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Abstract

In 1815, Napoleon Bonaparte and Pope Pius XVII signed an agreement called the Concordat, which was an agreement between the French state and the Catholic Church that reconciled the Church with the anti-religious policies established during the French Revolution. This paper discusses the conflicting viewpoints held by various historians concerning the legacy of the Concordat; that is, did the agreement fulfill the religious goals of the early revolutionaries or did it betray their ideals? Ultimately, the paper concludes that the Concordat did indeed uphold the religious principles established during the early stages of the Revolution.

Keywords

Napoleon Bonaparte, Concordat, French Revolution

Acknowledgements

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Napoleon Bonaparte's Concordat and the French Revolution

Kristy Hosack

On July 15, 1801, Napoleon Bonaparte and Pope Pius VII signed an agreement called the Concordat; this document influenced the relationship between church and state in France for the next century. The Concordat attempted to reconcile the religious conflicts that had plagued France since the beginning of the French Revolution in 1789. During the Liberal Phase of the Revolution from 1789 to 1792, the revolutionary governments took measures to reform the Roman Catholic Church and the relationship between church and state. The Civil Constitution of the Clergy of 1790 carried out many of these reforms by establishing the Constitutional Church. The principal accomplishments of the Liberal Phase of the Revolution included bringing the Church under state control, establishing religious tolerance, abolishing the privileges of the Church under the Ancien Régime, selling the Church's land to raise money for the state, and subjecting the selection of bishops to popular elections. Bonaparte's Concordat and the accompanying Organic Articles maintained the accomplishments of the Revolution's Liberal Phase through their provisions and stipulations. The Revolution became much more radical from 1793 to 1794, and the government in power completely abolished Catholicism; the government that followed this period, the Directory, legally separated church and state. While the later stages of the Revolution are important, the early phase of the Revolution is the main focus of this paper, as there are much stronger corollaries between its religious policies and those established by the Concordat. As a number of historians argue, the Concordat preserved the achievements of the Liberal Revolution because it maintained many of its most important accomplishments. Other historians, however, argue that the Concordat destroyed the gains of the early Revolution and even strengthened the Church at the expense of the state, but their principal arguments are unsubstantiated. Thus, while the Concordat did not preserve every single religious accomplishment of the Revolution, overall, it protected and maintained the religious decisions and achievements of the early revolutionaries.

Bonaparte recognized that it was important to end the religious conflicts in France and to establish peace within the country; after all, the relationship between the Church and the French state was almost nonexistent when he came to power. Bonaparte was not a religious man, but he was aware of the social role that religion played in society. He recognized that religion was an important way to achieve social stability. In this way, he and the leader of the government during the subsequent Radical Phase of the Revolution, Maximilian Robespierre, shared similar viewpoints, for Robespierre also understood the important social role that religion played. Robespierre himself was a deist, but he insisted on establishing a state religion, the Cult of the

Supreme Being, which would act as a social pacifier. However, whereas prior revolutionary leaders and governments were not successful in establishing a long-term, acceptable relationship between the Catholic Church and the French nation, Bonaparte achieved success because of his willingness to cooperate. Bonaparte was able to strike a balance between the two major camps of religious thought: radical anti-clericalism versus extreme loyalty to the Catholic Church. This ability to compromise allowed him to establish an agreement that remained in effect for more than a century.

Bonaparte and Pope Pius VII finalized the Concordat in 1815 after nearly a year of negotiations. The agreement recognized Catholicism as “the religion of the great majority of citizens,” and the clergy (the bishops and the parish priests) became employees of the state.¹ In addition, the Concordat permitted the establishment of seminaries, although the state would not fund them. The agreement also required all clergy to take an oath of loyalty to the government and to say prayers for the state at the end of each mass. Furthermore, the state received the power to appoint bishops, who subsequently were allowed to appoint the parish priests. The Concordat also included papal recognition and acceptance of the Church lands that had been confiscated by the state and sold during the Revolution. After Bonaparte’s government initially opposed the Concordat, he added a series of stipulations called the Organic Articles, which subjected the clergy to more restrictions and government supervision.

Historians are divided as to whether the Concordat and the Organic Articles upheld the laws and regulations established during the Revolution’s Liberal Phase. For example, many historians argue that the Concordat actually increased papal authority and influence in France, which the revolutionaries had tried to prevent. Historian Louis Madelin argues that the very fact that Bonaparte, as the head of a republic, consulted the Pope and included him in negotiations serves as proof of increased papal influence.² After all, the National Assembly did not consult the Pope when they crafted the Civil Constitution of the Clergy.

The reorganization of the episcopate is another area where some historians argue that papal influence was increased. Madelin argues that the Pope received an “astounding increase of authority” when Bonaparte gave him the right to dismiss the bishops that had been consecrated prior to the Revolution.³ Historian Robert B. Holtman also argues that this provision gave

¹ “The Concordat of 1801,” Concordat Watch, http://www.concordatwatch.eu/showkb.php?org_id=867&kb_header_id=826&order=kb_rank%20ASC&kbid=149, Preface.

² Louis Madelin, *The Consulate and the Empire 1789-1809* (New York: G. H. Putnam’s Sons, 1934), 120.

³ Ibid.

the Pope “more power over the clergy in France than he had ever held during the *ancien régime*, and more power over bishops.”⁴ To these historians, this power was significant because it set a precedent for further papal interference: if he could dismiss those bishops, then he might be able to dismiss others in the future and thus have a significant amount of influence over the Catholic Church in France. Historians such as David Laven and Lucy Riall also point to the fact that while Bonaparte appointed the new bishops, the Pope had the right to invest them with their spiritual authority, which gave the Pope a power he had not enjoyed before the French Revolution.⁵ In addition, Holtman notes that because the Concordat did not mention monastic orders, it effectively gave permission for new religious orders to be established that would owe “their allegiance to the Pope directly,” instead of to the French government; this further increased the Pope’s authority.⁶ Thus, historian Frank McLynn concludes that the “attempt by the Revolution to exclude the French Church from papal influence had manifestly failed.”⁷ Instead, McLynn argues, the Concordat established a precedent for further influence and interventions.⁸

McLynn also argues that the Concordat abandoned Revolutionary principles and accomplishments when it gave the state the authority to choose bishops, who would then choose the parish priests.⁹ After all, this was fundamentally different from the Constitutional Church under the Revolution, which had given the people the right to democratically elect their clergy. Historians such as Georges Lefebvre also assert that Bonaparte and the new bishops allowed counter-revolutionary clergy to dominate Church offices, given that the Concordat “did not specify any specially reserved places for the constitutional bishops.”¹⁰ Such historians argue that this conflicted with the fact that only Constitutional bishops had held Church posts during the Revolution, for the government had dismissed all counter-revolutionary bishops who had refused to swear an oath of obedience. Likewise, Madelin argues that by dismissing the bishops of the Constitutional Church and primarily replacing them with counter-revolutionary clergy, the Concordat

⁴ Robert B. Holtman, *The Napoleonic Revolution: Critical Periods of History* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1967), 133.

⁵ David Laven and Lucy Riall, *Napoleon’s Legacy: Problems of Government in Restoration Europe* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Berg Publishers, 2000), 219.

⁶ Holtman, *The Napoleonic Revolution*, 133.

⁷ Frank McLynn, *Napoleon: a Biography* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2002), 248.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 246-47.

¹⁰ Georges Lefebvre, *Napoleon: from 18 Brumaire to Tilsit, 1799-1807* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 139.

effectively abolished the Constitutional Church. Therefore, Madelin concludes that the Concordat did not preserve an important accomplishment of the Revolution.¹¹

On the other hand, there are also many historians who maintain that the Concordat preserved the gains of the Revolution. For example, historian Martyn Lyons argues that the Concordat conserved the principles of religious tolerance established by the early revolutionaries. He asserts that because the Concordat did not claim that Catholicism was the established religion of France, it firmly established the principle of religious tolerance by depriving the Catholic Church of its monopoly on religion.¹² In addition, by extending tolerance to Protestants, the Concordat “preserved the principle of religious toleration which the Revolution had established.”¹³ Historian Nigel Aston adds that the Concordat gave the Calvinists and Lutherans much more legal recognition, thereby preserving the policy of tolerance as a “lasting fruit of the Revolution.”¹⁴

Furthermore, Lyons emphasizes that in making the clergy salaried employees of the state, the Concordat fulfilled what “the Civil Constitution of the Clergy of 1790 had intended,” which was to bring the clergy under state control and reduce papal authority.¹⁵ Lyons asserts that because all bishops and approximately 35,000 parish priests would receive their salaries from the state, the government would have significant control over their actions. Historian David Jan Sorkin also points out that because the Concordat gave the state the right to appoint the bishops instead of the Pope, it “subjected the Church to even greater state supervision.”¹⁶ In addition, historians assert that the Organic Articles contributed to the reduction in papal authority, for the Articles limited the actions of the bishops and tightened the state’s control over the Church. Lyons argues that these Articles “amounted to a strengthening of centralised authority at the expense of the helpless Papacy.”¹⁷ In addition, Sorkin maintains that the Articles preserved the independence of

¹¹ Madelin, *The Consulate*, 130.

¹² Martyn Lyons, *Napoleon Bonaparte and the Legacy of the French Revolution* (London: The Macmillan Press LTD, 1994), 86.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Nigel Aston, *Religion and Revolution in France 1780-1804* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 330.

¹⁵ Lyons, *Napoleon*, 86.

¹⁶ David Jan Sorkin, *The Religious Enlightenment: Protestants, Jews, and Catholics from London to Vienna* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 308.

¹⁷ Lyons, *Napoleon*, 88;

the state from Church authority.¹⁸ Thus, according to these historians, the Concordat and its Articles significantly weakened the Pope's authority.

Furthermore, Lyons maintains that the Church did not regain its privileged status with the Concordat, which is what the early revolutionaries had wanted. First, the newly-drawn diocesan boundaries eliminated inequalities that had existed under the Ancien Régime and instead adhered to reason and rationality. As Lyons declares, under the Ancien Régime, "a few very rich bishoprics contrasted with a multitude of small and poorer ones," but because of the Concordat, these "inequalities had definitely disappeared."¹⁹ In addition, because the Church received no tax exemptions or special privileges, Lyons asserts that it no longer held a special position within the state and instead was subject to government control, "just as the National Assembly had intended."²⁰ Also, historians such as Susan P. Conner emphasize that the Concordat legalized the land transfers conducted during the Revolution, thereby adhering to "the principles of the Revolution" by eliminating a principle source of the Church's wealth.²¹

Thus, it is clear that significant controversy exists concerning the legacy of the Concordat. Although both camps of historians make compelling arguments, the Concordat did in fact preserve the accomplishments of the early revolutionaries.

The French Revolution acknowledged the right of the French people to participate in any religion that they wanted. At the beginning of the Revolution in 1789, the Declaration of Rights of Man established the principle of religious tolerance. The Declaration states that no one "may be disturbed for his opinions, even in religion," and the Constitution of 1791 included this guarantee.²² As historians Stewart Jay Brown and Timothy Tackett point out, by the end of 1789, Protestants had been granted complete political and civil rights.²³ For the most part, the Concordat upheld this legacy of tolerance. In fact, as historian Alexander Grab points out, Pope Pius VII wanted the Concordat to declare that Catholicism was the official religion of France, but Bonaparte refused to do so, "thereby preserving religious pluralism in

¹⁸ Sorkin, *The Religious Enlightenment*, 308.

¹⁹ Lyons, *Napoleon*, 92.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Susan P. Conner, *The Age of Napoleon* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004), 37.

²² Georges Lefebvre, *The Coming of the French Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 221.

²³ Stuart J. Brown and Timothy Tackett, *Enlightenment, Reawakening and Revolution 1660-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 543.

France.”²⁴ In addition, the Organic Articles attached to the Concordat also protected the rights of these two groups of Protestants; for example, the Articles forbade the Catholic clergy from insulting other religions.²⁵ This serves as further proof that the Concordat maintained the establishment of religious tolerance. While Bonaparte did not grant Jewish people religious tolerance with the Concordat, the early revolutionaries had not done so either. But, the Concordat did succeed in putting Lutheranism, the main religion that competed with Catholicism, on equal legal footing with the Catholic Church, and it did not grant the Pope a monopoly on religion in France. Thus, the Concordat fully implemented the Revolutionary principle of religious tolerance.

Another important gain of the French Revolution was the abolition of Church privilege and decadence. Under the Ancien Régime, the Church owned a large amount of land, was exempt from taxes, and collected tithes from all French citizens. However, the actions of the revolutionaries, such as abolishing the tithe on August 11, 1789 and selling some of the Church’s land, signaled that the historical inequalities were no longer acceptable. The Concordat maintained the Revolution’s abolition of privilege in several ways. First, it declared that while Catholics could make endowments to the Church if they desired to do so, tithing was not mandatory. While the stipulation was a compromise between the Ancien Régime and the Revolutionary government, it ultimately favored the Revolution because the French citizens now had the right to choose if they wished to tithe or not.

The Concordat also upheld another important Revolutionary gain concerning privilege: the sale of Church lands. On November 2, 1789, the National Assembly confiscated all income-producing Church lands and later sold the lands in order to raise money for the French state. While this was primarily done for financial reasons, it also reflected a desire to prevent the Church from maintaining inequitable economic privileges. Under the National Assembly, the Church no longer owned a significant portion of the land in France nor was it able to generate income from its land. The Concordat maintained this Revolutionary gain by declaring that neither the Pope nor his successors would “disturb in any manner those who have acquired alienated ecclesiastical possessions.”²⁶ Although Bonaparte promised to compensate the Church for its losses, he made it clear that the compensation would be nothing more than a small amount. Therefore it is true, as Lyons argues, that the

²⁴ Alexander Grab, *Napoleon and the Transformation of Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 44.

²⁵ “Organic Articles,” Concordat Watch, http://www.concordatwatch.eu/showkb.php?org_id=867&kb_header_id=826&order=kb_rank_ASC&kb_id=1524, Article 52.

²⁶ “The Concordat of 1801,” Article 13.

Church was now an institution that “enjoyed no special privileges.”²⁷ Thus, because the Concordat legalized and secured the sale of the Church lands, it protected one of the most important gains of the Revolution concerning Church privilege.

In addition, the Concordat followed the revolutionaries’ model of rational reconstruction of diocesan boundaries, which subsequently restricted inequalities of privilege within the Church itself. The National Assembly had redrawn the diocesan boundaries and had reduced the number of dioceses to 83, in accordance with the 83 newly created *departments*. The Concordat also adhered to the principle of rationality established by the Revolution and reorganized the diocesan boundaries even further, creating only 50 total dioceses. As Lyons asserts, because of this rational reorganization, the small number of wealthy bishoprics that had existed in the Ancien Régime were effectively eliminated.²⁸ Because of this reorganization, it was no longer possible for certain clergymen to enrich themselves simply because of the location or size of their bishopric. Thus, the privileges of certain clergymen were fully eliminated, thereby removing another source of inequality within the Church, as the liberal revolutionaries had intended.

The Concordat also upheld the Revolutionary ideal of limiting papal authority. The revolutionaries in France had given the state greater control over the Church and reduced the authority of Rome, for, as Lyons asserts, one of the essential components of the Revolution’s religious policies was “full government control over the French clergy” and the Church as a whole.²⁹ During the Revolution, this was accomplished primarily through the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. As historians Sidney Z. Ehler and John B. Morrall argue, “The clear aim of the Constitution was to cut off the French Church, for all practical purposes, from contact with Rome.”³⁰ The Civil Constitution of the Clergy provided for the citizens to elect their bishops and parish priests, and it also made the clergy employees of the government, which would pay their salaries. The Constitution greatly reduced the Pope’s authority, for he no longer had any say in the selection of the clergy. The state would maintain complete control of the Church, for, as Lefebvre argues, “[f]ar from planning to separate Church and state, [the revolutionaries] dreamed of bringing the two more closely together.”³¹ The Concordat accomplished this goal in several ways; for example, the Concordat gave the state the authority to name the bishops

²⁷ Lyons, *Napoleon*, 92.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 79.

³⁰ Sydney Z. Ehler and John B. Morrall, *Church and State Through the Centuries* (Cheshire, CT: Biblo and Tannen Booksellers and Publishers Inc., 1988), 238.

³¹ Lefebvre, *Napoleon*, 161.

instead of the Pope, whose only role in the matter would be to sanctify the nominees. The Concordat also mandated that the state pay the salaries of the clergy, which effectively made all clergymen state employees, and therefore subject to state authority. Because clergymen were to receive their pay and in many cases, their appointments, from the state, they had no choice but to be obedient and loyal to Bonaparte and his government instead of to the Pope.

Equally important in reducing papal authority were the Organic Articles that Bonaparte added to the Concordat, which undeniably strengthened “secular authority over the clergy,” as Lyons asserts.³² Among other provisions, the Articles mandated that no papal bull be published without the government’s permission, that any representatives of the Pope visiting France had to get the consent of the French government before they could perform their duties, and that no French bishops could leave their dioceses without permission from the government. The Articles even required state approval in order to establish the dates of religious holidays. Aston argues that Bonaparte “had no intention of allowing the Pope to assume a greater status in the post-Concordat order than he had possessed before 1790,” and that the Organic Articles made it clear that “the state would have the final word, ... leaving the clergy dependent on the government.”³³ Indeed, the Articles placed authority over the Church firmly in the hands of the state, for the Church could hardly do a thing without clear approval from the government. This meant that the state, represented by Bonaparte, would be able to always know what the Church was doing and would have a legal way to interfere if he did not like the Church’s actions or decisions.

However, other historians disagree, and instead argue that the Concordat actually strengthened papal authority and influence in France. They argue that because the Pope had the right to dismiss the current bishops and because he was also trusted with investing the bishops appointed by Bonaparte with their spiritual authority, the power of the Papacy was increased. They also cite the monastic orders and assert that these fell under the sole jurisdiction of the Pope, given that the Concordat does not mention them at all. However, with the exception of the monastic orders, these are arguments that support the claim that the power of the Papacy increased *symbolically*. After all, the Pope received no practical gains from dismissing the bishops, nor did he acquire any real power from endowing the clergy with their spiritual authority. Lyons also points out that the French bishops were not willing to grant the Pope more authority, for they were increasingly “jealous of papal encroachments on their powers” and even argued that they received their authority “directly from God,” not the Pope.³⁴ Thus, even had the Concordat

³² Lyons, *Napoleon*, 88.

³³ Aston, *Religion*, 329.

³⁴ Lyons, *Napoleon*, 87.

not reduced papal authority, it is arguable that the bishops would have done so themselves, for they were determined to guard their own power and not let the Pope exert too much influence over them and their dioceses. Also, even though historians like McLynn argue that the Pope now had a precedent for dismissing bishops or otherwise interfering in the future, I would argue that this is not true. Unique circumstances compelled Bonaparte to allow the Pope to exercise this power. The pope only had the right to dismiss that particular group of bishops, for Bonaparte did not allow further papal intervention in the future. In addition, the fact that the Pope had influence over the monastic orders is not significant. After all, the monastic orders played no important role in society, for Bonaparte had removed their influence in education with the creation of his own schools, the lycées. Thus, despite these arguments, it is still clear that the Concordat reduced papal influence.

In addition, historians such as Madelin, Holtman, and McLynn believe that the Concordat's method of appointing new bishops did not coincide with the revolutionaries' treatment of the bishops. They argue that the dismissal of the current Constitutional bishops and the installation of bishops with a wide range of political beliefs contradicted the Revolution's practice of only accepting clergy who were in favor of the Revolution. However, I would argue that the policies established by the Concordat did not completely break away from this practice. In fact, according to historian Frank J. Coppa, Bonaparte nominated sixteen bishops from the Ancien Régime, twelve from the Constitutional Church, and thirty-two unaffiliated priests. As Coppa argues, this shows that Bonaparte "selected his new hierarchy in accordance with his principals of amalgamation to avoid the appearance of favoring any party."³⁵ That is, Bonaparte did not favor one group of priests over another. Coppa also asserts that Bonaparte compelled the new bishops to reserve a number of positions, such as canons, vicar-generals, pastors, and curates, for constitutional clergy.³⁶ Therefore, while the Concordat allowed non-Constitutional priests to serve and thus did not fully preserve an important Revolutionary tradition, Bonaparte made up for it by not favoring one clerical position over the other in his choice of clergy.

Another gain of the Revolution that the Concordat arguably did not preserve was the popular election of priests and bishops. The revolutionaries of the Liberal Phase allowed French citizens to choose their own bishops and parish priests through a series of elections, thus maintaining, as Malcolm Crook asserts, the early revolutionaries' "passionate advocacy of popular

³⁵ Frank J. Coppa, *Controversial Concordats: The Vatican's Relations with Napoleon, Mussolini, and Hitler* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1999), 49.

³⁶ Ibid.

participation.”³⁷ In contrast to this democratic procedure, the Concordat gave the state the right to choose the bishops, who would then select the priests. As historians such as Frank McLynn and Georges Lefebvre argue, the Concordat thus destroyed a fundamentally democratic aspect of the Revolution, for it gave the state the right to make decisions instead of the French citizens. However, as Crook points out in his recent study, the election of priests during the early Revolution actually took place in two stages. Nearly everyone got to vote in the first phase, but in order to qualify for the second stage, voters had to meet certain fiscal requirements, such as having paid taxes that were the equivalent of ten days’ wages.³⁸ Thus, as Crook argues, “the electoral colleges were composed of members of the wealthy elites,” instead of average citizens.³⁹ Therefore, instead of being a democratic process, the voting procedures were actually highly selective and exclusionary, at the expense of the common people that McLynn and other historians think were enfranchised during the early Revolution. In that regard, the Concordat did not infringe upon the revolutionary democratic tradition. In addition, I would argue that democracy and popular participation were not the principal goals of the early revolutionaries, and that empowering the state at the expense of the Church was more important to them. In this regard, giving the state, although represented by Napoleon, the right to choose the bishops achieved this goal, even though democracy might have suffered.

Thus, the Concordat was neither purely revolutionary nor completely influenced by the Ancien Régime. Ultimately, however, the Concordat preserved most of the accomplishments achieved by the revolutionaries of the Liberal Phase of the French Revolution. Even though some historians argue that the Concordat did not uphold the Revolution and argue, for example, that it increased papal authority or abolished revolutionary gains, their arguments are not valid. On the other hand, other historians assert that the Concordat’s provisions did, in fact, maintain the accomplishments and the spirit of the early revolutionaries, and it is these historians who have stronger arguments. After all, both the Concordat and the Liberal Phase of the Revolution increased state authority at the expense of the Church, supported the principle of religious tolerance, and diminished the privileges and inequitable wealth of the Church. Thus, the Concordat effectively preserved the gains of the Liberal Phase of the Revolution and upheld its principals and ideals.

³⁷ Malcolm Crook, “Citizen Bishops: Episcopal Elections in the French Revolution,” *The Historical Journal*, 43, no. 4 (December 2000) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3020875?cookieSet=1>, 957.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 958.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

