

The Catholic nobility's commitment to *écoles libres* in France, 1850–1905

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ABSTRACT

In France the Falloux Law of 1850 set out the distinction between state-run public schools and *écoles libres* maintained by individuals or associations. This article argues that Catholic nobles' historic property-based and charitable ties with rural communities underpinned their foundation of *écoles libres*. Drawing upon the private archives of noble families the article shows how networking between aristocratic laity and religious orders facilitated the running of these schools. Nobles' determination to guard a reputation for charitable patronage, especially in the locality of their landed estate, meant they were impelled to invest financially in *écoles libres* when it made no practical sense to do so. From 1879 successive governments of the Third Republic introduced secularizing legislation that clashed with the aims of Catholic school founders. Even when taken to court for breaking republican laws nobles, nuns, and monks remained passionately committed to upholding the culture of Christian faith within education.

KEYWORDS: Catholicism, *liberté*, nobility, religious orders, republic, schools, secularism

On 2 May 1903 in the village of Bey-sur-Seille (Meurthe-et-Moselle) parents, children, and nuns gathered to mark the twentieth anniversary of an *école libre* for the primary education of girls. Antoine de Metz-Noblat (1850–1914), the school's founder, gave a speech in which he recounted the advice of his friend, “a monk with missionary zeal”, who in the late 1870s had discussed with him the republicans' rising political power in France. The monk told Antoine: “There are three things that one must not say: [the republicans] will not dare; [the regime] shall not last; nothing can be done.”¹

To Antoine, the monk's words resonated all the more powerfully in retrospect. Since 1879 successive republican governments had pushed through legislation to

promote *laïcité*. The republicans introduced free, compulsory state primary schooling (1880–82); banned clerics and members of religious orders from teaching posts and education committees (1880, 1886, 1904); reinstated divorce (1884); and passed the Law on Associations (1901) that required religious orders to obtain government authorization or be forcibly dissolved. Anticlericalism intensified as a result of the Dreyfus Affair during the 1890s; then, in 1905, the law was passed for the Separation of Church and State.² Although politically turbulent, the Third Republic seemed destined to last.

Within this context, French Catholics were far from accepting that there was nothing to be done. Pope Leo XIII's directive for *ralliement* to the Republic convinced some Catholics to adopt a conciliatory attitude toward the regime. Other Catholics, galvanized by the government's blows against the Church, decided to counter-attack by developing strategies to offset the secularizing policies. Opposition to those policies was aided by the buoyant profile of the Catholic Church in France. A shift in theological messages "from a God of fear to a God of love", the cult of Marian devotion, and the rise in the numbers of female religious orders signaled a "feminization" of the Church and clerical commitment to increase the numbers of practicing faithful.³ The vibrancy of nineteenth-century lay Catholicism was evidenced in pilgrimages to Lourdes, charity work by the well-to-do, the cult of the Sacred Heart, and the formation of Catholic women's organizations that counted hundreds of thousands of members by 1914.⁴

This article examines the particular role played by Catholic nobility in efforts to protect religious-based education within *écoles libres* during the second half of the

nineteenth century. The definition of *écoles libres* and the conditions under which these schools could legally operate were set out in the Falloux Law of 15 March 1850. This law, which divided ecclesiastical opinion at the time, provided a significant boost for the Catholic Church in the education sector.⁵ It enabled nuns and monks to open schools without a teaching diploma, which in turn led to increases in the numbers of establishments run by congregations. According to article 17 of the Falloux Law: “The schools that are established and maintained by communes, departments, or the state are called public schools. The schools that are established and maintained by individuals or associations are called *écoles libres*.” By applying the adjective *libre* to any school that was not public, the legislators of 1850 aligned the definition in article 17 with the principle of *la liberté de l’enseignement*. Previously, under the Guizot Law of 28 June 1833, the term *école privée* had been used for primary schools that were not public establishments.⁶

The principle of *la liberté de l’enseignement* is fundamental to the modern French system of education for it relates closely to article 10 of the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen: “No one should be disturbed on account of his opinion, even religious, provided their manifestation does not upset the public order established by law.” In 1791 the marquis de Condorcet wrote of the necessity to uphold this principle for the good of society, and throughout the nineteenth century *la liberté de l’enseignement* was repeatedly raised in debates over education policy.⁷ Louis Grimaud first detailed this history from the late eighteenth century through to 1848. Sylvain

Milbach has recently published a further in-depth study of the political campaign for *la liberté de l'enseignement* during 1830–1850.⁸

At the center of Milbach's analysis is a group of upper class lay men from "the first generation of Catholics who invoked God and Liberty" to stimulate reform to secondary schooling through parliamentary oratory and journalism. The political struggle to formulate educational policy in the 1840s, accompanied by efforts to build a Catholic party, exposed contradictory positions among religious leaders and led to the negotiated settlement in the Falloux Law. In an epilogue on the passing of the law Milbach suggests "the curtain can fall" on this generation of clerical and lay figures among which the diversity of Catholic perspectives on education made political unity elusive.⁹

This article takes up Milbach's closing point that a new history is needed to show how the campaign spearheaded by male notables during the July Monarchy and Second Republic provided a basis for Catholic activities stretching into the second half of the nineteenth century. My approach to the topic of *la liberté de l'enseignement* complements and differs from that of Milbach in two main respects. First, this article focuses on grassroots initiatives for primary education in rural France, thereby decentering attention away from parliamentary chambers in the capital. Key players in Milbach's study like the comte Charles de Montalembert and Louis Veillot influenced the thinking of Catholics beyond the 1840s, so where possible personal links and responses to the "first generation" are flagged.¹⁰ The second difference stems from my concern to integrate female and male experiences so that the history of *la liberté de*

l'enseignement is inclusive of the roles played by upper class lay women and men. Like my earlier work, this article draws on the private archives produced by nobility.¹¹ By presenting new research in collections of noble family papers that were not previously classed or consulted for my book, the article highlights a widening empirical base of archival material dispersed in provincial depots.¹²

Catholic noblewomen and noblemen founded *écoles libres* because of their families' historic property-based and charitable ties with rural communities. Networking between nobles and religious orders facilitated the day-to-day running of these schools. The extensive contributions made by nineteenth-century nobles to increase the availability of schooling in rural areas has been overlooked by modern historians because of a tendency to focus on the role of the state in the education sector. There has been much excellent scholarship about teacher training and curricula for public schools in France.¹³ Less common in the historiography are studies of how rural *écoles libres* functioned or what kinds of resources they had at their disposal in the period from 1850 to 1905.¹⁴ Various other non-public forms of education, including Jesuit colleges and the lessons that noble and bourgeois children received in the home, have been investigated.¹⁵ The strong emphasis on religion in these latter forms of education, catering mostly to elites, helps to explain the adult activism of the aristocratic founders of rural *écoles libres* who were concerned about declining levels of religiosity and difficulties of access to schooling among the poor.

Most of the Catholic nobility who were active in founding schools did not command national media attention, unlike those elected lay men who debated in

parliament.¹⁶ Their activism, while nourished by news emanating from Paris, was concentrated at the rural communal level. State-employed republican prefects, who were opposed to the continuing presence of religious orders in communes, took a very negative view of these lay Catholic activists. In reports for the departments of Gers and Tarn-et-Garonne, the prefects complained about the support (including financial assistance) that nuns received from well-to-do residents, especially widows or female heirs.¹⁷ After 1880 religious congregations were forced to re-orientate their activity away from teaching toward hospital work, and to multiply missions abroad, whilst reluctantly accepting the secularization of some members to continue work in schools.¹⁸ The experiences of nuns and monks who remained passionately committed to teaching are revealed in this article through their personal correspondence with nobles.

For documentation and analysis the article draws on records relating to four schools in three departments to illustrate patterns of aristocratic foundation replicated in other departments. Case studies are introduced in the following order to examine developments by timing and theme (rather than geographical variation). The *École des Petits Frères de Marie* at La Verdière (Var) opened in 1852 and received boy pupils from the age of seven. The *École des Soeurs de la Sainte Enfance de Marie* at Bey-sur-Seille (Meurthe-et-Moselle) opened in 1882 and received girl pupils from the age of seven. The *École des Soeurs de Saint Paul de Chartres* at Le Mée (Eure-et-Loir), originally an *école privée*, was on the cusp of changing legal status to an *école libre* in 1900 and received girl pupils. The *École des Soeurs de la Sainte Enfance de Digne*, at La Verdière (Var), opened in 1897, was a pre-school for girls and boys aged three to seven. Records

for these schools are conserved in the private archives of the Metz-Noblat family; the private archives of the Forbin family; and the private archives of the Lévis Mirepoix family.¹⁹

The four schools were located in areas that were culturally distinct and distant from one another. The department of Var in Provence exhibited a strong nineteenth-century republican tradition rooted in Provençal working-class sociability.²⁰ The department of Meurthe-et-Moselle in Lorraine was very different for it lies close to the Franco-German border. Popularly known as the “*vieille terre de Catholicisme*” Lorraine has a complex religious history informed by popular mysticism, especially witchcraft, and proximity to the cities of Strasbourg and Freiburg that were important centers for the growth of Protestantism during the Reformation.²¹ The department of Eure-et-Loir in Orléanais exhibited low levels of church attendance by nineteenth-century men, which were deplored by the bishop of Chartres as a sign of dechristianization.²² Historical studies of religious-based opposition to French republicanism tend to focus on the western half of France, particularly the Vendée, an area steeped in collective memories of the 1793–4 civil war when communities militantly defended the traditional structures of the Church.²³ My research demonstrates how in eastern, southern, and northern parts of France, too, Catholic nobles deployed networks and patronage traditions to resist republican secularization in persistent and sometimes dramatic ways.

Founding a school

In March 1850 the baron Augustin de Forbin d'Oppède (1764–1857) wrote to the monks of Notre Dame de l'Hermitage at St Chamond (Loire) about his desire to establish a school for boys in the commune of La Verdière (Var) where his family owned the château.²⁴ Augustin was the third child among four surviving children born to Joseph de Forbin d'Oppède (1721–89) and Françoise de Baussan (1732–79); like many younger sons in noble families he had trained for the priesthood. Augustin was twice elected mayor of the commune of La Verdière in 1813 and 1821. He was no longer serving as mayor in 1850, the year in which he turned eight-six. On 15 March 1850 – the same day as the passing of the Falloux Law – Frère Jean Baptiste wrote an enthusiastic reply to the baron's letter about the proposed school: "A sound education, in other words a Christian education, is truly the best means to regenerate the youth. There is no better thing you can do for the population of La Verdière than to provide it with this benefit."²⁵

Frère Jean Baptiste explained that there were five conditions attached to the monks' collaboration on this "excellent project". The first condition was a large self-contained house with a courtyard, garden, and rooms that were airy and well lit. The second condition was 1,500 francs worth of furniture for the monks' personal use, plus the classroom furniture. The third condition was an annual stipend of 1,400 francs for the three monks. The fourth condition was a one-off payment to Notre Dame de l'Hermitage at St Chamond (Loire) of 1,260 francs. Finally, the monks and school pupils must have the use of pew seats at the parish church.²⁶

It took nearly two years for the baron to satisfy the monks of Notre Dame de l'Hermitage that all five conditions would be met. Rather than construct a new building

for the school an existing house was converted. To help reduce the costs of employing workmen, a monk carried out some of the repairs. By March 1852 the final improvements were almost done including the installation of a drinking water fountain, fitting of blackboards, and completion of a plan for the planting of fruit trees in the garden.²⁷

The elderly baron's initiative meant that other members of his family soon had contact with the departmental authorities about the school. Augustine de Forbin d'Oppède (1815–1902), the baron's niece, wrote to the rector of the Académie départementale du Var requesting his opinion. The château de La Verdière featured among items of property jointly inherited by Augustine and by her younger brother Palamède, so Augustine had an interest in the school established by her uncle in the commune.²⁸ On 19 October 1852 the rector began his reply by paying homage "to the charitable Christian sentiments" of the school's founder. He then went on "to draw attention to some circumstances that may sooner or later put [the school's] existence in peril" because of the founder's wish that it not be public. "However religious and moral it may be, [the school] is only, in the eyes of the law, representative of private interest."²⁹

The rector evidently wanted to be helpful for he had given temporary authorization for the school at La Verdière. The Falloux Law required the director of an *école libre* (in this case one of the monks from Notre Dame de l'Hermitage) to submit a declaration of intent to open the school to the mayor of the commune, and copies of this declaration to the prefect and prosecutor of the arrondissement. When the director

had obtained confirmations of receipt from these authorities, he then had to present that paperwork with his birth certificate and certificate of education to the rector. Clearly the rector knew that there was no chance of the school being opened as a public one in 1852, for the baron de Forbin d'Oppède had formally opposed the idea. Nevertheless, as the public authority in the department, the rector felt professionally obliged to raise the possibility that the school might one day be transformed into a public establishment through an official mediation with the commune.³⁰

From the passing of the Falloux Law in 1850 *écoles libres* and public schools co-existed within the French education system. In the mid-nineteenth century there were still 2,690 communes without any school at all. Although the numbers of children receiving primary education rose to some 3.5 million by 1847, only around 100,000 received secondary education.³¹ Nineteenth-century accounts illustrate the predominance of the Catholic Church's role in staffing different types of establishments. In 1864 a survey of girls' boarding schools revealed that nuns ran two-thirds of such schools across France. At the primary level in 1878, nuns staffed 16,478 schools of which 10,951 were public and 5,527 were privately established Catholic schools. The striking prevalence of religious congregations in the education sector is partly explained by the encouragement given to municipalities during the July Monarchy and Second Empire to call upon nuns to teach. There were few legal hurdles to opening a school and an escalating demand for education. For decades this demand remained only partially met across France's vast rural territory.³²

The support that religious orders received from nobles was vital for increasing the numbers of schools in rural areas. “Charitable Christian sentiments” informed numerous actions undertaken by aristocratic families for education and social welfare. Such actions followed patronage traditions dating back to the Middle Ages.³³ Piety meshed with *noblesse oblige*. Nobles prioritized patronage in the *pays* surrounding their landed estate primarily for the strategic purpose of reinforcing their family’s reputation for “good works” and, prosaically, because personal contacts there facilitated the organization of labor involved.³⁴ For the wealthiest families decisions about how to prioritize aid were of increased complexity because the more real estate a family owned, the more likely it was that those landed properties were geographically dispersed, and the more irregular were the occasions when the owners were physically present in the *pays*.

Records of the pious donations and foundations undertaken by the Lévis Mirepoix family during the nineteenth century illustrate such complexity. The commune of Lérans (Ariège) appears as the principal beneficiary of charitable patronage by Athanase Gustave de Lévis Mirepoix, duc de Mirepoix (1792–1851), who owned the château de Lérans, and his wife Charlotte Adélaïde (née de Montmorency-Laval). In 1838 this couple purchased two houses in the commune for the purpose of founding a shelter for the poor and a school for girls run by the Soeurs de la Croix de Saint André; they also restored the village church, and gave three thousand francs to the Bureau de Bienfaisance of Lérans.³⁵ The Lévis Mirepoix made similar donations to communes in other parts of the country, such as for the construction of churches in Neaumesnil (Eure)

and Nages (Tarn), because nineteenth-century marital alliances increased the geographical spread of the family's real estate holdings, especially in northern departments of France and in Belgium.³⁶ Yet accumulating land in the fertile cereal-crop plains of the north, that was certainly more lucrative for farming compared with the steep rugged pastures of Ariège, did not protect the Lévis Mirepoix from losses when the agricultural crisis began to decimate the revenues of the grandchildren of Athanase Gustave and Charlotte Adélaïde.

For it was precisely in the final quarter of the nineteenth century that the aristocratic rationale for prioritizing charitable patronage in the *pays* surrounding their landed estate(s) began to reveal debilitating flaws. From the 1880s not only was land worth less money, but also the charitable patronage of aristocratic families, while effective in bringing schools and care services to rural communes, was essentially fragmented and dispersed without any method for achieving efficiencies or oversight. These fiscal and operational drawbacks affecting nobles' capacity for social action collided with new problems in the political environment of the consolidating Third Republic regime.

Resources to meet the republican challenge

In March 1882 the Société Générale d'Education et d'Enseignement held a special meeting in Paris to discuss how it would respond to the Ferry laws. At that meeting a commission was formed of politicians, lawyers, and education professionals; Senator

Chesnelong was appointed as chair. In its monthly bulletin for April 1882 the Société announced: “*Écoles libres* must multiply in number, even when there are only limited means for them to function at the beginning. This is work of principal importance, for which you will understand the urgency and for which it is right and proper to make the greatest sacrifices.”³⁷

Chesnelong had been one of the keynote speakers at a meeting of the general assembly of the Oeuvre Diocésaine des Écoles Chrétiennes Libres on 15 March 1882. In his speech he had drawn attention to the resources previously raised to establish 126 *écoles libres* attended by 40,000 pupils. “Do you know how much it cost to found these 126 *écoles libres*? More than seven million [francs]! ... Five million came from voluntary donations; the loan made up the rest.”³⁸ The issue of financing was expanded upon in the April bulletin of the Société Générale d’Education et d’Enseignement. “We have found funds in Paris. ... But too often, in the smaller localities, the resources are not equal to the needs.”³⁹ On 9 April 1882 *Le Monde* announced a subscription fund for donations “to increase the number of Christian *écoles libres*”.⁴⁰

A detailed picture of the financial resource needed to open a single *école libre* appears in the records for the school at Bey-sur-Seille founded by Antoine de Metz-Noblat. A principal expense was for the purchase (and/or conversion) of a building. On 14 November 1882 Metz-Noblat bought a house and garden for 7,100 francs. Repairs were made to this property so it would be fit for purpose as a school. Tradesmen from Nancy were hired to complete the plasterwork at a cost of 9,181.75 francs and masonry and rendering at a cost of 2,147.29 francs. In October and November of 1883 around

600 francs was spent on furniture and other essentials. Purchases included four school benches made from oak and fir (228.64 francs), two blackboards (29 francs), eight stoves for heating (148 francs), twenty-five porcelain inkwells (20 centimes each), and “a large Christ”, which was most probably a painting or statue depicting Jesus (5 francs).⁴¹

The invoices were made out to Metz-Noblat who was a member of Nancy’s Comité de Defense, a group of Catholic activists for *écoles libres* in the Meurthe-et-Moselle. The Comité contributed 500 francs toward the school furniture. Metz-Noblat also secured donations. His niece, Marie de Faultrier, gave 4,614.40 francs – it is not clear from the archive whether this was her own money or the product of fundraising activity. In addition, there was a subscription fund to which eight people gave amounts varying between 20 and 200 francs. There were ongoing expenses after the school opened. In October 1884 Sidot Frères stationery in Nancy supplied one hundred notebooks, twelve crayons, two packets of purple ink powder, arithmetic and *sofège* charts, four copies of *Le Tour de la France par deux enfants* and a good manners guide for 43 francs.⁴²

Surviving correspondence reveals that the process of finding teachers was not necessarily an easy one. In March 1883 the Maison de la Doctrine Chrétienne in Nancy sent its regrets that it would not be able to provide teachers for the *école libre* at Bey-sur-Seille because it had recently had to abandon the management of five schools owing to the death or illness of nuns. Metz-Noblat had better luck in his approach to the Soeurs de la Sainte Enfance de Marie, also based in Nancy. On 20 July 1883, Soeur

Supérieure Rousselot accepted his invitation to discuss the project.⁴³ Accompanied by a priest, she visited Bey-sur-Seille on 24 July to appraise the school building. This interaction was evidently a success, for seventeen days later Soeur Supérieure Rousselot wrote to Metz-Noblat asking when it would be possible to complete the legal formalities. “We have chosen one of our young nuns; she has been teaching in the department of Meuse for two years and is held in high esteem by her commune.”⁴⁴

For a senior leader of a religious order the decision to manage direction of an *école libre* was not taken lightly. There was duty of care toward the members of the religious community who were nominated to teach and, by extension, a duty of care toward the pupils. Preoccupation with matters of health and wellbeing was expressed, for example, in Frère Jean Baptiste’s determination to ensure classrooms at La Verdrière were airy and light-filled, and Soeur Supérieure Rousselot’s request for additional heating in the school building at Bey-sur-Seille. Various letters indicate that in Meurthe-et-Moselle over winter bouts of rheumatism and chest infections among older teaching staff posed an operational problem because it was difficult to find replacement cover quickly.⁴⁵ From the 1880s a second major consideration was the wisdom of embarking on a new teaching mission given the government’s hardline anticlericalism that had caused the expulsion of the Jesuits.⁴⁶

Hesitation also crept in to some nobles’ thinking at this time when the agents employed by aristocratic families were trying to find ways to limit financial losses from capital tied up in land. The extensive real estate inherited by Henri de Lévis Mirepoix, duc de Mirepoix (1849–1915) included holdings in Eure-et-Loir, of which one item was a

building in the village of Le Mée that served as a private school for girls run by the Soeurs de Saint Paul; the building was jointly owned by the Lévis Mirepoix and another noble family, the Salvets.⁴⁷ In the late 1890s, when the teaching nun at Le Mée was approaching sixty years of age and suffering poor health, the *curé* feared the school was at risk of closure and that the state would intervene to create a secular establishment in the commune. He wrote to the duc de Mirepoix asking for a fresh injection of funds to support the private school's formal transition to the status of an *école libre*, which would enable a subvention to be sought from the Comité des Écoles Libres in Eure-et-Loir. The duc's secretary replied firmly to the *curé* that "in the context of the agricultural and social crises that have diminished land prices and revenues" financial outlay for charitable projects of an uncertain future that risked becoming the subject of claims and an onerous responsibility was not possible.⁴⁸

But Henri's cousin Gaston, marquis de Lévis Mirepoix, and Gaston's wife Marie-Thérèse, comtesse d'Hinnisdäl, joined the *curé's* campaign. Gaston and Marie-Thérèse promised that they and the Salvert family would contribute financially so that the annual charge for maintaining the Soeurs de Saint Paul to teach at Le Mée would be paid for collectively and not borne by their cousin the duc de Mirepoix alone. Gaston and Marie-Thérèse lived at the château de Montigny near Cloyes (Eure-et-Loir) so they had the necessary local contacts, including with the department's Comité des Écoles Libres, and were able to exercise arguments targeted to prick the duc's conscience and sense of moral duty as *chef de famille*. Gaston wrote to Henri pointing out the shameful of "abandoning" the commune of Le Mée: "I think it would be detrimental

and contrary to your ideas to allow a religious school to close in this village where you are a large landowner, a school that does a lot of good and where the population is now better and more Christian than in surrounding areas. It would be distressing to see the Faith die there without trying to prevent it.”⁴⁹

The emotive style of persuasion deployed by the marquis de Lévis Mirepoix to lobby his cousin confounded the efforts of the duc’s secretary Olive and the marquis’s steward Granger to manage budgets and try to implement cost savings. Granger wrote to Olive explaining the enquiries he had made in Le Mée and the funding contributions promised by the marquis and marquise de Lévis Mirepoix and by the Salverts. “I do not want to be accused of having tried to prevent the creation of the *école libre*; on the contrary I have undertaken all the necessary steps for the project to be realised. But I do not want to forget my role as steward.”⁵⁰ The Lévis Mirepoix and Salvert families agreed in 1900–2 not only to maintain the teaching provided by the Soeurs de Saint Paul but also to invest in a new classroom. These Catholic nobles were pursuing charitable patronage in circumstances where their actions ran contrary to common sense.

Redoubling efforts

We can understand better the persuasive pleas from one aristocratic relative to another by considering the proselytizing messages directed at nobles on the subject of moral obligations toward Church and countryside. The Oeuvre des campagnes was founded in the 1850s by the *curé* Jean-Marie Vandel and a Legitimist aristocrat, the comtesse de La

Rochejaquelain; it was an aristocratic lobby group comprising a central board in Paris and provincial diocesan branches. The Oeuvre recruited within the nobility's familial networks and published its own bulletin to communicate a "call to arms" for reanimating Christian faith in France that was similar to sermons preached from many pulpits.

Core to the Oeuvre des campagnes' mission was the idea that in God's design the status of nobility came with a responsibility to serve the less fortunate. Such service was best achieved by anchoring the noble family on the land to conduct a moral lifestyle in contrast with the lifestyle of the wealthiest eighteenth-century aristocrats accused of abandoning their rural estates for the luxuries and pleasures found at court and in the capital. The Bulletin de l'Oeuvre des campagnes integrated chastening rhetoric about aristocratic "culpability" for the 1789 Revolution and contrasted sinful eighteenth-century hedonism with virtuous examples of nobles from the more distant past to illuminate the path of Christian piety.⁵¹

The messages of the Oeuvre des campagnes backed by the Church had a wide appeal for nineteenth-century conservative and liberal monarchists and for Bonapartists which encouraged nobles of these differing political affiliations to work together in charitable action. Moreover the effectiveness of such messages was enhanced by the tactics of emotional "persuasion" exercised by priests who knew intimate details of aristocratic family life through social contact, confession and deathbed rituals. On 26 February 1903 the *curé* at Le Mée turned up the emotive pressure on the duc de Mirepoix to donate more funds toward the *école libre*: "By taking this action you will do

the will of your dear departed and devout mother who is now in heaven. You are too much of a Catholic to refuse the gracious act requested of you by the priest whom you love.”⁵²

Clergy also played upon an aristocratic tendency to idealize bonds between noble and peasant when reporting village people’s views back to nobles. As rural communes contemplated the prospect of a new public school being established by the state, the question arose of whether sufficient numbers of parents would remain loyal to an existing *école libre* run by nuns or monks.⁵³ In the case of Le Mée, the Lévis Mirepoix were given assurances by the *curé* that a majority of villagers wanted the nuns to stay, tempered with the acknowledgement that “there are two camps in our parishes ... one camp will be for the nuns, the other for the *institutrice*.”⁵⁴

The cumulative impact of “charitable Christian sentiments” expressed in local action by different generations of noble kin can be seen at La Verdrière. In 1896 nuns were preparing to open the *École des Soeurs de la Sainte Enfance de Digne*, a pre-school (*salle d’asile libre*) for children of both sexes, which was to operate in partnership with the *école libre* for boys founded four decades earlier in 1852. The pre-school was the initiative of the marquise de Forbin d’Oppède (née Louise de Boisgèlin) who was the second wife of Palamède de Forbin d’Oppède (1816–1900).⁵⁵ Louise and Palamède lived at the château de Saint Marcel (Var), which together with the château de La Verdrière had been jointly inherited by Palamède and his elder sister Augustine. It was Palamède’s wife Louise who paid for two old houses in the commune of La Verdrière to be renovated for the pre-school and nuns’ residence. Through the winter of 1896–7, whilst the

houses' kitchens could not be used because of the renovations, the nuns took their meals at the château de La Verdière and the marquise sent sheets and bedding for their temporary accommodation.

Article 57 of the Falloux Law had stipulated that the same formalities applied for the opening of a *salle d'asile libre* as for an *école libre*.⁵⁶ On 3 August 1881 the *Journal officiel* published a presidential decree containing forty-five articles on the legal regulation of pre-schools. These articles reiterated provisions contained in the Falloux Law but introduced the term *école maternelle* as a substitute for *salle d'asile libre*. On 23 February 1897 Soeur Sainte Angélique wrote to the marquise: "Monsieur the mayor has only just delivered the copies [of the declaration] today. ... I hope we shall not encounter any opposition."⁵⁷

Both the parish priest and the Révérende Mère anticipated that the pre-school would open at Easter; however, after notices were posted to that effect in the commune of La Verdière on 23 March, Soeur Sainte Angélique informed the marquise that children "who do not attend the secular school" were turning up in advance: "Despite the zeal of our adversaries, I believe work will not be lacking for us."⁵⁸ Soeur Sainte Angélique wrote to the Maison de la Bonne Presse, which operated "principally to support *écoles libres*", in order to obtain a banner and *oriflammes*. As she informed the marquise, "I have just received a sample depicting the heart of Jesus with this inscription: *Coeur de Jésus sauvez la France*."⁵⁹ There were other items needed, too, especially cooking utensils, a soup cauldron, a basin for washing dishes, and a saw to cut wood, for which the nuns called upon the generosity of the marquise. By November

1897, the pre-school had doubled its original intake of children. Soeur Sainte Angélique observed: “We have thirty infants at the pre-school ... A fortnight ago we began giving them soup and we have twelve or fifteen who will take it throughout the winter. It is no small task to feed this little crowd.”⁶⁰ The following spring, in 1898, several of the boys at the pre-school turned seven so were old enough to begin primary schooling with the monks at the École des Petits Frères de Marie.⁶¹

Protest and sacrifices

When the 1901 Law on Associations was passed public protests bubbled up quickly across France but to respond to such opposition the government had to rely on slower bureaucratic mechanisms. Applications received by the government for the authorization of a religious order were considered by a council within the Ministère de l’Intérieur et des Cultes chaired by Émile Combes. It was this council that decided whether to forward the dossier to the Conseil d’État or to reject it. Combes replaced Waldeck-Rousseau as prime minister in the summer of 1902 and on 25 July issued a circular ordering the closure of 2,500 unauthorized congregational schools. The following year, 1903, there was blanket rejection of all requests for authorization. On 7 July 1904 a law was passed forbidding all religious congregations from any kind of teaching activity.

On 6 May 1903 the Ministère de l’Intérieur et des Cultes responded to the marquise de Forbin d’Oppède who had made an application on behalf of the nuns and

monks at La Verdière. The letter of rejection, signed by Combes, contained a strong warning that “under the terms of the law of 4 December 1902 punishment may be brought according to article 8.2 of the law of 1 July 1901 (a fine of 16–5,000 francs and imprisonment of 6 days to one year) to any individual who without the authorization required by article 3.2 has opened or directed any kind of religious-run establishment.”⁶² The prefect of the Var also wrote to the marquise to inform her that he had notified the director of the École des Petits Frères de Marie of the government’s decision and to advise that the school must be closed by 1 May 1903. The marquise was by this time a widow; she inherited from her husband Palamède the usufruct for the estate of La Verdière when he had died in 1900. The prefect reiterated that, as the person responsible for the property, the marquise would be subject to legal penalty for any breach of the law.⁶³

At La Verdière, however, preparations for a likely rejection of the application had already swung into effect. Everything hinged on the strategy of pretend secularization to enable the same teaching staff to continue at the school and pre-school. Religious orders dubbed this strategy *sécularisation sur place* and were applying it in various parts of the country. The nuns and monks would relinquish the names and clothing that identified them as members of congregations in order to remain teachers in the commune. There were high risks. If the pretense was denounced it could potentially lead to police investigation. The tactics of subterfuge also profoundly compromised religious existence.⁶⁴ The parish priest at La Verdière wrote on 21 April 1903 to reassure the marquise: “Our Catholic school has already commenced its new life. Monsieur

Albert Cyrille (formerly Frère Alpert) has changed into lay clothing and continues to teach his class.”⁶⁵

The nuns waited a further three weeks until the Supérieure Générale of their order, Soeur St Stanislas at the Institut de la Sainte Enfance in Digne, had reflected and given consent. On 10 May 1903 Soeur Sainte Angélique wrote to the marquise about the upcoming momentous and dreaded transformation.

For us it is the greatest of sacrifices that the Lord could impose on us, and it is only with broken hearts that we resign ourselves to retake civilian habit. But since it is necessary we declare, at the foot of the cross, our deed made for love of Him and for the souls that we care about so much. ... Oh! May the Lord be willing to accept it for the salvation of our poor country and to spare us from going before the tribunal!⁶⁶

In her next letter to the marquise on 16 May, it was in her civilian identity as Euphrosine Gilly that the former Soeur Sainte Angélique gave news: “The sacrifice is made! ... We are resolved to defend our rights as French citizens right to the end.”⁶⁷

The legal battle

Relatives of the marquise de Forbin d’Oppède variously offered moral support for the approaching confrontation with the authorities but were pessimistic. Her brother Auguste wrote from Bargemon (Var) on 4 May 1903 anticipating that the police would

place locks on the school buildings: “At that moment it is essential to act ... to try to have the legitimacy and reality of Frère Alpert’s secularisation recognised.”⁶⁸ A fortnight later a cousin, the comte de Forbin La Barben, alerted the marquise that the police commissioner had questioned him: “How I deplore all of this. We have reached the most critical moment and ask ourselves if France shall not become uninhabitable! ... There is even talk of closing the private chapels of the châteaux. The great sanctuaries venerated for centuries are threatened!”⁶⁹

Following contact with the notary Foubert, the marquise was put in touch with the lawyer Bagarry at Brignoles (Var) who would represent her at court. In case of interrogation by police the marquise was advised to say that the school’s director Cyrille Albert had visited her, dressed as an ordinary civilian, and that because she was convinced that this former monk’s connections with the orders to which he had belonged were broken she had given consent for the school to continue.⁷⁰

On 8 July 1903 at Brignoles’s Tribunal de Première Instance Cyrille Albert, director of the *école libre*; Jean-Baptiste Mathieu, adjunct director; and the widow Forbin d’Oppède appeared before the Republic’s prosecutor, Monsieur Estrade. All three were charged with breaking the laws of 30 October 1886, 1 July 1901, and 4 December 1902. Further court sessions took place at the Tribunal Correctionnel on 4 August and 22 August where the ruling was handed down. The lawyer Bagarry, representing the marquise, sent her a telegram: “You were acquitted. Albert was found guilty. [Fined] 16 francs.”⁷¹ This was the minimum fine set by article 8 of the 1901 Law of Associations (the maximum penalty was 5,000 francs and a year of imprisonment).

Far from closing the matter, the judgment of 22 August 1903 was followed by two more years of legal battle. In October 1903 the marquise and a committee linked with the non-authorized congregation of the Petits Frères de Marie re-opened the school that had been closed by court order. Cyrille Albert's successor as director was Jean-Baptiste Corréard, a member of the same non-authorized teaching congregation. At the order of Brignoles's Tribunal de Première Instance, the marquise was summoned to the Tribunal Correctionnel on 20 December 1904, then to the Cour d'Appel in Aix-en-Provence on 31 March and 17 April 1905. Charged with having helped to promote the organization and functioning of the school, in 1905 she was found guilty. The judgment contained the observations that the establishment at La Verdière functioned in the same conditions as in the past, at the same location, with the same teaching, and with the same means of support. The judgment also noted that Monsieur Corréard (who was still called Frère Gonzalès by some people) had adopted civilian dress and pretended to have become a secular person; however, a letter addressed to him on 24 March 1904 that had been seized by police contained evidence that the secularization was faked and that Corréard remained under the authority of his religious superiors. Corréard and the marquise were both fined; the fine of 115.39 francs was paid by the marquise so they did not have to go to prison.⁷²

Individual fates and collective support

The court judgment in 1905 was hardly unexpected because protests against school closures had not proved successful in any region of France. By 1903 the government had closed over 10,000 congregational schools. Successful prosecutions, however, were comparatively rare; an estimated 272 cases were brought to trial and 637 persons were found guilty. Many more cases never reached court owing to a lack of incriminating evidence.⁷³ The marquise de Forbin d'Oppède had the satisfaction to have fought the 1901 Law of Associations "right to the end", as Soeur Sainte Angélique had put it. For individual members of the non-authorized congregations their prospects rested both on decisions made for them by superiors and on the reactions of the parents of school pupils to government and court decisions.

For the pre-school at La Verdière, Euphrosine Gilly had tried to convince an inspector of the Académie that she was a lay *institutrice*. When the attempt failed she had managed to find a lay replacement, Mademoiselle Pellat. Soeur St Stanislas at the Institut de la Sainte Enfance in Digne wrote to the marquise de Forbin d'Oppède on 24 July 1903 cautiously offering support for an attempt to make a formal declaration of the school's re-opening with Mademoiselle Pellat as director. At Le Mée the ministerial rejection was followed up by the prefect's order for the Soeurs de Saint Paul to leave the commune in February 1903. Soeur Supérieure La Croix told the duc de Mirepoix that she had recalled the nuns to Chartres because of the "impossibility and above all the inutility of resistance".⁷⁴

The situation played out somewhat differently at the girls' school in Meurthe-et-Moselle. On 3 April 1903 the police commissioner from Nancy and his secretary

confronted Metz-Noblat with the prefect's letter that the *École des Soeurs de la Sainte Enfance de Marie* at Bey-sur-Seille had to close. Speedily a transformation was effected. On 7 April the office of the prefecture in Nancy acknowledged receipt of the declaration made by Louise de Metz-Noblat (one of Antoine's daughters, then aged twenty-eight) to the mayor of Bey-sur-Seille that she intended to open an *école privée*. The inspector of the Académie in Meurthe-et-Moselle received a copy of the same declaration on the same day, which meant the school was able to open the following month on 8 May 1903.⁷⁵

On paper his daughter was in charge, but Antoine de Metz-Noblat remained closely involved and his first duty was to farewell the nuns on the twentieth anniversary of the *école libre* in 1903. His speech, with which this article began, gave entire credit for the school's progress to the Soeurs de la Sainte Enfance de Marie. "I salute their devotion, hard work, and spirit of sacrifice."⁷⁶ Letters concerning new teachers for the school were addressed to Metz-Noblat by the Société Générale d'Éducation et d'Enseignement and the Union Catholique des Dames de l'Enseignement Libre.⁷⁷

In the Var news of the court sentencing of Jean-Baptiste Corréard in 1905 led some of the Catholic mothers at La Verdière to petition the marquise. "In the name of all the mothers and fathers whose children are at the Christian school we come to implore the goodness of Madame la marquise that she will have pity on all these children who will be abandoned without her!" Anna Eugène Caron, Philomène Pascal, Louise Baptiste, Alexandrine Agnès Blanc, Marie Davin and others, "all mothers of families", asked that Monsieur Corréard remain in the commune to watch over their

children at church on Sundays and provide lessons in the catechism.⁷⁸ A temporary arrangement was hurriedly organized in the final week of April 1905 with Corr  ard agreeing to mind the children and teach plainchant and catechism. “We cannot express on this poor piece of paper all our gratitude and our joy to Madame la marquise”, declared the mothers.⁷⁹ The mayor of La Verdi  re encouraged Corr  ard to continue with the classes until officially ordered by the state authorities to leave the commune.

By late May Corr  ard was ordered to leave, and he went to stay with his brother and sister-in-law at Luc (Var). On 31 May 1905 the monk found himself in the Grand Caf   at Luc, run by his niece, reflecting on a tumultuous few months in a letter to the marquise de Forbin d’Opp  de. He laid the blame squarely on the parish priest for “having said too much to the prosecutor”. As a result of the priest being questioned, it seems, Corr  ard’s correspondence had been seized by the police, including the letter of 24 March 1904 used as evidence in the Cour d’Appel at Aix-en-Provence. The monk was uncertain about his future:

Alas, Madame la marquise, the world [outside the religious order] seems tempting from a distance but it is repugnant when one gets close to it. For nearly forty years I would have been able to ask my brother for my part of the inheritance; I asked nothing from him. I have given him one thousand francs that I managed to save at La Verdi  re, and my sister-in-law is already in a sulk. So my stay at Luc will be short. ... I see nothing ahead for my old age, and the [Spring] days, instead of becoming brighter, seem increasingly full of shadows.⁸⁰

Corréard was one among hundreds of former teachers from non-authorized congregations who found themselves unemployed, geographically separated from other members of their order, and often in financial difficulty. Senior leaders of religious orders had to accept the voluntary departures of some members from religious life altogether, whilst struggling to accommodate other members returning to the congregation's premises.⁸¹

Importantly, the orders were not alone in trying to find solutions to the crisis. Lay Catholic bodies were established in rural localities, such as the Association scolaire libre d'Azay-le-Rideau (Indre-et-Loire) that met in the buildings occupied by three schools founded by Charles-Marie-Christian, marquis de Biencourt (1826–1924).⁸² A larger body, the Association pour la Défense des Écoles Primaires Catholiques set out the daunting task for Catholic activists in a report on 1903–4 and launched a subscription fund “to defend Christian education and come to the aid of former members of teaching congregations”.⁸³

The general secretary of the Association, Paul Princeteau, wrote to the marquise de Forbin d'Oppède on 19 September 1905 in response to her request for recommendations of teachers for her school at La Verdière. Behind the profiles of these unemployed middle-aged men lay experiences, mostly lost from the historical record, that were perhaps not dissimilar from those of Jean-Baptiste Corréard or Cyrille Albert. “Monsieur Désiré Soux, aged 42, educated by monks, basic diploma, knows plainchant, organ, harmonium ... To this name I would add that of Monsieur Philippe René, aged 42,

educated at St Gabriel at St Quentin in Manges (Maine-et-Loire), also highly recommendable.”⁸⁴

The new teacher, Paul Rebois, who arrived at La Verdrière in 1906, was recommended to the marquise by the Société pour la Défense des Intérêts Catholiques in Marseille. In March 1907 Rebois received the visit from the primary school inspector: “He found everything in order, he looked through the books and notebooks of a student ... he checked the pupils’ lockers. ... Then he went to sit in my office, asked me at what age the children were received, whether I demanded a birth certificate to have confirmation of meeting the statutory age requirement for enrolment.”⁸⁵ The school, founded and staffed by Catholics, had passed the Republic’s “test”.⁸⁶

Conclusion

Evolutions in the political context, as well as the financial and personal circumstances of Catholic nobility, are relevant for understanding the motivations and actions of the founders of *écoles libres*. In the final decades of the nineteenth century nobles strove to preserve the mechanisms for exercising social and religious influence that provided some compensation for their declining economic position and erosion of representation in politics at the national level. Aristocratic families’ longstanding reputation in the field of charitable patronage, practiced especially in the *pays* of their landed estate(s), meant that successive generations felt impelled to respond to pleas from clergy and congregations and to absorb the resulting fiscal pressures. Emotive persuasion and

mythologizing rhetoric about the nobility's "duty" circulated in an increasingly fragile system. That aristocratic fortunes were vulnerable in a period of falling land values and agricultural crisis underlines nobles' determination to resist the government's secularizing policies by continuing financial bequests to the Church and by initiating and subsidizing a range of religiously oriented projects.⁸⁷

Louise de Boisgelin had no children from her marriage to Palamède de Forbin d'Oppède and unfortunately letters written by her do not appear in the archive; only the letters addressed to her are conserved and provide some clues to her character and personality. As a childless noblewoman, and widow from 1900, the marquise had financial independence and control over her time and material resources. It is impossible to know whether she ever wished to become a mother, or was attracted to the celibate lifestyle of the nuns and monks she helped. One of the court judgments stated that the marquise was inspired by her late husband Palamède's pious work.⁸⁸ It is not clear from the archive how far this was true, but the marquise's own actions in fighting the secularizing laws suggest a profound personal faith and certainly point to a strong will and courage. The regular, frank letters addressed to the marquise by nuns and monks reveal a high level of trust and confidence in her. She was not a distant, uninvolved benefactor.

Antoine de Metz-Noblat and his wife Mathilde (née de Carcy) had eight children and the couple also adopted Antoine's niece Marie de Faultrier. In a letter of June 1882 to a close friend, Antoine confided: "I congratulate the populations with sufficient courage to brave imprisonment and sufficient wealth to pay the fine and the costs of

alternative education. I am convinced that it will be possible only in a small fraction of [France's] territory.”⁸⁹ Like many Catholics Metz-Noblat was critical of the extreme conservative politics pursued by Louis Veillot through the newspaper *L'Univers*. He also felt dismayed by the incapacity of ecclesiastical authorities to mend divisions that constituted a handicap in the Church's ability to fight effectively against republican legislation. As a well-to-do *père de famille* Metz-Noblat combined public activism against the government's secularizing laws with a commitment to educating his children privately in the home. Sensitivity and a wish for discretion (but not secrecy) about the conversion to Catholicism of his own wife, Mathilde, who was raised Protestant, reveals that Metz-Noblat was a man who reflected deeply on matters of faith.⁹⁰

The Lévis Mirepoix family and the Salvart family worked in concert to sustain the *école libre* at Le Mée. Although the secretary employed by Henri de Lévis Mirepoix urged economies, it was the arguments of the *curé* that won out, echoing contemporary messages about noble “duty” to rural communities communicated by the Oeuvre des campagnes. Joint ownership of a property in which an *école libre* operated was a reason for other aristocratic families to take similar collective action in the wake of the 1901 Law on Associations.⁹¹

A core reason for the greater historical knowledge about public schools in France is that records about these institutions, classed as public archives, are systematically deposited in state repositories and therefore readily accessible for research. For private archives there is not the same legal requirement for deposition and preservation. Nobles' records of *écoles libres* survive only because they were conserved within their

family papers and subsequently donated to or deposited on contract with state repositories. We will never have a complete picture of *écoles libres* in nineteenth-century France because many founders' records have been lost or destroyed or remain inaccessible at the current owners' wish. After the 1901 Law on Associations there was certainly a motive for destroying documents about these schools because of the risk that these papers would be seized by police and used as incriminating evidence in court.

This article has drawn upon the personal correspondence of nobles, nuns, monks, and priests to document both the practical dimensions of their collaboration in setting up *écoles libres* in the second half of the nineteenth century, as well as the complex of emotional bonds and emotional pressures that arose from a sense of embattlement against the growing secularism of modern France. Milbach's narrative for 1830–1850 showcases the plurality of Catholic attitudes on education by privileging the *histoire événementielle* approach. But we ought not lose sight of the *longue durée*. This article has argued for the durability of ancient traditions of charitable patronage underpinned by nobles' historic property-based ties with rural communities and strategic use of aristocratic family networks.

In highlighting such continuities, the article contributes to historians' reassessment of the roles of women and men in Church activities and the ways in which practices within those roles could challenge prevailing views of gender in different eras. Various studies have shown that prescriptive theological messages about "feminine" meekness and passivity contrast with the actual initiative, authority, and skill that women in religious orders had to exercise.⁹² Nobles' private archives reveal the parallel

agency, organizing capacities, and determination shared by Catholic aristocratic laity. The interactions between nineteenth-century nobles and religious orders, which resemble medieval and early modern interactions, reinforced a mutual commitment to upholding the culture of Christian faith within education. Antoine de Metz-Noblat, who had begun his 1903 speech at Bey-sur-Seille with the far-sighted advice of a monk, concluded that same speech with some prophetic words of his own directed to children and parents: “In four months, in four years, in forty years, will you remember the nuns who taught you, above and before everything else, the faith in Jesus Christ? ... The doors of Hell, the Devil, and the servants of the Devil shall not prevail against the Church!”⁹³

¹ Manuscript for speech 2 May 1903, Archives départementales de Meurthe-et-Moselle, 52J/40 Fonds Metz-Noblat.

² John McManners, *Church and State in France 1870–1914* (London: Harper and Row, 1972); Maurice Larkin, *Church and State after the Dreyfus Affair: The Separation Issue in France* (London: Macmillan, 1974); Maurice Larkin, *Religion, Politics and Preferment in France since 1890: La Belle Époque and its Legacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Jean-Marie Mayeur, *La Séparation des Églises et de l'État* (Paris: L'Atelier, 2005).

³ Claude Langlois, *Le Catholicisme au féminin: les congregations françaises à supérieure générale au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Cerf, 1984); Jean Delumeau ed., *La Religion de ma mère: le rôle des femmes dans la transmission de la foi* (Paris: Cerf, 1992); Ralph Gibson, *A Social History of French Catholicism 1789–1914* (London: Routledge, 1989).

⁴ Ruth Harris, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age* (London: Allen Lane, 1999); Suzanne K. Kaufman, *Consuming Visions: Mass Culture and the Lourdes Shrine* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005); Bonnie G. Smith, *Ladies of the Leisure Class: The Bourgeoises of Northern France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); Raymond Jonas, *France and the Cult of the Sacred Heart: An Epic Tale for Modern Times* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Phil Kilroy, *Madeleine Sophie Barat 1779–1865: A Biography* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2000); Carol E. Harrison, “Zouave Stories: Gender, Catholic Spirituality, and French Responses to the Roman Question,” *Journal of Modern History* 79, no. 2 (2007): 274–305; Anne Cova, “*Au service de l’église, de la patrie et de la famille*”: *femmes catholiques et maternité sous la III République* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2000); Bruno Dumons, *Les Dames de la Ligue des Femmes Françaises (1901–1914)* (Paris: Cerf, 2006).

⁵ John K. Huckaby, “Roman Catholic Reaction to the Falloux Law,” *French Historical Studies* 4, no. 2 (1965): 203–13; Anita Rasi May, “The Falloux Law, the Catholic Press, and the Bishops: Crisis of Authority in the French Church,” *French Historical Studies* 8, no. 1 (1973): 77–94.

⁶ Paul Gerbod, *La Vie quotidienne dans les lycées et les collèges au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Hachette, 1968), 162–4, 170–3.

⁷ Jean-Antoine-Nicolas Caritat, marquis de Condorcet, *Second mémoire sur l'instruction publique, de l'instruction commune pour les enfants* (Paris 1791).

⁸ Louis Grimaud, *Histoire de la liberté de l'enseignement en France* 6 vols (Paris: Rousseau et Liget, 1954) was a development of Grimaud's 1898 doctoral thesis. Sylvain Milbach, *Les Chaires ennemies: L'Église, l'État et la liberté d'enseignement secondaire dans la France des notables (1830–1850)* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2015).

⁹ Milbach, *Les Chaires ennemies*, 560.

¹⁰ See endnotes 36, 42, and 88. Drawing neat distinctions between generations is problematic, see Milbach, *Les Chaires ennemies*, 22, 49, 508.

¹¹ Elizabeth C. Macknight, *Aristocratic Families in Republican France, 1870–1940* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012).

¹² I thank the archivists who gave permission for access and brought newly classed collections to my attention. This article derives from my research in the Archives

départementales de Meurthe-et-Moselle in Nancy [hereafter ADMM], the Archives départementales des Bouches-du-Rhône in Marseille [hereafter ADBR], and the Archives départementales de l'Ariège in Foix [hereafter ADA]. Further evidence for the central thesis comes from my research in the Archives départementales de l'Indre-et-Loire in Tours [hereafter ADIL], the Archives départementales du Loir-et-Cher in Blois [hereafter ADLC], and the Archives départementales de la Haute-Loire in Le Puy en Velay [hereafter ADHL].

¹³ Paul Gerbod, *Les Enseignants et la politique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1976); Antoine Prost, *Histoire de l'enseignement en France 1800–1967* (Paris: Colin, 1979); Mona Ozouf, *L'École, l'église et la République, 1871–1914* (Paris: Colin, 1963); Karen Offen, "The Second Sex and the Baccalauréat in Republican France, 1880–1924," *French Historical Studies* 13, no. 2 (1983): 252–86; Phyllis Stock-Martin, *Moral Education for a Secular Society: The Development of Morale Laïque in Nineteenth-Century France* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988); Linda L. Clark, *Schooling the Daughters of Marianne: Textbooks and the Socialization of Girls in Modern French Primary Schools* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984); Jo Burr Margadant, *Madame le Professeur: Women Educators in the Third Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

¹⁴ For the diocese of Lyon detailed study has been made of schools run by nuns and monks using the archives of congregations: Sarah A. Curtis, *Educating the Faithful:*

Religion, Society and Schooling in Nineteenth-Century France (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000). On the social backgrounds of religious teachers: Rebecca Rogers, "Retrograde or Modern? Unveiling the Teaching Nun in Nineteenth-Century France," *Social History* 23, no. 2 (1998): 146–64.

¹⁵ Éric Mension-Rigau, *L'Enfance au château: l'éducation familiale des élites françaises au XXe siècle* (Paris: Rivages, 1990); Marie-Françoise Lévy, *De mères en filles: l'éducation des françaises 1850–1880* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1984); John W. Padberg, *Colleges in Controversy: The Jesuit Schools in France from Revival to Suppression, 1815–1880* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969); Patrick J. Harrigan, "The Social Appeals of Catholic Secondary Education in France in the 1870s," *Journal of Social History* 8, no. 3 (1975): 122–41; Françoise Mayeur, *L'Éducation des filles en France au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Hachette 1979); Rebecca Rogers, *From the Salon to the Schoolroom: Educating Bourgeois Girls in Nineteenth-Century France* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2008).

¹⁶ Benjamin F. Martin, *Count Albert de Mun: Paladin of the Third Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978); Éric Phélippeau, *L'Invention de l'homme politique moderne: Mackau, l'Orne et la République* (Paris: Belin, 2002); Jean-Marie Mayeur, Jean-Pierre Chaline and Alain Corbin, *Les Parlementaires de la Troisième République* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2003).

¹⁷ Judith F. Stone, "Anticlericals and *Bonnes Soeurs*: The Rhetoric of the 1901 Law of Associations," *French Historical Studies* 23, no. 1 (2000): 103–28.

¹⁸ Stone, "Anticlericals," 103–28; Sarah A. Curtis, "Lay Habits: Religious Teachers and the Secularization Crisis of 1901–1904," *French History* 9, no. 4 (1995), 478–98; Patrick Cabanel and Jean-Dominique Durand, eds, *Le Grand Exil des congregations religieuses françaises, 1901–1914* (Paris: PUF, 2005).

¹⁹ The Metz-Noblat family is of ancient noble extraction that can be traced back to the fifteenth century. Under Napoleon's First Empire, Nicolas-François de Metz (1751–1825) served as public prosecutor of Nancy and received the nobiliary title of baron in 1810. The Forbin family is of ancient noble extraction with various branches including the Forbin-Gardanne, Forbin d'Oppède, and Forbin-La Barben. Palamède de Forbin (died 1508) was a councillor to King René and governor of Provence. The Lévis Mirepoix family is of ancient noble extraction that can be traced back to the thirteenth century. Guy de Lévis (died c. 1233) followed his suzerain Simon de Montfort in crusade against the Albigeois.

²⁰ Maurice Agulhon, *La République au village* (Paris: Seuil, 1970).

²¹ Robin Briggs, *Communities of Belief: Social and Cultural Tensions in Early Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Robin Briggs, *The Witches of Lorraine*

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Philippe Martin, Fabienne Henryot, and Laurent Jalabert, eds, *Atlas de la vie religieuse en Lorraine à l'époque moderne* (Metz: Serpenoise, 2010).

²² Larkin, *Church and State*, 9–15; Peter McPhee, *A Social History of France 1780–1880* (London: Routledge, 1992), 167.

²³ Charles Tilly, *The Vendée* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1964); Laurence Wylie, ed., *Chanzeaux: A Village in Anjou* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966); Timothy Tackett, "The West in France in 1789: The Religious Factor in the Origins of the Counterrevolution," *Journal of Modern History* 54, no. 4 (1982), 715–45; T. J. A. Le Goff and D. M. G. Sutherland, "The Social Origins of Counter-Revolution in Western France," *Past and Present* 99, no. 1 (1983), 65–87; Caroline Ford, *Creating the Nation in Provincial France: Religion and Political Identity in Brittany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); David Bensoussan, *Combats pour une Bretagne catholique et rurale: Les droites bretonnes dans l'entre-deux-guerres* (Paris: Fayard, 2006).

²⁴ The château de La Verdière had passed from one (extinguished) branch of the family, the Forbin-Gardanne, to another branch, the Forbin d'Oppède. Auguste de Forbin-Gardanne (1769–1823), who was the last member of the Forbin-Gardanne branch, left the property to his cousin Anatole de Forbin d'Oppède (1818–1831). Anatole was the nephew of Augustin de Forbin d'Oppède (1764–1857) who founded the school.

²⁵ 15 March 1850, ADBR 63J/45 Fonds Forbin.

²⁶ 15 March 1850, ADBR 63J/45 Fonds Forbin.

²⁷ 16 March 1852, ADBR 63J/45 Fonds Forbin.

²⁸ The school's founder, Augustin de Forbin d'Oppède, had no children. Augustin's younger brother Sextius de Forbin d'Oppède (1767–1853) married Henriette de Thomassin-Peynier (1789–1864) and this couple had three children: Augustine (1815–1902), Palamède (1816–1900), and Anatole (1818–1831). Anatole de Forbin d'Oppède's succession included the château de La Verdière and the château de Saint Marcel that had previously been owned by the Forbin-Gardanne branch of the family. On Anatole's death in 1831 these properties passed in an undivided state to his parents and to his siblings, Augustine and Palamède.

²⁹ 19 October 1852, ADBR 63J/45 Fonds Forbin.

³⁰ 19 October 1852, ADBR 63J/45 Fonds Forbin.

³¹ Robert D. Anderson, *Education in France, 1848–1870* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 31–5, 57; R. Grew and P.J. Harrigan with J. Whitney, "The Availability of Schooling in

Nineteenth-Century France,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 14, no. 1 (1983), 25–64;

Laura S. Struminger, *What were Little Girls and Boys Made Of? Primary Education in Rural France, 1830–1880* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983).

³² Rogers, “Retrograde or Modern,” 146–64; Stone, “Anticlericals,” 111; Peter McPhee, *The Politics of Rural Life: Political Mobilization in the French Countryside 1846–1852* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 45–7.

³³ Amy Livingstone, *Out of Love for My Kin: Aristocratic Family Life in the Lands of the Loire, 1000–1200* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 17–18, 189–92; Constance Bouchard, *Sword, Miter, and Cloister: Nobility and the Church* (Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 1987), 130–49; Barbara Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity: Pious Women and the Catholic Reformation in Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 160–1, 209–11, 234–5, 246; Sharon Kettering, “The Patronage Power of Early Modern Noblewomen,” *Historical Journal* 38, no. 2 (1989): 817–41.

³⁴ Livingstone, *Out of Love for My Kin*, 191–2; David Higgs, *Nobles in Nineteenth-Century France: the Practice of Inegalitarianism* (Baltimore John Hopkins University Press, 1987), 150–2, 171.

³⁵ ADA 46J/405 Fonds Lévis Mirepoix.

³⁶ Athanase Gustave and Charlotte Adélaïde had two sons. The eldest son Guy (1820–86) married Marie, comtesse de Mérode (of Belgian origin) in 1844; the younger son Sigismonde (1821–86) married Juliette Berton des Balbes de Crillon. On the Mérode family and *la liberté de l'enseignement* in Belgium see Milbach, *Les Chaires ennemies*, 59, 298–310, 574.

³⁷ *Bulletin de la Société Générale d'Education et d'Enseignement* Supplément Mensuel 15 April 1882 (Paris), 194.

³⁸ Chesnelong cited in *Bulletin*, 237.

³⁹ *Bulletin*, 196.

⁴⁰ *Le Monde*, 9 April 1882.

⁴¹ Invoices and receipts, ADMM 52J/40 Fonds Metz-Noblat.

⁴² List of donations and Sidot Frères receipts, ADMM 52J/40 Fonds Metz-Noblat.

Antoine's father, Alexandre de Metz-Noblat, was involved in Catholic initiatives in Nancy during the July Monarchy, see Milbach, *Les Chaires ennemies*, 365.

⁴³ 20 July 1883, ADMM 52J/40 Fonds Metz-Noblat.

⁴⁴ 10 August 1883, ADMM 52J/40 Fonds Metz-Noblat.

⁴⁵ 29 February 1892, 11 July 1893, 3 April 1903, ADMM 52J/40 Fonds Metz-Noblat.

⁴⁶ Padberg, *Colleges in Controversy*, 265; McManners, *Church and State*, 50–2.

⁴⁷ The Salvert family originated from Auvergne and was attached to the ancient chivalric house of Montrognon. In the nineteenth century the Montlieu de Salvert branch retook the name Montrognon and lived at the château de Villebeton near Le Mée (Eure-et-Loir). François-Henri de Salvert-Montrognon, comte de Salvert (1828–1882) married Aglaé de la Taille and had two children. François-Henri's younger brother Adolphe-François taught at the Faculté catholique de Lille.

⁴⁸ 26 July 1899, ADA 46J/405 Fonds Lévis Mirepoix.

⁴⁹ 13 November 1899 and 3 July 1900, ADA 46J/405 Fonds Lévis Mirepoix.

⁵⁰ 23 June 1900, ADA 46J/405 Fonds Lévis Mirepoix.

⁵¹ Éric Mension-Rigau, *Le Donjon et le clocher* (Paris: Perrin, 2003), 35–7.

⁵² 26 February 1903, ADA 46J/405 Fonds Lévis Mirepoix.

⁵³ In Saint-Privat d'Allier (Haute Loire) an *école libre* for boys founded by the aristocratic Mercœur family had seventy-six pupils in 1912 compared with forty-six for the public school. ADHL, 1T art. 18.

⁵⁴ 30 June 1900, ADA 46J/405 Fonds Lévis Mirepoix.

⁵⁵ Palamède married Roselyne de Villeneuve in 1841; following her death in 1884, he made a second marriage to Louise de Boisgelin in 1885.

⁵⁶ *Bulletin*, 266–7.

⁵⁷ 23 February 1897, ADBR 63J/45 Fonds Forbin.

⁵⁸ 28 February 1897, ADBR 63J/45 Fonds Forbin.

⁵⁹ 20 May 1897, ADBR 63J/45 Fonds Forbin.

⁶⁰ 18 November 1897, ADBR 63J/45 Fonds Forbin.

⁶¹ 19 March 1898, ADBR 63J/45 Fonds Forbin.

⁶² 6 May 1903, ADBR 63J/45 Fonds Forbin.

⁶³ 27 April 1903, ADBR 63J/45 Fonds Forbin.

⁶⁴ Curtis, "Lay Habits," 478–98.

⁶⁵ 21 April 1903, ADBR 63J/45 Fonds Forbin.

⁶⁶ 10 May 1903, ADBR 63J/45 Fonds Forbin.

⁶⁷ 16 May 1903, ADBR 63J/45 Fonds Forbin.

⁶⁸ 4 May 1903, ADBR 63J/45 Fonds Forbin.

⁶⁹ 15 May 1903, in ADBR 63J/45 Fonds Forbin.

⁷⁰ 9 May 1903, ADBR 63J/45 Fonds Forbin.

⁷¹ Tribunal proceedings 8 July 1903, court summons 28 July 1903, court session documents, and telegram 23 August 1903, ADBR 63J/45 Fonds Forbin.

⁷² Court summons 10 December 1904 and 24 March 1905, judgement of the Cour d'Appel d'Aix, 7 April 1905, and receipt, ADBR 63J/45 Fonds Forbin.

⁷³ Caroline Ford, "Religion and the Politics of Cultural Change in Provincial France: The Resistance of 1902 in Lower Brittany," *Journal of Modern History* 62, no. 1 (1990), 1–33; Curtis, "Lay Habits," 481, 494.

⁷⁴ 23 February 1903, ADA 46J/405 Fonds Lévis Mirepoix.

⁷⁵ Receipts 7 April 1903, ADMM 52J/40 Fonds Metz-Noblat.

⁷⁶ Manuscript for speech 2 May 1903, ADMM 52J/40 Fonds Metz-Noblat.

⁷⁷ 19 September 1903 and 30 September 1903, ADMM 52J/40 Fonds Metz-Noblat.

⁷⁸ 16 April 1905, ADBR 63J/45 Fonds Forbin.

⁷⁹ 24 April 1905, ADBR 63J/45 Fonds Forbin.

⁸⁰ 31 May 1905, ADBR 63J/45 Fonds Forbin.

⁸¹ Curtis, "Lay Habits"; Cabanel and Durand, *Le Grand Exil*.

⁸² Records of the three *écoles libres* and of the Association scolaire libre 1905–35, ADIL 152J/152 Fonds de Biencourt.

⁸³ Circular from the Association pour la Defense des Écoles Primaires Catholiques (1904), ADBR 63J/45 Fonds Forbin.

⁸⁴ 19 September 1905, ADBR 63J/45 Fonds Forbin.

⁸⁵ 21 March 1907, ADBR 63J/45 Fonds Forbin.

⁸⁶ Under the Fifth Republic the bill proposed by Socialist minister Alain Savary in 1983–4 sought to create a “single public sector of national education, unified and secular (*laïque*)” by transforming *écoles libres* into *établissements d’intérêt public*. President Mitterrand withdrew the Savary bill after massive demonstrations. Rod Kedward, *La Vie en bleu: France and the French since 1900* (London: Penguin, 2005), 496–7, 556; Bruno Duriez, Étienne Fouilloux, Denis Pelletier, Nathalie Viet-Depaule, eds, with Tangi Cavalin, *Les Catholiques dans la République 1905–2005* (Paris: L’Atelier, 2005).

⁸⁷ Claire Biquard, “Piété et foi dans le Faubourg Saint-Germain au XIXe siècle,” *Histoire, économie et société* 12 (1993), 299–318.

⁸⁸ Judgement of the Cour d'Appel d'Aix, 7 April 1905, ADBR 63J/45 Fonds Forbin. On Palamède's first wife Roselyne de Villeneuve (1822–84), who corresponded with Montalembert, see Jean-Rémy Palanque, ed., *Une catholique libérale du XIXe siècle, la marquise de Forbin d'Oppède: d'après sa correspondance inédite* (Leuven: Nauwelaerts, 1981).

⁸⁹ 27 June 1882, ADMM 52J/53 Fonds Metz-Noblat.

⁹⁰ 27 June 1882 and 17 January 1883, ADMM 52J/53 Fonds Metz-Noblat.

⁹¹ Five aristocratic families from the departments of Mayenne and Sarthe signed a contract in 1902 authorizing the baron Raymond de Fougères to represent them in the event that the teaching nuns were expelled from their jointly-owned building in Fougères-sur-Bièvre that served as the premises of an *école libre des filles*. Contract 23 July 1902, ADLC 83J/191 Fonds de Bizemont-Lambot de Fougères.

⁹² Rogers, "Retrograde or Modern"; Curtis, *Educating the Faithful*; Sarah A. Curtis, *Civilizing Habits: Women Missionaries and the Revival of French Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Caroline Ford, *Divided Houses: Religion and Gender in Modern France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

⁹³ Manuscript for speech 2 May 1903, ADMM 52J/40 Fonds Metz-Noblat.