

Lamennais, Hugues Félicité (François) Robert de



Rudolf Uertz

Faculty of History and Social Sciences, Catholic
University Eichstätt/Ingolstadt, Bonn, Germany

Hugues Félicité Robert Lamennais

Hugues Félicité Robert Lamennais (de Lamennais, or de La Mennais; June 19, 1782, Saint Malo/Bretagne – February 27, 1854, Paris) was a Catholic priest and theological as well as political writer. Lamennais, whose Father was a shipowner ennobled by Louis XVI, was ordained priest in 1816. In the spirit of the traditionalism of Joseph de Maistre (*Du pape*, Paris 1819), as a teacher and writer he initially attacked Gallicanism, a complex of French ecclesiastical and political doctrines and practices advocating restriction of papal power (*Essai sur l'indifférence en matière de religion*, 4 vol. Paris 1817–1823; *Défense de l'essai*, Paris 1821; *De la religion considérée dans ses rapports avec l'ordre politique et civil*, Paris 1825). In 1830, he founded the journal *L'Avenir*, whose campaign for freedom of belief and conscience soon made it the voice of liberal Catholicism in France (cf. Editors).¹

Introduction

In 1830, Belgian Catholics and Liberals had together adopted a constitution that declared the separation of church and state. The constitutional efforts of the Catholics in Belgium, Ireland, and Poland helped convince Hugues Félicité Lamennais to give up his traditionalist demands in favor of liberal and democratic ones, which he defended in the journal *L'Avenir* along with Charles de Montalembert and Henry-Dominique Lacordaire (cf. Uertz 2005, pp. 49ff., 91ff.).

The hatred of the Breton priest for the Bourbon monarchy had intensified, but he was even more decisive in his struggle against the government of the “citizen king” Louis Philippe, whom he accused of failing to comply with the liberal principles of the Charter of 1814, which ostensibly formed the basis of the regime. Lamennais recognized that the new order with its constitutional foundation had definitively disposed of Gallicanism, meaning that the Church could expect nothing more from an alliance with the monarchy. He now became a staunch defender of the alliance between democracy and the Church, so that H Maier might say that if Lamennais in his traditionalist period had tried to Christianize the monarchy, he was now trying to Christianize democracy (cf. Maier 1969, chap III.1). The theologian recognized that given the rise of democracy across Europe, the rights and security of the Church could only be guaranteed by enshrining the freedom of conscience, of education, of the press, and

¹This essay is a revised removal of my article: Uertz (2011), pp. 55–76.

of association in the constitution – an insight that logically culminated in a call for the separation of church and state.

In the encyclical *Mirari vos* (1832), Gregory XVI expresses his joy and gratitude to God, who, “having overthrown all enemies, snatched Us from the present danger,” in an allusion to the restoration movements gaining momentum throughout Europe (cf. *Mirari vos*: On Liberalism and Religious Indifferentism, 1832, www.papalencyclicals.net/popelist). At the same time, the Pope shows great concern about “the insolent and factious men who endeavored to raise the standard of treason.” The pontiff is here evidently referring to the teachings of Lamennais, which were now even threatening the Church from within (Gregory XVI’s predecessor Leo XII, 1823–1829, held Lamennais in high regard and even wanted to appoint him cardinal; cf. Schmidlin 1933, p. 404.)

“The Restoration of Church Discipline”

The style and the core arguments of the encyclical are similar in many ways to the *Quod aliquantum* brief (cf. *Quod aliquantum*: The Church in the secular state, 1791, of Pius VI, www.papalencyclicals.net/popelist). Like his predecessor Pius VI, Gregory XVI regarded liberal and democratic ideas – in their foundations as well as in the demands they made on politics, culture, and the Church – as completely incompatible with Catholic doctrine. Thus *Mirari vos* is also primarily concerned with defending Catholic truths, which, it goes without saying, include the religious and moral foundation of the polity. For the pontiff, a *Christian monarchy* is the only appropriate form of organization. His criticism of liberal Catholic ideas is of a piece with his worry about the decline of church-mindedness. *Mirari vos* calls for the restoration of church discipline, observance of the Church’s teachings on the sacraments and morality, respect for Church law and the tenets of natural law, as well as the subordination to the Church’s magisterium, particularly to the Pope. The encyclical describes the approaching conflict as a battle between the “powers of darkness” and the defenders of the true

Christian faith, which it is the Pope’s God-given responsibility to guard over. “Depravity exults; science is impudent; liberty, dissolute,” writes Gregory. He laments the battle against “the divine authority of the Church” and its subjection “to human reason,” the hostility toward the See of Peter, the refusal to obey the bishops, the “tremendous blow [...] dealt to religion and the perversion of morals,” and, last but not least, “the heretical societies and sects in which all that is sacrilegious, infamous, and blasphemous has gathered as bilge water in a ship’s hold, a congealed mass of all filth” (Cf. *Mirari vos*).

The Condemnation of “Indifferentism”

The innovators’ demand for the separation of church and state, argues the Pope, is aimed at the heart of Catholic doctrinal theology and moral teaching. For Gregory, the disregard of these teachings and the breakdown of discipline are logical consequences of the “indifferentism” in matters of faith. He condemns democratic liberties as well as the freedom of religion and of speech as ideas profoundly opposed to the Catholic faith.

A strictly secular polity, the Pope argues, is a contradiction in itself. *Freedom cannot* and should not *claim priority over the truth*, since it is not bound by reason and its interpretation is not guided by Catholic doctrine (This view was maintained as part of the Catholic theory of the state until the end of Pius XII’s papacy, 1939–1958). Gregory thus rejects the core demand inherent in Lamennais’ liberal Catholic ideas, namely that of religious freedom, and counters with the notion of the *religious state*, which alone could provide the necessary protection and supportive legal framework to the Church and the papacy. Only in this way could the *Catholic truth* with its broad societal and political claims and admonitions assert itself on the public stage. Referencing “the admonition of the apostle” Paul, Gregory strongly urges his readers to remember the supreme authority of God and condemns all resistance against the human authorities.

The Ideas of 1789 in the Tradition of the Reformation

Much like the papal brief of 1791, *Mirari vos* associates the ideas it condemns with “the infamous and wild plans of the Waldensians, the Beghards, the Wycliffites, and other such sons of Belial, who were the sores and disgrace of the human race” and who, like Luther, “received a richly deserved anathema from the Holy See” (cf. *Mirari vos*). The encyclical’s criticism is clearly aimed at Protestantism, whose doctrine of conscience (the emphasis on the individual person’s conscience) encouraged the principle of the autonomy of culture, which in the *absurd demands for freedom* (separation of church and state, freedom of conscience, religion, and speech, refusal to obey the rightful rulers, etc.) had found its logical political conclusion.

Gregory XVI was thus advocating a traditionalist foundation for the political order and the law, according to which religion comprises not only the moral but also the political norms for the protection and preservation of the monarchical polity, including lawful obedience to the ruler. *L’Avenir*’s program, on the contrary, with its demand for the freedom of conscience and of religion, left the Christian obedience of faith and of the law up to the individual – thereby, in the eyes of the Pope, striking at the very heart of Christian morality. Because of its basic traditionalist theological premise, the condemnation of *indifferentism* – in the language of *Mirari vos*, the view that “it is possible to obtain the eternal salvation of the soul by the profession of any kind of religion” – was necessarily accompanied by a condemnation of a polity neutral in matters of religion. Although the document does distinguish between religious and natural morality, they nevertheless are seen as forming an insoluble unity. The historian R. Aubert conclude from the ecclesiastical point of view that a religiously indifferent community would thus negate its own foundations and become an immoral community (cf. Aubert, p. 341f.).

For the Austrian Chancellor of State Klemens Prince von Metternich, who feared the liberal demands of the French abbot would galvanize the cabinets of the Catholic powers along with the ecclesiastical and secular supporters of the

Restoration, *Mirari vos*’ condemnation of Lamennais did not go far enough. L. Ahrens edited the correspondence between Metternich and the Roman embassy concerning Lamennais, and she write: Metternich “was extremely annoyed and did not neglect to alert Rome on this question and to insist that a new, more clearly worded statement would be appropriate”. (HA Kissinger point out the concert of the European monarchies including the Papal State and analyses the system of Metternich; cf. Kissinger, chap XI.) The desire for a more decisive condemnation was due in no small part to Lamennais’ influence on the Belgian Catholics. The Belgians found themselves in a difficult situation because their democratic constitution of 1830, which had also been approved by the Belgian bishops, was increasingly serving as a basis for practical and political action. The bishops, nevertheless, showed “no concern whatsoever,” since they assumed “that declarations of principles regarding an ideal regime did not affect the constitution, which, after all, was a civil and not a theological agreement” (cf. Aubert, pp. 342ff.). Neither did Gregory XVI, in fact, want *Mirari vos* to come across as a condemnation of the Belgian constitution. He did consider the latter to be incompatible with theological and canonical principles, particularly the Catholic religion’s entitlement to special protection; nevertheless he was prepared to “accept, in certain extraordinary cases, a regime that tolerates the modern liberties, on condition that the basic rights of the Church are not violated.” No doubt the rationale behind this was the moral and theological maxim of the *toleration* of the democratic, denominationally diverse state as a “lesser evil,” which Leo XIII would later make into a basic principle of the Catholic theory of the state (cf. *Immortale Dei: On the Christian Constitution of States*, 1885, of Leo XIII, No. 36, www.papalencyclicals.net/popelist).

The Condemnation of Lamennais by Name

Gregory XVI was not willing to admit a fundamental and rule-governed separation of church and state as intended by Lamennais, “since he

held the view that the call to revolt against the established authorities called into question moral and religious principles.” By legitimizing the monarchical order as deriving from the God-given rights of kings, Gregory XVI was unmistakably making use of traditionalist legal theory and thus implicitly denying principles of natural law such as the scholastic doctrine of popular sovereignty.

Although after the appearance of *Mirari vos* Lamennais declared himself prepared to submit to the demands of the Holy See “in questions of faith, morality, and church discipline,” in the same breath he insisted “on the right, even after the encyclical, to exercise complete freedom of judgment and action in the political sphere.” The theory of society (a Theory of Common Sense) he lays out in his *Paroles d'un croyant* (1833) is completely devoid of theistic justification. “In 41 apocalyptic visions,” the book paints “a picture of the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth. If Christianity in *L'Avenir* was the motor and principle of humanity's progress into a new future, in the *Paroles* it is the ‘principle of social and political revolution’ that will bring about the Kingdom of God. This Kingdom of God was to restore the natural equality, freedom, and brotherliness among men,” after they had been lost due to being led astray by Satan and by those men who were sons of Satan (cf. Valerius 1983, p. 21). On June 25, 1834, in the encyclical *Singulari nos*, Gregory XVI explicitly condemned Lamennais’ *Paroles* (On the “Errors” of Lamennais cf. *Singulari nos*, www.papalencyclicals.net/popelist).

Conclusion

Lamennais can be credited with being the first Catholic theorist to draw up a body of principles justifying from a Christian perspective a constitutional order that includes basic liberal rights and the separation of church and state. Lamennais’ students and comrades-in-arms, Jean Baptiste Henri Dominique Lacordaire (1802–1861) and Charles Forbes René de Montalembert (1810–1870), took his ideas in a more moderate

direction, without adopting all of his political and theological premises.

The Catholic Church continued to look to traditionalism – the theory rooted in historical law (customary law) – as its strongest support in its struggle against liberal principles of order, which it saw as being opposed to traditional Church dogma and moral teachings. Legitimism was justified theologically by appealing to the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Romans: “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves” (cf. Romans 13:1–7).

One of the essential reasons the Popes held into traditionalism and that it continued to be upheld by the official Catholic doctrine of the state was the existence of the Papal State (756–1870), whose supporting pillar was *historical law*. Historical law was also the driving force at the Congress of Vienna in 1814–1815 and the basis for the restoration of the European monarchies. But Lamennais subsequently, as writes B Cook, “applauded the revolutions in Belgium in 1830, where his ideas had gained popularity and where an alliance between Catholics and liberals had been effected,” and in Poland and Ireland (cf. Cook).

Cross-References

- Christianity and Political Ideologies
- Gallicanism
- Liberal Catholicism
- Separation of Church and State
- Traditionalism

References

- Ahrens L (1930) Lamennais und Deutschland. Studien zur Geschichte der Französischen Restauration. Helios, Münster
- Aubert R (1985) Die erste Phase des katholischen Liberalismus. In: Jedin H (ed) Handbuch der Kirchengeschichte, vol VI/1. Herder, Freiburg i. Br.

- Cook B (2004) Lamennais, Hugues-Félicité Robert de. In: Chastain JG (ed) *Encyclopedia of 1848 revolutions*, Columbus. Available at <https://www.ohio.edu/chastain/ip/lamann.htm>
- Editors (2019) Félicité Lamennais. In: *Encyclopaedia Britannica online*. Available at <http://www.eb.com/>
- Kissinger HA (1999) *A world restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the problems of peace 1812–1822*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London
- Lamennais FR (1895) *Essay on indifference in matters of religion* (trans: Stanley HEJ). John Macqueen, London (Reprint: Forgotten Books 2018)
- Maier H (1969) *Revolution and church. The early history of Christian democracy, 1789–1901* (trans: Schossberger EM). University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame/London
- Milbach S, Lebrun RA (eds) (2018) *Lamennais: A believer's revolutionary politics* (trans: Lebrun RA, Ryan J). Brill. Leiden/Boston
- Schmidlin J (1933) *Papstgeschichte der neuesten Zeit*, vol 1. Kösel & Pustet, München
- Uertz R (2005) *Vom Gottesrecht zum Menschenrecht. Das katholische Staatsdenken in Deutschland von der Französischen Revolution bis zum II. Vatikanischen Konzil (1789–1965)*. Ferdinand Schöningh, Paderborn. Available at <https://opacplus.bsb-muenchen.de/metaopac/search?View=default&db=100&id=BV019366026?page=1>
- Uertz R (2011) *The Catholic Church after the French revolution (1789–1848)*. In: Schmidt P, Dorsch S, Herold-Schmidt H (eds) *Religiosidad y Clero en América Latina – Religiosity and clergy in Latin America (1767–1850)*. *La Época de las Revoluciones Atlánticas – the age of the Atlantic revolutions* (trans: Hyatt M). Böhlau, Köln, pp 55–76
- Valerius G (1983) *Deutscher Katholizismus und Lamennais*. Matthias Grünewald, Mainz