Introduction

Claude Langlois's Vision of France

Regional Identity, Royal Imaginary, and Holy Women

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Claude Langlois's work points the way out of a long-standing whiggish view, not only of French, but also European historiography. If Western Civ textbooks or respectable general histories reflect the consensus of the profession, it is still easy to find themes of progress toward equality, secularism, and modernity. Such themes are defensible, of course, but they are one-sided. They omit a lot, like the experiences of those left out of the march of progress, of religious institutions, and of unintended victims of revolution and civil war. A more sophisticated rendering would be more satisfactory since it would emphasize resistance, the apparently marginal, and the richness of historical experience. It would replace assumptions about inevitable outcomes with a greater awareness of contingency. Claude Langlois's work on women, religion, and the French Revolution illustrates how such a complicated history might look.

At first glance, Langlois's output is too diverse for generalization. The author of over two hundred books and articles, he has written about the Napoleonic Concordat, dechristianization in the French Revolution, nuns in the nineteenth century, population, plebiscites, prints and iconography, spiritual biography, and much else. The articles in this issue of *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* capture much of Langlois's work; they also break into three overlapping themes: religion, women, the Revolution.

These articles originally grew out of a session at the annual meeting of the Society for French Historical Studies in Charleston, South Carolina on 12 February 2011. The idea for the session was Tim Tackett's, who asked me to take over some of the administrative tasks that the session and this special issue required—we continue to be close collaborators on the project. The conference session included four papers and we invited three additional scholars to comment on the gaps in that original session or to emphasize aspects of the work we thought needed enhancing. Two of the authors in this issue are former students (Duprat and Rogers), the others are colleagues and friends.

Langlois is part of the second generation of academic writing on religion in French history. The first, pioneered by Gabriel Le Bras and Canon Boulard, set the stage for much to follow. Both men developed the technique of counting Easter communicants to measure the historical extent and the geographic distribution of Catholic practice. They concluded that the Old Regime witnessed near universal adherence to the Church; that the Revolution was a major turning point in religious practice and that the Church never really recovered. Their map of communicants in 1952 showed a fascinating distribution of a deeply practicing west, Massif Central, and Alsace, juxtaposed to an indifferent center and Provence.¹

Langlois's early work resembles this problematic but even then he attempted to develop different measures of intensity. As Thomas Kselman points out in his contribution, Langlois wrote his *thèse de troisième cycle* on the Diocese of Vannes after the Concordat in order to find geographical and social patterns in allegiance to Catholic institutions, but he extends the Le Bras-Boulard metric to measure the vitality of individuals and institutions. Thus he evaluates the quality of pastoral care, the vigor of various church leaders, and the strength of various lay organizations. Unlike other regions where the anti-clericalism and the dechristianization of the Revolution had more lasting effects, the Diocese of Vannes recovered fairly quickly. Whatever the reason, the restored diocese did not feature the kinds of conflicts between clergy and lay persons that make for such colorful reading elsewhere. No conflicts over clerical refusal to bury former Jacobins here.² Instead, as Kselman points out, the overall impression is one of lay deference to the clergy and clerical sympathy for idiosyncratic expressions of popular piety. At least in this part of southern Brittany, tensions were not overwhelming.

The unusual and eccentric can be seductive, a trap that creates the impression that dissidence was the norm in lay-clerical relations, that the Church was constantly obliged to repress spontaneous and authentic popular expression. Régis Bertrand's contribution is a reminder that conflict with the hierarchy is not the only reason for studying popular religion. He has devoted much of his career to studying the religious confraternities of Provence. These were lay organizations of differing types: associations sometimes composed of both men and women who looked after the upkeep of the church and its altars; trade confraternities designed to provide mutual aid; and most fascinating of all, the penitent societies. These latter groups were composed uniquely of men whose purpose was mutual aid, but especially to assure a departed brother a dignified and very public and very boisterous send-off into the next world. Where the village or small town was large enough, there would be more than one society. There was conflict among the societies in these cases—friendly rivalries before the Revolution, lethal afterward when the societies divided into Jacobin or anti-Jacobin supporters. More to the point, before 1789, disagreements with the clergy were not particularly between fervent and half-Christianized Catholics. Instead, the clergy wor-

ried about the societies becoming too social or in the sixteenth century, too demonstrative with their taste for mortification and self-flagellating.

Contributors to this collection—in particular Rebecca Rogers—also address the fascinating subject of the feminization of Catholicism. Caroline Ford and Ralph Gibson defined “feminization” as the increasing role of women in the Catholic Church in terms of both numbers and influence. Specifically, it observes the gender disparity in church attendance over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; records the explosion in personnel in female congregations; and asserts the greater emotional, as opposed to intellectual, expressions of religious activity that the gender disparity supposedly caused.³

As our authors demonstrate, Langlois has enriched this feminization theme, concentrating especially on the remarkable growth of female religious orders.⁴ Indeed, his discoveries are a perfect example of an increasing female presence in an ancient institution. His examination of the founders of the congregations shows a rise in the proportion of female founders and an increasing dominance of founders from the laity. Of course, it took money to found a congregation, so the prominence of daughters of the military and office holding nobility was natural. But over time, the daughters of the bourgeoisie played a greater role. And, interesting enough, women from the lower classes were also significant among the list of founders.⁵ Langlois has found similar expansion and “democratization” occurring in the recruitment of sisters, but this was not spread evenly among the lower classes. Urban recruitment declined, while daughters of working-class parents were underrepresented relative to the size of the urban working population. At the same time recruitment fell more heavily on the countryside and increasingly from the West, Normandy, Brittany, and the Vendée. As Langlois puts it, “Recruiting occurred more and more in the most rural bastions of French Catholicism.”⁶

The rise of the congregations was a consequence of legal structures that limited women’s professional roles. The Civil Code constrained married women’s property rights so that they were restricted to life in the family, to devotions, and to individual good works. As several contributors point out, Napoleonic property law unintentionally stimulated the female religious orders. Ambitious and talented women entered congregations to manage large organizations that contributed to professional service. Invariably such institutions required managerial and personnel skills that were restricted in the secular world. At the same time, the congregations got the broader public used to seeing women as professionals, especially in teaching, social services, missionary service, and medicine. As France became more secular, women were more easily accepted as these activities too became more secular.⁷

Yet if the congregations foreshadowed the welfare state, they were not simply transitional institutions. As Rebecca Rogers argues, they were not relics of the past, even if their emphasis on *bonnes œuvres* recalls the seventeenth century. Their vocational schools trained their charges in practical

crafts and made a significant contribution to female literacy. Their charity work with the mentally ill and with convicts made the society they lived in more humane. In short, they were far from the bastions of reaction and ignorance that republican politicians of the time asserted. Their effect was subtle but substantial. In their very adaptability, they conditioned the public to accept broader social roles for women.⁸

The congregations were an unlikely route toward the welfare state and to women's equality. Yet there had been stirrings of a greater female assertiveness in politics and society since the Revolution. As Langlois has shown, religion was the vector. Women played a big role in the resistance to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy and to dechristianization. This resistance continued even after the Terror as women asserted central roles in religious practice. Because so many priests had been deported, had resigned, or had been executed, there was virtually no one to perform the mass. In many parts of the country, women conducted "white masses," a truly remarkable phenomenon since the Church had excluded women from liturgical functions for over a millennium.⁹

Langlois's interests in the Revolution are very broad. My article catalogs this eclecticism, from his interest in the Civil Constitution, the Concordat, clerical resignations, and attempts at reconciliation among Catholic factions. He broke out of the concern for religious history in his justly famous article on the phony plebiscite of the Year VIII, one that showed among other things how little Bonaparte's coup changed the ongoing chaos, and how country people unjustifiably projected their hopes for a religious restoration on the coup.

Annie Duprat shows another aspect of Langlois's breadth in her discussion of his analysis of royalist caricatures.¹⁰ These are the ancestors of modern cartoons, but the genre has changed immensely. Modern French newspaper cartoons are drawn in a minimalist style, with brief or no captions, and expect the reader to recognize the joke instantly. Caricatures, by contrast, are closer to texts. They tell a story, usually by allusion to widely known classical or Biblical sources. Therefore, they expect the reader to bring a fair amount of prior knowledge in order to interpret the text. They startle in their use of monsters or drawings of half animals or half people, and in their appeal to the grotesque. This makes them far more biting than their modern counterparts.

Annie Duprat shows that these polemical drawings make a number of unexpected reconstructions of the timeline of the Revolution. In the first place, they pay almost no attention to popular politics. Instead, they were obsessed with the Orleanist plot. As Langlois's *Les Sept morts du roi* (1992) shows, royalist caricaturists considered the October Days of 1789 to be a critical turning point. Most historians treat the October Days as an afterthought or as an example of women's agency. For contemporary royalists, however, these *journées* finally revealed Louis XVI's fatal weakness. Thus, paradoxically, they gave up on the king far sooner than the mainstream

revolutionaries did. They also saw a foreign war as a deliverance far sooner than many revolutionaries did.

Because of his broad interests, Langlois adopts methods to suit the project at hand. He chooses the project, then the method. Thus he uses cartographic presentations to illustrate intensity of feelings, the geographic distribution of institutions, and the spread of social practices. The best example of this would be the *Atlas de la Révolution française*, which he co-edited and to which he contributed. Tim Tackett observes that he was among the first to deploy “an eclectic array of methodologies and sources beyond the traditional domain of the historian—from computer generated quantification to social science models and iconographic analysis—depending on the topic and the problems being posed.” But if there is no one method, one can detect certain general intellectual influences—de Certeau, with his skepticism of a rigid social science that dehumanizes, and Durkheim for his realization that, among other things, religious institutions are human creations. This perspective allows for a great deal of human agency in the past and a distrust of explanations based on grandiose single cause engines, be it class- or ideas-based.

Thomas Kselman observes that in his voluminous writings on St Thérèse of Lisieux, Langlois has chosen the most basic unit in history—an individual, and a deceptively simple method to study her—textual analysis. Langlois has described his passion for St Thérèse as “my time-consuming hobby, my late psychoanalysis”: a fascination with a woman so far out of her time, in a world so very distant from her preoccupations. Guillaume Cuchet reports on the surprise many colleagues expressed when Langlois undertook this seemingly arcane subject. Even so, it does display many of Langlois’s gifts as an historian: his ability to work at the edges of the discipline, in this case theology and spiritual biography (“a unique female presence in the Catholic Church,” as he calls it); his care and respect for complicated texts; and his interest in women’s history. Langlois himself justifies the project by saying the Catholic Church is a huge writing machine and that historians should be as interested in the content of these writings as in the sociology of their diffusion. Even an individual can throw light on the general, in the case of St Thérèse on the history of publication, on the reception of miracles, the diffusion of her relics, and the process of recognizing sainthood. Like many characters that inhabit Langlois’s historical writings, St Thérèse also did not fit into easy categories; indeed, in her desire to be a priest, she was torn with wanting the impossible. Understanding this extraordinary young woman comes from reconstructing her interior life, as Cuchet says. Only afterward can one appreciate her effect on her contemporaries.

Taken together, Langlois’s work wrestles with big questions. A comparison of the maps within the *Atlas de la Révolution française* and with those in other sources raises the question of continuity in French history. Is French history simply immobile, with the apparent continuity of the regional maps of religious and political loyalty from the sixteenth century to the present simply the outward expression of something unnamed but deeper?¹¹ Does

the religious history of the Revolution reflect deeper continuities, continuities that transcend institutions, enduring sentiments in culture and community that are, in the end, very difficult to capture? How stable was the post-revolutionary bourgeois order when it intended to confine married women to restricted roles but also encouraged the activities of talented women in the congregations? How linear was the trend to gender equality?

Langlois's work also links to big issues. It is no longer possible to see religion in the post-revolutionary period as atavistic, its practitioners a dwindling group of followers nostalgic for a past long gone. It is no longer possible to describe the era as one of the triumph of science and reason.¹² Indeed, as Ruth Harris has shown in her magnificent study of Lourdes, miracles could be verified through scientific methods.¹³ Langlois has shown that religious institutions were both products of their time and that they acted on the wider society. The female congregations especially provided opportunities for the ambitious and careers to the helpers. They educated generations of girls and enhanced perceptions of what capable women could do.

The Revolution too was not only about human rights—that was such a flickering candle in the end—but about resistance based on religious sentiments. These ultimately drove revolutionary politics much more than concerns for liberty ever did. They also laid the groundwork for the religious revival of the 1790s. This too was the basis of the nineteenth century.

Notes

1. Gabriel Le Bras, *Études de sociologie religieuse*, 2 vols. (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1955); Fernand Boulard, *An Introduction to Religious Sociology: Pioneer Work in France* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1960). Much more detail in the 4-volume set of Fernand Boulard, Yves-Marie Hilaire, and Pierre Barral, *Matériaux pour l'histoire religieuse du peuple français: XIXe–XXe siècles* (Paris: Éd. de l'École des hautes études en sci. soc.: P. de la fond. nat. des sci. pol.: Éd. du CNRS, 1982, 1987, 1992, 2011).
2. Maurice Agulhon, *La République au village: les populations du Var, de la Révolution à la Seconde République* (Paris: Seuil, 1970).
3. Caroline C. Ford, *Divided Houses: Religion and Gender in Modern France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 3–4; Ralph Gibson, *A Social History of French Catholicism, 1789–1914* (London: Routledge, 1989).
4. Claude Langlois, *Le catholicisme au féminin: les congrégations françaises à supérieure générale au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Cerf, 1984).
5. *Ibid.*, 263–297.
6. *Ibid.*, 622. “[L]e recrutement s’opère de plus en plus dans les bastions les plus ruraux du catholicisme français.” (Translations are the author’s.)
7. See the remarks on sisters forswearing an inheritance in favor of a professional career in Susan Carol Rogers, *Shaping Modern Times in Rural France: The Transformation and Reproduction of an Aveyronnais Community* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 83–93.

8. Patrick Harrigan, "Women Teachers and the Schooling of Girls in France: Recent Historiographical Trends," *French Historical Studies* 21, no. 4 (1998): 593–610.
9. Timothy Tackett, "Women and Men in Counterrevolution: The Sommières Riot of 1791," *Journal of Modern History* 59, no. 4 (1987): 680–704; Olwen Hufton, "Women in Revolution, 1789–1796," *Past and Present* 53, no. 1 (1971): 90–108; idem, *Women and the Limits of Citizenship in the French Revolution* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992); Suzanne Desan, *Reclaiming the Sacred: Lay Religion and Popular Politics in Revolutionary France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 93–94; idem, "The Role of Women in Religious Riots During the French Revolution," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 22, no. 3 (1989): 451–468. See also Tim Le Goff and Donald Sutherland, "Religion and Rural Revolt in the French Revolution: An Overview," in *Religion and Rural Revolt*, ed. János Bak and G. Benecke (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 123–145. Despite the number of references, this subject is hardly exhausted.
10. For other contributions to this genre, see Antoine de Baecque's *La caricature révolutionnaire* (Paris: Presses du CNRS, 1988) and *La révolution à travers la caricature* (Paris: Solar, 1989); James A. Leith and Andrea Joyce, *Face à Face: French and English Caricatures of the French Revolution and Its Aftermath* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1989); Michel Vovelle, *La Révolution française, images et récits* (Paris: Messidor, 1986); idem, *Les images de la Révolution française: actes du Colloque des 25-26-27 Oct. 1985 tenu en Sorbonne* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1989).
11. The phrase is Le Roy Ladurie's. See his "L'histoire immobile," *Annales. Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 29, no. 3 (1974): 673–692.
12. See Caroline Ford's remarks on this in "Religion and Popular Culture in Modern Europe," *Journal of Modern History* 65, no. 1 (1993): 152–175.
13. Ruth Harris, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age* (New York: Viking, 1999).