

The Civil Constitution of the Clergy

In July 1790, the French Constituent Assembly introduced the Civil Constitution of the Clergy in order to revitalise the Church and bring it into concord with the principles of the Revolution. Fifty-four percent of the clergy felt unable to swear the oath to Nation, King, Law and Constitution, opining that this would contradict Papal authority and thus this legislation forced French citizens to choose between the new, revolutionary order and their Catholic faith. The Church became a focus for counter-revolution while the issue spelt an end for revolutionary consensus as refractory priests were supported across class boundaries.

When the Estates-General was called for 1789, the clergy were enthusiastic about their future prospects, something demonstrated by the Abbé Fauchet's announcement in May of that year that "The moment of regeneration has arrived!" However, as a result of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy in July 1790, a measure designed to free the church "from foreign (papal) control", divisions developed between juring and refractory priests, respectively those who did and did not swear the oath.

Although some of the ecclesiastical representatives in the Constituent Assembly were high-ranking bishops, there were, by necessity of numbers, many priests who were nearer in outlook to their Third Estate congregations and were more likely to favour institutional reform. Those clergymen who disapproved of the 'democratic' overhaul of the system were forced publicly to declare themselves "against the new order". Even though 54% of France's clergy were in favour of the "sensible settlement" that was the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, those priests who refused to swear the oath usually did so with the support of their congregations yet were labelled traitors by extremists such as Saint-Just.

Although clergymen who were dissatisfied with the new system did act as focuses for counter-revolution, especially those whose background lay in the Second Estate, and had influence over their congregations, their importance in this respect was negligible when compared to that of the émigré nobles who were finding support throughout Europe. Religion, through the conflicts between both jurors/refractaires and Protestants/Catholics, was definitely a major factor in turning people against the republic and inciting counter-revolution.

Through the period from 1790 until the King's death in 1794, opposition to the republic was centred on the King with much fervour engendered by the King's restriction of liberty after the Flight to Varennes.

Its ultimate aim was to restore him to the throne and reverse much of the reform that had occurred. The most serious anti-revolutionary uprising, however, which occurred in the Vendées in 1793, although catalysed in part by the expansion of the war and the conscription imposed by the Republic was primarily a result of local hatred for the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, which had been strongly resisted in the area.

It can therefore be seen that although the clergy did not for the most part actively oppose the revolution, the refusal of many to swear the Civil Constitution of the Clergy and the staunch Catholicism of the rural peasantry were important factors in the promotion of counter-revolution.