Religion and the Reign of Terror, Or, the Church During the French Revolution

Pressensé Edmond De
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Author: Pressensé Edmond De

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RELIGION
AND THE
REIGN OF TERROR;
or,
THE CHURCH DURING THE FRENCH REVOLUTION.

PREPARED FROM THE FRENCH OF
M. EDMOND DE PRESSENSE,
Author of "Histoire des trois premiers siècles de l'Église Chrétienne," "Jésus-Christ, son temps, sa vie, son œuvre;" "Le Pays de l'Évangile," and Editor of "La Revue Chrétienne."

BY REV. JOHN P. LACROIX, A.M.

God is as necessary as liberty to the French people.—MIRABEAU.
Free Church—free State.—CAVOUR.

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LETTER OF AUTHORIZATION.

[TRANSLATION.]

PARIS, November 30, 1866.

PROFESSOR JOHN P. LACROIX:

MY DEAR SIR,—I give you with true pleasure the authorization which you ask of me for translating my book entitled "The Church and the Revolution."*

Sincerely yours in Christ,

E. DE PRESSÉNÉ.

* The full title of the work is L'Église et La Révolution française; Histoire des Relations de l'Église et de l'État de 1789 à 1802.
PREFACE TO THE ABRIDGMENT.

The book here presented to the American reader is, in the main, an abridgment of a work, recently published in Paris, by the distinguished Protestant divine M. Edmond de Pressensé, the object of which is to describe, from an enlightened Christian stand-point, the vicissitudes of religion and its relations to the civil power in France, during the eventful years from 1789 to 1802. Some of the motives which have influenced me in its preparation in English are the following: The intrinsic general interest of the subject; its special interest for Americans; the peculiar stand-point and personal qualifications of the author; and, finally, the careful criticisms of the religious character of certain world-historical personages, to which the nature of the work naturally leads.

Of the general interest of whatever throws light on this great revolutionary crisis of humanity, I need scarcely speak. Of the crisis itself Mr. Alison uses these words: "There are few periods in the history of the world which can be compared, in point of interest and importance, to that which embraces the progress and
termination of the French Revolution. In no former age were events of such magnitude crowded together, or interests so momentous at issue between contending nations. From the flame which was kindled in Europe, the whole world has been involved in conflagration, and a new era dawned upon both hemispheres from the effects of its expansion. With the first rise of a free spirit in France, the liberty of North America was established.” Mr. Jones, the continuator of Russell’s history, speaks in similar terms. “We are now brought,” says he, “to enter upon a subject of such fearful magnitude, so portentous in its origin, and terrific in its consequences, that the annals of the human race scarcely present us with its parallel. The French Revolution introduced a new state of society in Europe.” A standard German encyclopedia speaks as follows: “The French Revolution constitutes one of the grandest epochs in the history of human society. He who regards it as a mere incidental event has not examined the past, and is unable to look into the future. It is an event which came forth out of the womb of the centuries. So judges Madame de Staël; and she is right.” M. Michelet says: “I define the Revolution as the advent of Law, the resurrection of Right, and the reaction of Justice. I see upon the stage but two grand facts, two principles, two actors, and two characters—Christianity and the Revolution. The Convocation of the States-General, in 1789, is the
true era of the birth of the people. On the eve of the opening of the States-General the mass of the Holy Ghost was solemnly said at Versailles. It was certainly that day, or never, that the people might sing the prophetic hymn: *Thou wilt create peoples, and the face of the earth shall be renewed.* Such is the general manner in which this event is spoken of both by the friends and the enemies of France. The merit of M. de Pressensé's book is, that it presents an exhaustive view of one of the special phases of this Revolution, namely, the religious—a phase which, though among the most important, has yet had the misfortune either of being treated with neglect, or of being perverted and distorted by skeptics, to the prejudice of Christianity.

The special interest of the French Revolution for republicans lies in the nature of the interests that were at stake. It was, on the one hand, a struggle of liberty against absolutism, free thought against spiritual despotism; and, on the other, of Christianity against a godless philosophy; it was, therefore, a struggle in the interest of the very principles which lie at the basis of American greatness. But the great Revolution made shipwreck: the name of liberty was tarnished by the most atrocious crimes; Christianity seemed for a moment to have gone down in a night of blood and delirium, amid the triumphant orgies of a foul-mouthed Atheism; and, finally, political liberty was trampled in the dust, and forced to
give place to the most absolute of despotisms. How
came this to be the result? Why did the principles
which have succeeded so well in America meet only with
disaster and failure in France? The question is inter-
esting. For more than half a century the political and
spiritual despots of Europe have been using the excesses
of the French Revolution as a bugbear to frighten their
ministers and subjects from every effort in favor of
liberty and Church reform. "Unless you desire to
renew the horrors of the reign of terror, and to be
subject to the disgusting domination of an unwashed
mob, do not limit the authority of your legitimate rulers;
unless you wish the extinction of religion, and the tri-
umph of vice and Atheism, do not question the preten-
sions of your priests, or presume to suppose that the
Church can exist without being salaried and governed
by the State." And, unfortunately, this argument has
too often succeeded, to the detriment of enlightened lib-
eralism. To the too common excessive censure of the
French Revolution, and especially to the prejudices
thereby created against the causes of liberty and free-
churchism, the book of M. de Pressensé is a sufficient
and convincing reply. These holy causes of liberty and
free-churchism are triumphantly vindicated, and the true
cause of the miscarriage of the Revolution assigned,
namely, a radical misconception as to the extent to
which a government may legitimately interfere with per-