoire d'une âme* (Bar-le-Duc: St. Paul, 1911)
LC	Letters of Thérèse's correspondents, numbered and published in CG
LD	Letters of various correspondents or contemporaries of Thérèse among themselves, published in chronology but without number in CG
LT	Letters of Thérèse, numbered and published in CG
NEC	*Nouvelle édition du centenaire*, an 8-volume edition of Thérèse's complete works (Paris: Cerf, Desclée de Brouwer, 1992)
NPHF	Notes prepared by Céline for Stéphane-Joseph Piat's *Histoire d'une famille* (Paris: Pierre Téqui, 1945)
NPPA	Notes prepared by Carmelites for the *Procès apostolique*

OC *Oeuvres complètes*, a 1-volume edition of Thérèse's complete works (Paris: Cerf, Desclée de Brouwer, 1992)

PA *Procès de béatification et canonisation: Apostolique*, hearings held in 1915–1917 for Thérèse's beatification and canonization (Rome: Teresianum, 1976)

PN *Poèsies*, Thérèse's 54 poems (Paris: Cerf, Desclée de Brouwer, 1992)

PO *Procès de béatification et canonisation: Ordinaire*, hearings held in 1910–1911 for Thérèse's beatification and canonization (Rome: Teresianum, 1973)

Pri *Prières*, Thérèse's 21 prayers (Paris: Cerf, Desclée de Brouwer, 1992)

RP *Récréations pieuses*, Thérèse's 8 plays (Paris: Cerf, Desclée de Brouwer, 1992)

VT *Vie thérésienne*, trimestral review published since 1961

Thérèse of Lisieux

This page intentionally left blank

I

After the Revolution

Catholicism in France before Thérèse

Tout vrai philosophe doit opter entre deux hypothèses, ou qu'il va se former une religion nouvelle, ou que le christianisme sera rajeuni de quelque manière extraordinaire [Every genuine thinker must choose between two suppositions, either that he is going to create a new religion or that Christianity will be revitalized in some extraordinary way].

—Joseph de Maistre, *Considérations sur la France*, 1796

Three men over as many generations pursued de Maistre's second option. Each of them failed brilliantly. Their failures prepared the way for someone who had never read nor perhaps even heard of de Maistre, and who was so obscure, a young, inadequately educated woman, that her finding what has been called the "Columbus egg" of Christianity would have seemed even to herself dauntingly improbable. If that succession seems to give this narrative a fairytale aspect, it becomes more so as Chateaubriand, Lamennais, and Renan figure centrally in any chronicle of nineteenth-century French Catholicism, while Thérèse Martin, the Little Flower, Saint Thérèse of Lisieux would be marginal to it, and yet these men, who lived long and wrote much, are for the greater part forgotten, and she, dead at twenty-four, has become the most beloved woman in modern times.

She was from Normandy; Chateaubriand, Lamennais, and Renan from neighboring Brittany, one of the most fervently Catholic regions of France. That these men, who enjoyed considerable social profiles and even notoriety in their times, failed and that an

inconspicuous, indeed hidden away woman succeeded in this modern version of a Grail quest, affords one of the caprices in which the history of thought and feeling abounds. Their profiles, all of them, are postrevolutionary and of the nineteenth century, a time when many minds were coursing de Maistre's first and much broader avenue, the invention of a new religion. Not a new religion strictly, but ideology, the secular ersatz for spirituality, exerted its sway, spouted its dogmas, predicted the future, and promised the generation of a new humankind. Utopian visions, whether from Fourier or Saint-Simon, from Marx or Comte, took their historical impetus from the French Revolution's overthrow of autocracy and caste privilege. The promissory note in utopianism, however, had been written many centuries before, within the greatest of all myths, when the serpent in the garden told its only human inhabitants that they would be like gods.

The three failed men were variously propelled, if not swept away, by the tide of that message. As this is a Christian's story, I have chosen to see them under three sorts of temptation, none of which is strictly comparable to those Christ faced in the wilderness but each of which St. Augustine identifies: the rage for feeling, *libido sentiendi*; for commanding, *libido dominandi*; for knowing, *libido sciendi*. As these men did not think, work, write in a vacuum, it is necessary to provide with each account some brief remarks on the political and spiritual life of their age.

Chateaubriand and the *Libido Sentiendi*

At 11 a.m. on Wednesday, October 16, 1793, despoilers broke into the massive tomb of King Louis XV in Saint-Denis, north of Paris. He had been lying there for nearly twenty years. When his casket was opened and his corpse released from its linen shrouds, the smell of putrefaction was overwhelming. The intruders fired pistols over the regal, rotten body so the gunpowder would cleanse the air. Sometime during that hour, the once queen, Marie-Antoinette, was losing her head.

These lurid proceedings are recorded among the voluminous notes behind *Génie du christianisme*, a farrago of ecclesiastical history and ritual, literary criticism, landscapes, and piety, all presented with intermittent but lengthy rhetorical effusions by François-René de Chateaubriand. To this day, he is reckoned the father of romanticism in nineteenth-century France. He wrote *Génie* in England, whither he had fled at age twenty-five, during the Jacobin republic of terror, in the year that proved so unpleasant to Louis XV and his daughter-in-law. He had secretly returned to France in 1801 but was able to emerge from proscription only after publishing *Atala*, a melancholy little fiction of thwarted passions between two noble savages in the American wilderness. It starts in Florida, proceeds to the Mississippi River, and

concludes at Niagara Falls. He had initially intended to include *Atala* within *Génie* as a demonstration of his claim that literature could and should take up Christianity, its morals and its history, as sources of inspiration, shedding in that way the well-worn classicism which had exclusively dominated literary taste before the Revolution.

Few read *Génie du christianisme* today. Its author's *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, a massive autobiography with engagingly close optics on eight decades of French history, goes on maintaining its hoary profile. The morbidly charming *Atala* runs second, awaiting French majors between *Candide* and *Lorenzaccio* on the reading lists. *Génie*, however, remains a vital historical gauge of both taste and spirituality in the first years under Bonaparte. It was published on April 14, 1802, just eight days after his regime altered the terms of its *concordat* with Rome, ending state repression of clerical life and practices but subordinating ecclesiastical power, including the papal, to the will of the civil government.

Roman Catholicism had been crippled and nearly destroyed by two weighty assaults in the previous generation. Identified with the corrupt absolutism of monarchy and aristocratic privilege, it had become the target of populist fury and official maleficence. The cause lay chiefly in the egregious wealth the Church had long amassed. Bishops, themselves of high lineage, and monastics had profited conspicuously, while countless parish priests subsisted in poverty. Many in the church hierarchy were cynical unbelievers, including the cardinal of Toulouse, who had been the prime minister of France. Thus was the Church exposed to Voltaire's withering gibes, which it had neither the strength nor the will to combat.

By official dispensation within the first year of the Revolution, on November 2, 1789, ecclesiastical properties were sold off, and in the following February the monastic orders were dissolved. The motion for selling came from an unbelieving bishop, Talleyrand, who was not alone among expedient clerics in riding the revolutionary wave. Clergy were brought under a constitution which had them elected and salaried. Pope Pius VI objected helplessly to these extraordinary reforms but officially condemned the constitution only after about half of France's parish priests, with no cue from Rome, had accepted its provisions under oath. Thereafter, Catholicism staggered on with three kinds of priests: those who had resisted the oath from the first, those who had taken it but retracted, and those who formed in effect a new state-run clergy.

The Church had to sustain more than political and economic disasters. Far more subtle than the constitutional contempt for the Church in this bizarrely unhappy history was the other enmity, which came from the makers of intellectual fashion, *les philosophes*, as they were long known and as Chateaubriand consistently denominates them. We would call them atheists or "secular humanists." To such minds, Christianity amounted to little more

than a congeries of barbarous superstitions to which no rational person could honestly subscribe. Even some devout Catholics were embarrassed and repelled by folk-rooted devotions. In these practices and in the corruption of church officers, the Church was ridiculed mercilessly according to the enlightenment, or what in a darker age would be called the correctness, of the time.

In his *Journal*, André Gide, a Protestant, once noted that the effect of reading witty barbs against Catholicism by writers such as Diderot was to make him more sympathetic to the Church. Something of the same sort of reaction might have set in after the persecutions, but nationalism had first come into play against the Church. Anticlericalism was identified with the national defense against Catholic Austria, which went to war with France in May 1792. Pius VI was ineluctably identified with the counterrevolution. In the tumult of war, even the civil clergy were at risk and were fatally discredited when in the autumn of that year the revolutionary assembly introduced clerical marriage and recognized civil divorce. The First Republic invented a cult of reason under which priests not killed in their parishes were forced abroad or into hiding. While we might see in the republic the birth of the modern state, it would be amiss to underestimate the failure of this regime to dislocate the cultism, the subterranean irrationality of folk Catholicism by which alone the Church was able to survive the Revolution. As in its first generations under persecution, the Body of Christ was not chiefly its officers but its people, unobstreperous, tested, devout.

The mockery of clever unbelievers proved finally too weak to thrive because it could not fill the spiritual void which it had willy-nilly prepared. And the torments to which the Church was subjected during the Revolution's reactionary phase paradoxically strengthened it: many priests, having refused or having recanted on the oath of allegiance, continued the sacramental life of parishes by a kind of underground, and some provinces, notably the Vendée and Chateaubriand's Brittany, remained staunch in their adherence to the Church throughout the Jacobin period, the Directory, and the Consulate.

Chateaubriand had not written for believers but for skeptics, aging sophisticates still open to argument, vagrant youths, and anyone else who realized that France had lost its spiritual anchorage and that Robespierre's farcical cult of the Supreme Being had offered no mooring. He shrewdly dodged metaphysical and theological arguments, thus leaving *les philosophes* isolated and ignored. His appeal was primarily aesthetic, to convince the reader that in Christianity one would find an imperishable source of uplifting beauty, especially in its rituals, its architecture, and its scriptural mysteries.

No matter his many claims to the *poésie* of the Christian religion, it does not take the reader long to notice that Chateaubriand ignores the Christian God. In two volumes, Christ is given 3 pages out of 670 (in the Flammarion edition). That is because this writer's intent rests not merely upon appeals to

outward beauties in Christian history and practice. It lies more deeply couched in appeals to this religion's indispensable contribution to social order. The Roman, one might say Ciceronian, accent upon the need for religion as a stay against chaos implies that the sincerity of one's beliefs does not constitute an issue; religion will always be attended by hypocrisy. What matters is a kind of idea of God, a centripetal force of social stability. Chateaubriand posed an argument from utility, both collective and individual: atheism helps no one and threatens the state with havoc and blood. France by 1801 had had enough of both. Anticipating Dostoevsky by three generations, Chateaubriand urged that without the moral constraints of theism, men can and will hurl themselves into innumerable crimes.[1]

It would be difficult to determine how much Chateaubriand in *Génie du christianisme* was reflecting an age exhausted by revolution and war, and how much he was shaping its articulation of a profound spiritual crisis. What remains clearly his own, his sensibility, affords us another perspective on this book. With tireless and tiresome iterations, its advertisable sensitivity is registered in two words, sublimity and tears.

In Christianity's life and art, he argues, we find an inexhaustible source of the sublime, something of such loftiness and grandeur that it provokes awe and reverence. That it would be, then, a perpetual source of higher distraction provides another hint about Chateaubriand's cultured, leisurely audience. It would have time to read. In order to shake his readership free of its old allegiance to classical literature, Chateaubriand makes pointlessly pejorative arguments at the expense of Homer and on behalf of Tasso and Milton. For instance, admitting equity in the "amours pures et sévères" of Odysseus and Penelope, he claims that Milton's Adam and Eve (she, though, weak and loquacious) are a superior couple because in them "la vraie religion a pu seule donner le caractère d'une tendresse aussi sainte, aussi sublime" ["the true religion alone has been able to give the stamp of such saintly, such sublime tenderness"].[2] The Christian epic hero is far superior to the pagan because the latter could never be more than "l'homme naturel." Charity confounds vanity: the humility of Tasso's Godefroi marks the first of Christian virtues, as the pride of Achilles or Agamemnon marks the first of vices.

Chateaubriand does not skirt the old question of why evil's depiction in literature is so much more engaging than any profile in goodness (Satan, not Adam, exemplifies grandeur in *Paradise Lost*); he is simply unaware of it. He intuited that his readers wanted uplift. Whatever the many merits of polytheistic classicism—and among them he finds some of Simone Weil's "intuitions pre-chrétiennes"—only Christianity can put you into the fields of hope. Hope of what? For the author, release from the destructive sway of passions, especially the pathology of eros.

Chateaubriand makes a claim for Christianity much like the one Lucretius made for Epicureanism, that it alone could save you from yourself, from

all the sways of emotions, their costly turmoil, and the disgust with life which they entail. This could be Pascal speaking.[3] Augustine, a veteran in the passion wars, might have concurred, but here is how Chateaubriand puts it: "Ah! le christianisme est surtout un baume pour nos blessures, quand les passions, d'abord soulevées dans notre sein, commencent à s'apaiser, ou par l'infortune, ou par la durée. Il endort la douleur, il fortifie la résolution chancelante, il prévient les rechutes, en combattant, dans une âme à peine guérie, le dangereux pouvoir des souvenirs: il nous environne de paix et de lumière; il rétablit pour nous cette harmonie des choses célestes, que Pythagore entendait dans le silence de ses passions" ["Oh, Christianity is an especial balm for our wounds, when passions, once aroused in our breast, begin to be calmed, whether by adversity or by time. It puts suffering to sleep, fortifies faltering resolve, prevents relapses, by fighting in the scarcely cured soul the dangerous power of memories; it surrounds us with peace and light and restores for us this harmony of heavenly things which Pythagoras heard in the silence of his passions"].[4]

An aestheticized Christianity, then, performs as a narcosis for the overwrought, or at least for the egotists of romanticism who need from time to time to be rescued from themselves: the heart has treasons of which reason knows nothing. Readers of *Génie*'s encyclopedic celebration of Christian tradition will find nothing about the bearing of a cross nor would they guess that the promised aura of peace and light cannot be derived from the Sermon on the Mount. Not incidentally, Chateaubriand, abundant in patristic references, cites not one passage from the New Testament, but then the Bible was not in his day a book which the devout themselves were allowed to know. He would likely fail to convince anyone that he not only understands Christianity from without but lives it from within, that a need to escape from the expensive ardors of eroticism or any other self-indulgence does not in itself constitute a conversion nor a genuine penance, let alone an attention to the neediness of other sinners. Exhaustion does not stand in the same ledger with renunciation.

The duchess de Broglie, one of Chateaubriand's many aristocratic critics, may have hit the mark when she said that *Génie's* popularity was a proof of the unbelief (*incrédulité*) of the age, "le produit d'une société toute factice" ["the product of a completely fake society"].[5] There remains something unsettlingly bogus and stagy about this work, not least because the sublimity supposedly bearing us up provokes in its agent a lachrymose enthusiasm, fitful and self-induced. Chateaubriand knew his rhetorical gift and abused it with self-hypnotic abandon. That does not detract from the urgent melancholy of a slavishness to the emotions, a fetter which Chateaubriand is (only) apparently attempting to escape. Yet, in a sense, he needs "the dangerous power of memories" which Christianity was presumably fending off, so that he can feel the more drawn to this religion. Had he wholly embraced it, he would not have been Chateaubriand. Neither would he have written this book.

Although he shows himself no friend of Rousseau, dismissing the paranoid *promeneur solitaire* for his unwholesome self-absorbing solitude, he, like Rousseau, is not so much a religious man as someone intoxicated with religion. *Génie*'s celebration of Gothic architecture is credited with a revival in France of interest in things medieval, but that does not alter the plain fact that Chateaubriand was presenting a spectator Christianity, one for on-looking as the occasion of appreciative, exclamatory reveries and noticeable tears. Everything which he commends in Christian life amounts to a kind of trussing up, and the costuming of church and folk tradition remains only adornment.

All of these objections stand for naught, however, if we concede that, whatever its value as a mechanism of social order and control, religion's predominant purpose is therapeutic, that it serves not so much to offer the rigors of a hortatory moral vision as to ensure comfort for the unhappy, the anxious, the weary. Forlorn France at that century's turn labored under far more than weariness: it had become spiritually dispossessed, in a kind of Babylonian captivity of its own devising. Under the sway of ruthlessly secular authorities, the Church had gradually recovered for itself the bracing countercultural vitality of early Christian history, and it was this hardiness, the unshakable appeal of an irrational power, which Napoleon shrewdly saw fit to coopt with the *concordat*. He was also depriving counterrevolutionary foes like Austria of a potent ally in the papacy.

It may seem that Chateaubriand had all too conveniently served the first consul's intent with *Génie*. The book appealed to the educated public because it came not from a religious but from a thoroughly lay writer, one not trained in theology yet able to make a passable case for the affective might of the emotions as a sufficient basis for religious affirmation. In a *Défense* composed after the book underwent its first criticisms, Chateaubriand made much of being a layman, boldly citing Pascal and La Bruyère as his lay predecessors in defense of the faith. It was bootless for a critic like the comte de Salaberry to accuse him of a "charlatanisme des mots," of sustaining "sous une fausse modestie une vanité effrénée" ["under a false modesty an unbridled vanity"].[6] That unflinching, Rousseauist exposure of self, of personality, of emotional susceptibility, far from weakening Chateaubriand's partisanship, likely strengthened it. Any reader would feel at home with such foibles. The not infrequent argument from tears, if wearisome to the judicious, was at least tolerable and far preferable to any dispassionate show of metaphysics from that overworked mare, reason.

Those foibles, however, indicated to anyone concerned about the gravity of the author's religious belief that Chateaubriand wrote mostly for show: exhibits from Christianity's stores of art and cult, yes, but primarily exhibitions of self. On not a page of *Génie* is its composer out of sight. Neither hypocrisy nor insincerity is at issue here: Chateaubriand is always himself but it is not an integral self, as the following passage from his autobiography

suggests. He refers to a sunset along the Virginia coast which he had observed during his 1791 voyage to America. It was recalled as one of *Génie*'s many occasions for proving God's existence from nature's beauties: "Quand je peignis ce tableau dont vous pouvez revoir l'ensemble dans le *Génie du christianisme*, mes sentiments religieux s'harmonisaient avec la scène; mais hélas! . . . ce n'était pas Dieu seul que je contemplais sur les flots dans la magnificence de ses oeuvres. Je voyais une femme inconnue et les miracles de son sourire; les beautés du ciel me semblaient écloses de son souffle; j'aurais vendu l'éternité pour une de ses caresses" ["When I depicted this scene the whole of which you can read in *Génie du christianisme*, my religious feelings harmonized with the setting, but alas! . . . it wasn't God alone that I contemplated on the waves in the magnificence of his works. I saw an unknown woman and the miracles of her smile; the beauties of the sky seemed to me blossomings of her breath; I would have sold eternity for one of her caresses"].[7]

There is more. As the Virginian sun set, Chateaubriand might have been thinking of God and that absurd phantom, but he was not so distant from the *philosophes* he later scorned in *Génie*. From 1793 to 1797, while writing on ancient and modern revolutions, he anticipated de Maistre's first question: what religion will replace Christianity? He concluded that Christianity's decline was irreversible and hoped that future humanity might attain "un degré de lumières et de connaissances morales suffisant pour n'avoir pas besoin de culte" ["a degree of enlightenment and moral awareness sufficient to dispense with religious worship"]. What more would Voltaire himself have prescribed?

It seems unfair to fault so youthful a writer for changing his mind and heart, but what matters is that Chateaubriand could not realize that their very mutability made them unreliable foundations for the ataraxia he presumably sought. What he aptly styled his religious feelings (*mes sentiments religieux*) were themselves inherently unstable. It is almost comically self-defeating for someone wanting a refuge from his emotions to presume that that refuge lies in an emotional exaltation directed toward religion. The fleetingness of that sublimity which his rhetorical "highs" attest could never be identified even with conviction, let alone creed.

Chateaubriand's *Mémoires*—the passage on Virginia dates from 1822—prove commendably sober toward his much younger self on that American shore as it exposes the pitfalls of an exclusively affective response to religion. He spares us the clumsy piety of a convert—he did not become one—but that fact only underscores the more imposingly the sentimentality, not even vibrant nor fanatical enough to be called religiosity, which is the driving engine of *Génie*. At a safe distance and in a jaded time, we can only read the rhetoric in this book as though it were coming from another race. We know egotism but expect it not to be so unabashedly silly and can only wonder about the

tearfulness, affected or simply pathetic, which the writer makes a warrant for the truthfulness of his record.

Here we reach central questions for any study of Thérèse. Is the affective response to religion all in all deficient? Is Chateaubriand's exhibitionistic emotionalism the form which that response will likely tend to assume or can affectivity attain a less labile, more ripened development? What if we call that affectivity by the name of love, to which St. Paul gave primacy among Christian virtues? Does the affective life of a Christian, the subjective act of giving, take its character according to its subject or its object? Chateaubriand, as though seeking asylum, concerned himself not at all with Christ but only with the institutional props, the smells and bells of Christendom. What if one's emotive self were turned almost wholly toward the person of Christ? No less a hair shirt than Pascal had insisted that only the heart feels God; reason, never. And is the act of writing the occasion which prompts emotional exuberance? Is writing not so much the record of a passion as itself the passion? Perhaps when Chateaubriand put down his pen, he became a reasonably mediocre person.

Lamennais and the *Libido Dominandi*

When Napoleon went into exile and the monarchy was restored in France, the Church did not sit down at the banquet of reaction. Pius VII, a Benedictine by training, had weathered the overbearing and devious emperor with a forbearance just short of martyrdom. He became the first beloved pope of modern times and one of its shrewdest. He acknowledged the libertarianism unleashed by the Revolution and secured a *concordat* with Protestant Prussia on behalf of Catholics' freedom of religion, but the papacy had to come to terms with the ascendance of the state from a position of weakness requiring exquisite diplomacy. How the Church would maintain its authority before secular powers, especially those with Catholic cultures—Austria, France, Spain, Italy—became the predominant issue for nineteenth-century pontiffs.

The abiding legacy of 1789 was not its vaunted liberties and egalitarianism but a renewed and strengthened statism, the secular power to which Catholicism, an established but enfeebled religion, became subordinate. The fervor of revolution and reform in the nineteenth century might well be read as energy spent upon a renewal of the impulsions of 1789 against authoritarian structures, but those structures were themselves sustained, if not strengthened, by wars and nationalism. Catholicism, in its papacy, had to contend with both these overweening states and the ideological forces which were pounding at their gates.

To a degree, those ideologies picked up the remnant spiritual power of religion itself, recasting Christendom's legacy into new communitarian forms,

some of them ironically modeled on medieval monasticism. Saint-Simon's last book (1825) proclaimed *Le nouveau christianisme*. Chateaubriand's aestheticism had made its case for ad hoc sublimity but had been found wanting by its pharisaical complacency, its total ignorance of the claims of justice. It is instructive that in their *Manifesto*, Marx, a convinced atheist, and Engels urged that they were not opposed to religion, only to bourgeois religion. The redemptive appeal and promise of faith had been coopted, if not aborted, by secularism and the ascendant bourgeoisie which sustained it.

That the Church could no longer remain on the defensive but was imperatively called to renewal by an offensive, was the prophetic insight of its most unruly son since Luther, Hugues Félicité Robert de La Mennais. Born in 1782, he had come of age in the midst of the Revolution's convulsive lurches toward imperial power, but his native Brittany, with its druidic conservatism, had fiercely resisted the centripetal power of the Jacobin capital. (Two vivid fictions, Balzac's *Les Chouans* and Hugo's *Quatre-vingt-treize* attest to this fact.) Like Chateaubriand, he spent an exile in England and began to write. By the time he became a priest, in 1816, he had published two books on the ecclesiastical crisis, neither of which lit fires but which indicate that early on he was mulling over the question which was to occupy the rest of his life: how Christianity was to be reformed to meet the challenge of a materialist age.

His most lengthy work came as early as 1817. *Essai sur l'indifférence en matière de religion* identified the malaise of an age as La Mennais saw it: its satanic zeitgeist. The vigorous parataxes of his writing rival Chateaubriand's rhetoric in their headiness. Indifference was neither doctrine nor doubt nor even an honest atheism; rather "une ignorance systématique, un sommeil volontaire de l'âme, qui épuise sa vigueur à résister à ses propres pensées, un engourdissement universel des facultés morales, une privation absolue d'idées sur ce qu'il importe le plus à l'homme de connoître [*sic*]" ["a systematic ignorance, the soul's voluntary slumber, which exhausts its power to resist its own thoughts, a universal numbing of moral awareness, a total privation of ideas about what most matters for someone to know"].[8] The *Essai* argued against three assumptions implicit in so-called indifferentism: that religion sufficed merely as a political institution; that, with all religions subject to relativism, only natural religion or deism was valid; and that with a revealed religion, one could be free to pick and choose among its fundamental truths—the latter, an attack upon Luther and Protestantism.

The book won La Mennais instant praise and prompted him to write three supplementary volumes with the same title. It would be interesting to know, given the subsequent and extreme turn of his thinking, whether it was his sharp denunciation of democracy which won clerical approval. "La démocratie la plus effrénée n'est que l'absence de tout ordre et de toute loi" ["The most unbridled democracy is only the absence of all order and law"], a government of passions which honors with its hate all that is superior to it: wealth, talent,

genius, glory, and virtue itself.[9] It is a timeless plaint, as old as Plato, and it was sounded through the nineteenth century by Tocqueville, Burckhardt, and Nietzsche. La Mennais stands unique in this succession of protesters because he soon altered his views diametrically.

In 1825, his *De la religion considérée dans ses rapports avec l'ordre politique et social* [*Religion in Relation to the Sociopolitical Order*] claimed that Christianity had to be extended beyond private life and individual needs so as to inform political and social institutions. By then, he had become completely disillusioned with the Bourbon Restoration and resentful that the state had continued the Napoleonic practice of controlling the Church and keeping its clerics salaried as virtual hirelings. Ever more disdainful of the temporizing and compromised clerical powers in France, La Mennais realized that the only countervailing power to be set against the modern state lay in the papacy. The examples of two popes, Pius VI, who had been humiliated and broken by Napoleon, and Pius VII, who endured and outlasted him, informed the impetus of his vision, but Pius VII's discreet accommodation of the modern age, principally in the *concordats*, dismayed this Breton to a fury. The *concordats* tacitly affirmed the state's predominance over the religious life of its communities; no matter that in signing them, the pontiff was attempting to protect the freedoms of Catholics. While it would be fatuous to suppose that La Mennais, who died in 1854, foresaw such advances as the republican takeover of papal territories in 1869 or Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* against Rome in the 1880s, it would be fair to assume that he never underestimated the threat to Christianity posed by any government which, in his reckoning, could be called spiritually dead. That came to include them all.

La Mennais brought to the fore the central issue of how much Christianity was to render unto Caesar. The Caesar he saw in Restoration France was not martial and triumphant but corrupt and corrupting, and the Church could sustain itself and fulfill its forgotten holy mission only by unqualified secession from its alliance with the state. Nothing could have been more horrific to the vested powers within both civil and ecclesiastical offices than this gospel, which sundered church and state. Instead of two props for authority and order, one would be tilted against the other.

In effect, La Mennais was expecting the Church to seize a kind of cultural initiative, not by appending itself to modern liberal ideas of democracy and equality but by claiming them for its own. Not first with the idea but its most articulate proponent, he became convinced that Christianity was itself true democracy; it alone recognized the equality of all souls. After the collapse of the 1830 revolt, when revolutionaries realized one king had been substituted for another, this celebration of the people was much to the fore. Jules Michelet, in his *Introduction à l'histoire universelle* (1831), proclaimed *le peuple* the anonymous victor of modern times, when revolutions would be waged "sans héros, sans noms propres; point d'individu en qui la gloire ait pu se

localiser'' [''without heroes and proper names, with no individual in whom glory could be concentrated'']. [10] For La Mennais, however, the exalted masses needed a prophetic leader and that would be the pope. The papacy became in his vision the seat of prophecy, uniting a resurrected Christian Europe against the state and the bourgeoisie it served. Christianity would reclaim its spiritual life by championing the poor and oppressed.

La Mennais propagated these views in *L'Avenir* [*The Future*], a journal he founded in October 1830, three months after a Paris uprising nearly toppled the restored monarchy. Although never widely circulated, its influence quickly became powerful enough to be noticed. Hugo, Lamartine, Balzac, Vigny, and Michelet himself were among its contributors. La Mennais enjoyed a kind of miniature court of young and enthusiastic coworkers, two of whom, Henri Lacordaire and Charles de Montalembert, later played conspicuous roles in the Catholic liberalism which La Mennais seems virtually to have invented. In him, at least, that cause had its first martyr.

Rapt by his intense version of a Christian apocalypse, he had not reckoned that the papacy required diplomacy as well as prophecy, and no pope would likely respond well to an impetuous role casting and its implicit dictation from below. Besides, *L'Avenir*'s attacks upon the Church establishment in France alienated its editor from any possible support there for his crusade against the state and the middle class. Rome received vigorous complaints about the insolent and dangerous populism La Mennais was promoting in the name of the faith. When, after a year, *L'Avenir* was forced to close due to poor financial management, he told subscribers he would go to Rome to appeal to Pope Gregory XVI.

Do prophets seek martyrdom? La Mennais, uncompromising and fervid, would have been a challenge for any pope, but Gregory XVI, of aristocratic lineage, a one-time professor of philosophy and a pontiff interested chiefly in theology, was beset by the very forces which La Mennais wanted to fuel with Christian zeal. There had been nationalist uprisings in Rome and in the papal territories; the pope put a lid on a boiling kettle, paying Austria and France for soldiers of occupation. If La Mennais had been inspired by the overthrow of the Bourbons in July 1830, the papacy was not. Gregory XVI received him politely and dodged discussion of *L'Avenir*. La Mennais did not know that by the time he arrived in Rome, the pope had received a report from theologians appointed by some French bishops. It concluded that La Mennais as early as his *Essai sur l'indifférence* had shown himself a libertarian, subscribing not to revelation but to universalist notions of individual conscience. Thomism alone might have persuaded Gregory that La Mennais was a dangerously modern man.

The encyclical *Mirari vos* (August 15, 1832) condemned La Mennais's presumption that Christendom needed renewal, as though Christian revelation could grow tired or stale, as though the Church itself ''could be considered subject to defect or obscuration or other misfortune.'' [11] It attacked the

implicit union La Mennais was forging with any revolutionary movement against state authorities, and it rejected his keystone proposition that church and state should be separated. This sharply worded document against virtually every idea that could be called liberal, modern, or progressive (including freedom of the press and of individual conscience), set the tone of the papacy well into the twentieth century, putting one pontiff after another on the defensive. The Syllabus of Errors, the Index, the doctrine of papal infallibility all variously express this rear-guard position against emergent ideologies. The Church at bay was far from able or willing to appreciate La Mennais's incendiary program, including his option for the poor.

Initially, he submitted. He even signed an act of submission, but within two years he published *Paroles d'un croyant*, one of the truly extraordinary documents of apocalyptic literature, if not of Christianity. A measure of its appeal came from its selling one hundred thousand copies; it was translated into a number of languages, including Flemish, Lamennais being particularly popular among Belgians struggling against Dutch rule.[12] Its prophetic, disjointed assertiveness exposes its weaknesses in argument and yet it makes clear the author's egalitarian bias against all established order. (He recast his name from the aristocratic La Mennais to Lamennais but neither appeared as the author of *Paroles*.) As we are all born equal before God, whose law of love and self-sacrifice precludes hierarchies, all kingships and other dominations must be ended so that a universal epoch of justice and unity can be realized. Lamennais directs his animus almost exclusively against secular powers but in one macabre passage he fantasizes a council of ghoulish rulers (they drink blood from skulls, as had happened in the Terror) enlisting clergy in a struggle to the death against Christ. Priests can be bribed into making the people wholly subservient to the state. Such was Lamennais's view of the Church under the Bourbons.

Paroles alternates between weird tableaux such as the vampiric eucharist and pious depictions of the oppressed—bereft, dispossessed families—which are meant to bring forth indignant tears. Chateaubriand, closing his *Mémoires*, complained that Lamennais had appropriated his language but not his ideas,[13] meaning, perhaps, that sublimity was no longer to be wondered at, but achieved by the insurgent poor. The most curious aspect of *Paroles* lies here, in its glowing vision of Christian harmonies established on earth and the vehement, wrathful calls to social and political leveling apparently necessary to achieve that vision. On one hand, Lamennais asserts that if only love could prevail, there would be no more servitude; on the other, he likens *liberté* to the kingdom of God, which only the violent can bear away. His apocalypticism fashions the impoverished into the image of Christ crucified and the ruling class into ministers of Satan.

The most startling of this book's assaults is directed at the military, at the French chivalric tradition of honor and what Lamennais scorns as *obéissance*

passive, another instrument of oppression but one which can be converted to serve the poor. In a long strophic passage, with "Jeune soldat, où vas-tu?" ["Where are you going, young soldier?"] iterated fourteen times and answered with "Que tes armes soient bénies, jeune soldat!" ["May your weapons be blessed, young soldier!"], he conjures up his onward Christian soldiers for the end-time of justice.[14] It is not difficult to imagine how this invocation of a proletarian army confounded the entrenched officers of church and state, especially as it came from a prominent and influential ultramontanist now converted to the gospel of popular sovereignty. Had Lamennais not clothed his *Paroles* in the sanctifying rhetoric of brotherly love, he could have been dismissed as a mere apostate. Instead, he had made himself into a grotesque anomaly, a kind of Bolshevik St. Francis.

From the twenty-first century, we might recast *Mennaisisme*, as it came to be known, into terms long familiar to the debate on nationalism and colonialism. In state leadership and in the bourgeoisie it served, Lamennais decried what Sartre would call "systematic violence," an in-built structure of manipulation and oppression which could only be overcome by revolutionary violence. Lamennais *engagé* seems in that sense a precursor of Sartre, and like Sartre he had an immense influence upon the young generation of his age, George Sand within it. Further, the Church's censure of him is not unlike Camus's criticism of Sartre for an opportunistic alliance with movements that violated human dignity.

We need not look ahead to Marxism and its apologists in approaching Lamennais. His appeal to a *sens commun* exposes his substantial debt to Rousseau, who had mightily influenced his vagrant and, for a time, atheistic adolescence. But a weighty difference remains: Rousseau did not base his arguments upon Christian Scripture. Neither would Rousseau have ever imagined that the papacy could be the guiding light for political freedoms. Gregory XVI's rejection of Lamennais and his crusading *Avenir* explains in large part the absence of any churchly helmsman in *Paroles*. To Lamennais, the papacy had shown itself to be as corrupt as the priesthood in Bourbon France. That, too, is why the people themselves become the Christ figure in whom he foresees a resurrection from oppression. The work culminates in a Dantesque vision of luminous unity in God.[15]

For himself in *Paroles*, he cast the role of an exile wandering forever homeless. That was his fate after the pope denounced the book, "small in size, enormous in wickedness," in another encyclical, *Singulari vos*, issued June 25, 1834.[16] This Frenchman, he said, had "cloaked Catholic teaching in enticing verbal artifice, in order ultimately to oppose it and overthrow it." The pope seems to have been especially incensed that Lamennais wrote as though dispatched and inspired by God: "He twists the words of Holy Scripture in a bold and cunning manner in order to firmly establish his depraved ravings." *Paroles* could only promote anarchy by its calumnies and falsehoods. In sum,

it was a prime specimen of the danger in giving any tether to individual conscience. Gregory concluded in the feeble hope that the prodigal might return submissively to the fold, but the fulminations of papal prose made that unlikely. Lamennais's supporters abandoned him rapidly.

He fell away from Catholicism but translated the Gospels, the *Imitatio Christi* (Thérèse read his translation avidly), and the *Commedia*. How he must have been quickened by Dante's savage words on Avignon's miscreant popes and on the wayward Church, caricatured in *Purgatorio* as the whore of French kings. He served in the French Assembly for two terms beginning in the convulsive year of 1848. It must have seemed that his time had come, but he did not distinguish himself—this prophet was eloquent on paper only—and after the coup of 1851, he withdrew into permanent obscurity. Gregory's successor, Pius IX, tried to coax him back into the Church but to no avail. As he had requested, Lamennais was buried in an anonymous pauper's grave, with no cross over it.

No one labored more assiduously than Lamennais to reconcile Christianity with democracy, to push the Church toward a candid dealing with social and political issues. He might be said to have invented the social or liberal Catholicism of modern activists, of all those who commit themselves to oppressed multitudes. Whether it is possible to reconcile the demand for rights with the call to bearing one's cross remains a debatable matter, even though the tag of Christian Democrat has long been sanctioned as something other than an oxymoron. But Christ did not overcome the world by running for office or leading a campaign of insurrection against the Caesars. He left the political establishment of his time wholly untouched, uncriticized, unchanged. The pope's charge in *Mirari vos* that Christians have always owed self-subordination to political authority is scripturally well based. Resist not evil. But what of the truth which is to make you free?

When Lamennais worked himself up into the anaphoric grievances of a prophet, he was standing much closer to Rousseau than to Jeremiah or even to the Johannine *Revelation*. Man was born free but is everywhere in chains: such could be the epitome of *Paroles* no less than of Jean-Jacques's *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*. And like Rousseau, Lamennais seemed to be setting everything afire. (The pope called *Paroles* a "torch of treason.") It takes little imagination to assess his incendiarism from the pope's vantage. *Liberté* was a code word for license, if not chaos; a Pandora's box of subversions; 1793, again. The great Revolution had unleashed a furious, destructive hostility to the Church, and why should not any other revolution do the same?

Much was once made of Lamennais's catastrophic tone, that he defeated himself by his zealotry. Had he been temperate, controllable, more patient, he might have exerted a meliorative influence on the Church, even upon Pope Gregory. This seems an improbable, even anachronistic, view. Had he spoken,

for example, the conciliatory language of *Gaudium et Spes*, of pastoral renewal and openness to the secular world, Lamennais would still not have been able to persuade the papacy to adopt a "progressive" policy if only because the non-Catholic society of that time would probably not have credited such a position. Gregory and every pope after him faced a turbulent world of anticlericalism and indifferentism, against which the ecclesia had no choice but to stand firm. It is one measure of the peculiar intensity of Lamennais's ultramontanism that he presumed the papacy could consign itself to the flood tides of the modern age and steer a sure course on behalf of the democracy which, under Robespierre and Saint-Just, had nearly destroyed the Church in France.

Here is one verdict on an extraordinary personality: "cet homme emporté, dont l'âme sembloit [*sic*] n'être qu'un assemblage de passions violentes que nourrissoit [*sic*] un orgueil sans bornes, se montra d'abord résolu à courber son front superbe sous l'autorité. . . . Mais lorsque ses erreurs eurent été proscrites à Rome . . . ne prenant désormais conseil que de ses sombres ressentiments, il changea tout à coup de langage, et, ne gardant plus de mesure, lança, dans sa fureur, anathème contre anathème et arbora l'étendard de la rébellion" ["this impassioned man, whose soul seemed only a gathering of violent passions nourished by boundless pride, at first showed himself resolved to bend his proud countenance before authority. . . . But when Rome had proscribed his errors, . . . he took only his dark resentments for counsel, wholly changed his language, and, observing no constraint, threw out in his fury anathema after anathema and planted the standard of rebellion"]. The subject of these remarks was Martin Luther. Their author was Félicité de La Mennais.[17]

It seems that Lamennais, had he not lost his belief in heaven, would have liked to spend his life doing good on earth. The present book is about someone else who lost heaven and who had precisely that idea of terrestrial beneficence, said so, and cast herself in the sterling lead role of Christian spirituality. "I shall be Love," she said. It was a kind of popular sovereignty which forced the Church's hand and enlisted her among the saints.

Like Lamennais, Thérèse broke from the static circle of convention and made her dynamic way into the recesses of a hard-won intuition. That kind of movement subverts by its inherent antinomian thrust. It makes a proleptic claim upon humanity by its exceptional and loving creativity.[18] The *réflexions* he appended to his translation of the Gospels stand as Lamennais's noblest work in that vein: unequivocal, incisive, exigent. What would Thérèse have made of them? She knew and treasured his translation of the *Imitatio Christi* with other *réflexions*. A work by Lamennais, that outcast?!? Too bad, she replied equably. The differences between him and her, these dauntless adventurers, are nonetheless marked, not least that Lamennais became programmatic and bitter. Thérèse, forever a daughter of the Church, had no program, and she knew that bitterness is a good tonic but a poor diet.

Renan and the *Libido Sciendi*

In the summer of 1863, Pope Pius IX issued an encyclical, *Quanto conficiamur maerore*. "With how much grief we are overwhelmed" not least because of "the corruption of morals so extensively increasing and promoted by irreligious and obscene writings." He might have been referring to one of the most devastating books ever written about Christianity, Ernest Renan's *Vie de Jésus*, published less than two months earlier. From 1846, his papacy's first year, Pius IX had castigated the modern world for its many errant isms: socialism, rationalism, indifferentism, latitudinarianism, and a year after *Quanto maerore*, he issued a summary of their falsehoods, the famous Syllabus of Errors. If we look within that engaging text for condemnation of Renan, we find it in the pope's decrying of human reason and of scientific progress in understanding religion and its dogmas.

Renan was one of the most accomplished philologists of nineteenth-century scholarship. He was decisively influenced by the positivistic dogma prevalent in his time, that knowledge is obtainable only within the demonstrable limits of the natural world. On that empirical base, Auguste Comte had erected what he called the religion of humanity, superseding theology and metaphysics. Taking this partisan view—truth counts only when measurable—Renan's reading of early Christian history via the New Testament sundered Jesus of Nazareth from Christ, the only begotten Son who proceeds from the Father. Although German Protestantism had produced scholars who tilled the soil around "the historical Jesus" long before Renan, his book remains of profound importance as a work composed within and effectually against the Catholic culture of France during and after the Second Empire. Its novelty was explosive: eight editions were issued within the first three months.

Like Chateaubriand, Renan came from deeply conservative Brittany and, also like him, he was answerable to a deeply pious mother. But his youthful apostasy grew and hardened, beginning in the seminary education which toward his life's end he affectionately recalls in his engaging autobiography. There he says of Lamennais that he exchanged one faith for another; leaving the Church naturally made this priest celebrant of another absolute: democracy.[19] Renan, although he left the Church, did so with not a drop of Lamennais's righteous vitriol, and his learning made him too much of an elitist ever to embrace multitudes unquestioningly. He, too, merely changed profound allegiances. The religion to which he transferred his credulous sensibility was science, the predominant faith of the mid-nineteenth century. Even so, he never stopped looking back to the religion which he did much to undermine. Indeed, he ventured to give spirituality a reformulation: "Car la foi absolue est incompatible avec l'histoire sincère. Mais l'amour va sans la foi. . . . Dieu s'était révélé avant Jésus, Dieu se révélera après lui" ["Surely

absolute faith is incompatible with real history. But love proceeds without faith. . . . God was revealed before Jesus and will be revealed after him'']. [20]

Albert Schweitzer, his severest critic, charges him with insincerity, and why is little wonder. [21] Renan presents a Jesus he has unctuously aestheticized but does not believe in by any measure of faith. He purports to write in the scientific spirit of historicism, but he has simply discarded all the mystery and miracle of Christ—they are unprovable—and filled in his narrative with conjecture, which while entertaining is not consistently imposing. The emergent Jesus is soft, sentimentalized, deluded, and yet somehow indispensable to humanity. Renan might not have been the first to recast Jesus with the accommodating humanist tag of ''great teacher,'' but that is about the best he can and wants to do. Shrewdly, Renan knew his audience. He did not write a scrupulously cautious, well-grounded (dry) academic work. Had he done so, it would never have reached that eighth edition nor even a second. Yet, the effect of his book's outraging the Church and its defenders was to discredit all genuinely scholarly effort in France toward historical reconstructions of Jesus and his time. Worthy biblical scholarship remained the almost exclusive province of German Protestants for generations.

That is not to dismiss Renan's interpretation altogether. He reads with at times bracingly candid eyes, drawing conclusions which rocked the piety of his day. For example, he asserts about Jesus: ''Sa famille ne semble pas l'avoir aimé, et, par moments, on le trouve dur pour elle'' [''His family seems not to have loved him and at times he is harsh toward it''], a remark which he undergirds with no fewer than seven citations from the four Gospels. [22] In effect, he was bidding his readers to undertake something they had never done before because it had been prohibited: reading the Scriptures for themselves. Interpretation was long the meat of Protestantism but fruit forbidden to Catholicism. Here was a scholar of intimidatingly high credentials, recently seated by Napoleon III in the chair of Hebrew at the Collège de France, subverting the shepherdly authority of priests.

It would be easy, even so, to overdraw the heuristic force of *Vie de Jésus*. Renan's readers of those eight brisk editions were not in the main genuine believers but rather, like himself, lapsed Catholics who had gone the secular way, many to the extremes of anticlericalism. The Church's direst foes usually have come from the once-docile ranks of embittered childhood and adolescence. Some, like Alfred de Musset, found themselves caught between heart and head, realizing it was now unfashionable to believe and yet unable to shed fully the trappings of faith and its not inconsiderable consolations. [23] The rigorously pious were warned off early with denunciations from the pulpit and higher. There were numerous early attacks upon Renan, but none of his foes could match his learning. Of those who wrote instantly against him, Schweitzer cites only the bishop of Orleans, the famous Dupanloup, as estimable.

Along with his chair in Hebrew, Renan held another trump. He had written *Vie de Jésus* while on the spot, in Palestine. It would be hard from our distance to measure the strength of this fact, that to the bourgeoisie of his day he had the double appeal of exoticism and authenticity. Chateaubriand knew that his own charm lay in his adventurism, inflated though much of it was and as it was expected to be: he had gone to the New World of *Atala*; he had nearly lost his life at the Niagara Falls where that melancholy story concludes. Renan had gone back toward Eden but had made of his journey something other than a romantic dreamscape: it was a scientific mission. French readers had long been familiar with travel literature on North Africa: Lamartine and Nerval wrote of Egypt (Chateaubriand had been there, too); Fromentin, of Algeria; Delacroix, of Morocco. Flaubert's disastrously bad historical fiction, *Salammbô*, was the product of his exuberant research in Tunisia. All of these writers fed the Gallic taste for an impressionism of the bizarre, the allure of a fantastic otherness sure to relieve, however fleetingly, the crushing ennui of life at home. Renan was different: he was disrupting the home itself and with the prestige of supposedly detached, disinterested scientific inquiry.

To smile at his scholarship is to risk condescension. He is confidently categorical, for example, about the limits of Jesus' learning. It derived at best, says this chair of Hebrew, from Hillel of fifty years before: their "aphorisms" match. Renan claims that Jesus did not likely know Greek, a matter still under dispute today, with some scholars confident that he could have learned it at the Greco-Roman resort town of Sepphoris, only three miles north of Nazareth. Gifted at scene painting, one of romanticism's fetishes, Renan somehow fails to depict a carpenter and his son with commissions among their cosmopolitan neighbors. On the other hand, he sometimes ventures into absurdity in trying to rationalize (dismiss) miracles: Lazarus was not raised from the dead. That would be too much for the age of skeptical science to swallow. No, he planned and performed the role of a dead man in order to spread Jesus' reputation as a wonder worker.

Renan's optic upon Jesus is complex and ever shifting. At times, it veers toward that of Lamennais, to whom he likens John the Baptist, "toujours irrité." The God of Jesus is not a punitive despot but "le Dieu de l'humanité." Jesus founded "la doctrine de la liberté des âmes . . . l'idée la plus révolutionnaire qui soit jamais éclose dans un cerveau humain" ["the doctrine of freedom of soul . . . the most revolutionary idea ever conceived by the human mind"], exactly the spiritual freedom Pius IX decried in the Syllabus. God is not to be proved by metaphysical argument, says Renan, because Jesus felt the divine within him, as Plato had before him; St. Paul and Augustine, after. That sounds almost digestible until one realizes what he is actually saying. Only passingly does the Church itself come in for swipes: "Jamais on n'a été moins prêtre que ne le fut Jésus, jamais plus ennemi des formes qui étouffent la religion sous prétexte de la protéger" ["Never was anyone less a

priest than Jesus, never more inimical to the proprieties which stifle religion under the pretext of protecting it"].[24]

In his profile of Jesus, a recurrent number of giveaway epithets obtrudes: *charmant, sublime, doux, ravissant, délicieux*. Renan learned much from Chateaubriand and the taste he had created. For Jesus seems to be manifestly of his romantic stamp, an aesthete. Isolated from the exacting spirituality which speaks from every page of the Gospels, Jesus, no longer the Christ, becomes an admissible club member of the literate Second Empire bourgeoisie. It was a trick easy to turn and not for the last time, the refashioning of Christ into the terms of modern, sophisticated prejudice, a reduction to convenience and tacit dismissal. Much celebrated in salons later in his life, Renan once remarked that France wants to be flattered and to share its faults. In *Vie de Jésus*, he was rendering his subject according to that dictum: Jesus, the *cher maître*, negotiably noble, harmlessly inimitable, with all vestiges of the miraculous consigned to the bin of superstition and delusion.

The central tenets of the Christian faith, the Incarnation and the Resurrection, cannot figure here even as the inexplicable mysteries they are, because they belong to a prescientific antiquation. Renan dispatches altogether St. Matthew's scene with Christ risen standing before a woman who, according to *Mark* and *Luke*, had been possessed of seven demons. The facts will never emerge to confirm the resurrection of Jesus. All we are left with, Renan urges, is the powerful imagination of Mary Magdalene: "Pouvoir divin de l'amour! Moments sacrés où la passion d'une hallucinée donne au monde un Dieu ressuscité!" ["Divine power of love! Sacred moments when the passion of a hallucinating woman gives to the world a resurrected God!"].[25] By such legerdemain this professor of Semitic languages deftly reminded his readers that only the demonstrable realm of scientific investigation could be counted on for truth. Having lost the capacity for genuine, inner faith, Renan exalted the superstitious enlightenment of his age into the outer sort, one seeking ominous relief in the spread of complacency.

Renan's autobiography, an invaluable window onto the Church's intellectual life in midcentury France, shows how his use of reasoning, though flowered by rhetoric, not only served to confound the Gospel accounts but turned the medieval baggage of scholasticism inside out. All theological dogmas revealed by Scripture and authorized in councillary judgments had presumably been made demonstrable by and to reason. Revelation and church authority were thus proven. And so the Church was incensed—Renan was then a seminarian at Saint-Sulpice—when Lamennais told it to start anew, to begin not with reason, but with faith. How was that possible, since reason had for centuries been appointed the sole determinant of Christian truth?

It wasn't, and it remains to Renan's credit that he had recognized that fact long before he wrote *Vie de Jésus*. In 1848, he had declared abiding allegiance to the nostrums of his age: "C'est l'amour pur de la science qui m'a fait briser

les liens de toute croyance révélée, et j'ai senti que, le jour où je me suis proclamé sans autre maître que la raison, j'ai posé la condition de la science'' [''Pure love of science caused me to break the bonds of all revealed belief, and I felt that the day I proclaimed myself without any master save reason, I set out the terms of science''].[26] But for the Church, this new gospel, whether denominated as positivism or materialism, amounted to nothing other than atheism. The trouble was that the formidable scholarly authority of Renan, which he was careful not to parade before his popular readership, could not be matched by any learning within the ecclesiastical community. There was no such thing as biblical scholarship and ''higher criticism'' in France at that time.

It is instructive that when Renan's own master at Saint-Sulpice, Félix Dupanloup, a most prominent writer on behalf of Catholic education, wrote at length against his former student, his chosen audience was the piously concerned parents of impressionable young minds: *Avertissement à la jeunesse et aux pères de famille sur les attaques dirigées contra la religion par quelques écrivains de nos jours* [*Warning to Youth and the Fathers of Families about Attacks Directed against Religion by Some Writers of Today*]. At 125 pages, it was longer than a pamphlet but bore the compulsive gravity of one. Issued in precipitous response to *Vie de Jésus*, it makes no mention of Renan's bestseller, citing by ample quotes only Renan's *Études d'histoire religieuse* and his essays in the trendy *Revue des deux mondes*. Dupanloup charges him and the eminent medical encyclopedist Émile Littré (subsequently, editor of the great *Dictionnaire*) with *l'exégèse anti-chrétienne*. The incendiary post-Sulpician pronouncements come tumbling forth: faith stands in inverse proportion to mental vigor and intellectual cultivation. Faith is a strange malady which to the shame of civilization has not yet disappeared from humankind. No limit can be set to the human mind, as nothing is above man. God, providence, immortality are good old words, a bit heavy perhaps, which philosophy shall interpret in ever more refined ways. Dupanloup granted that, with Renan, negation was always well nuanced—a function of the protean self to which Renan himself admitted—but he also saw that this one-time seminarian was spreading his antitheism widely. *Vie de Jésus* was not constrained by the dry Teutonic pedantry on which it was built. It courted popular appeal and approbation.

Dupanloup knew his audience, too. He knew Renan could not be confronted on his own academic ground, only identified to the faithful as one of the false prophets in the age of ascendant sciences. Even so, Renan to the end of his life denied he wrote in a Voltairean spirit. He was aware that he could never shake off the Catholicism which had informed his early years, even when he had renounced it, and in that he was speaking for many contemporaries who might have presumed that they had become altogether modern and materialist. His enthrallment to the cult of reason closed him off to all that remains ineffable, to all that must remain forever mystery, beyond