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Milton's Role in the Reestablishment of Religion in France under Napoleon

It certainly can be strongly argued that Milton had a role in the disestablishment of the Roman Catholic Church in France during the French Revolution. Scholars such as Christophe Tournu have carefully documented the influence of Milton's prose works, especially *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, the *First Defence of the English People*, and *Areopagitica* on the French intellectuals principally responsible for fomenting the Revolution, which not only abolished the monarchy, but also in essence decreed out of existence the Catholic religion as previously constituted. Churches were locked, pillaged, even confiscated. Church hierarchy was dismantled, and priests were told either to get new professions or, for greatly reduced salaries, to swear allegiance to the state instead of to the Pope. New secular religions were established including one celebrating the Rights of Man.

But such measures against the Church were highly unpopular with the majority of the French populace, especially the peasants, and were the principal causes of the civil unrest that plagued the French government from the time of the

Terror through the Consulat into the early years of the Napoleonic era. In an effort to reunite the numerous factions disaffected by the official stance on religion following the Revolution, Napoleon on 15 July 1801 signed a Concordat with Pope Pius VII which, with certain provisos, reestablished Roman Catholicism in France. It was made public on Easter Sunday 1802 amidst general jubilation. Six days after the actual signing of the Concordat Chateaubriand (1768-1848) published the first version of le *Génie du Christianisme*.

Immensely popular both with Royalists and with Bonapartists, as well as with secular intellectuals, the general reading public, and Christians of all stripes, le *Génie* helped generate enthusiasm for the Concordat when it was finally announced.

Since as Milton has a significant presence in this work both in content and style (as Jean Gillet for one has demonstrated), I suggest that while on the one hand Milton seems to have played a literary part in the fall of the Roman Catholic Church in France during the French Revolution, on the other hand he would later also have a role both in the favorable initial acceptance of its official re-establishment under Napoleon, and in an aesthetic-moral view of Christianity suiting the temper of the times. Although Chateaubriand had an excellent Jesuit education and was well versed in the Church Fathers, le *Génie* is less a theological tract and more what we might call “Christian literary theory.” In this rambling survey of literature and art Chateaubriand argues that Christianity is responsible for the greatest works of art and literature that have ever been created and that true “taste” in evaluating art must take place within a Christian context. Milton is one of his prime examples and is recurred to throughout le *Génie*. Here it is not

Milton's prose works which matter, but *Paradise Lost* which Chateaubriand would translate into one of the most highly regarded French versions. Milton's epic "abounds with superior beauties which essentially belong to the groundwork of our religion." Citing the passage where Adam first addresses the God of his creation, Chateaubriand comments, "How sublime is Milton in this passage! But would he have conceived such grand, lofty ideas, had he been a stranger to the true religion?" Because of his Christianity and because his subject has such a universal appeal, including the "first emotions of the human heart," Milton is superior to Homer and Virgil. Using Milton as example, Chateaubriand celebrates the Christian artist's liberty to create according to his *génie* unfettered by rules and politics.

Chateaubriand's "Miltonic" religious treatise influenced many other writers. Drawing heavily on ideas in le *Génie*, Victor Hugo, for example, in what he considered his "revolutionary" tract of literary theory, the *Préface* to his gargantuan play *Cromwell*, also says that the greatest art has only been possible in the Christian age and also uses Milton as a major exemplar of Christian literary freedom and of Christian *génie*.

Kléber Haedens claims that the publication of Chateaubriand's *Génie* "relit the candles in all the churches of France." What has not been given due attention is the extent to which Milton in essence was used to strike the match.

Stephen Prickett in his 2010 *Modernity and the Reinvention of Tradition* speaks of the "unabashed emotionalism" of the *Génie* and its importance in shaping Christian thought in the nineteenth century and later, but never mentions Milton's role in the work.