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THE FRENCH SOCIALISTS AND ANTI-CLERICALISM: THE POSITION OF EDOUARD VAILLANT AND THE PARTI SOCIALISTE REVOLUTIONNAIRE

Of all the political and ideological debates which confronted the French Socialist movement between the Paris Commune and the Great War, the problem of anticlericalism was one of the most complex. The concept of anticlericalism gives rise to a certain degree of confusion, partly because of the fact that it was a war-horse ridden jointly by the radical republicans and by the Socialists. The simplest definition of anticlericalism is that offered by the dictionary of Robert: "opposition à toute immixtion du clergé dans la politique".¹

The question of this interference of the Catholic Church in French political life had been a dominant one throughout the nineteenth century. The conflict between Church and Republic after 1870 remained, in some ways, the major political problem of the day. Léon Gambetta, in a famous speech in May 1877, stressed the importance of this conflict by isolating the Church as the principal enemy of the new regime.² The fact is that the Church, while wedded to the State and deeply entrenched in the social life of the nation, still indicated its refusal to accept one of the basic principles of the 1789 Revolution: it denied that society should be ordered according to the wishes of man, and it continued to insist on a social order reflecting the will of a transcendental divinity acting through the medium of the Catholic hierarchy. The battle between the Republic and the forces of clericalism during the early Third Republic has been described by one historian as "the essential element of the political struggle".³

¹ Paul Robert, *Dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique de la Langue française* (Paris, 1972). Similarly, the word *cléricalisme*, whose first appearance is dated 1866, is defined as "opinion de ceux qui sont partisans d'une immixtion du clergé dans la politique".

² "Et je ne fais que traduire les sentiments intimes du peuple de France en disant du cléricalisme ce qu'en disait un jour mon ami Peyrat: Le cléricalisme? voilà l'ennemi!" *Discours et plaidoyers choisis de Léon Gambetta* (Paris, 1901), p. 237.

³ *La Séparation de l'Eglise et de l'Etat* (1905), présentée par Jean-Marie Mayeur (Paris, 1966), pp. 10-11.

Most radical republicans tended to regard the struggle against clericalism as an essentially political problem, the ultimate solution to which was to be separation of Church and State. There was, of course, behind this attitude a profound philosophical or ideological commitment to secular ideas. But for the most part, the Radicals were confident that after separation of Church and State the power of the former would be constantly undermined by the generalisation of secular education. They therefore felt no call to destroy the Church physically or materially.¹

Most Socialists had a different view of anticlericalism. Indeed, there were at least three different interpretations of the problem, three different “anticlerical factions” among the French Socialists. The followers of Jules Guesde, members of the *Parti Ouvrier Français* (POF), tended to adopt a rather rigid, pseudo-Marxist line according to which anticlericalism, being a struggle at the superstructural level of ideas and institutions, was a diversion from the main class struggle and therefore largely irrelevant if not actually harmful. Another group, which eventually acknowledged the leadership of Jean Jaurès, viewed anticlericalism in much the same way as the Radicals. For them, the taming of the Church was a political priority of the highest order. Separation of Church and State was an essential prerequisite for the consolidation and progress of the Republic. It was the ultimate battle of the 1789 Revolution. The difference between Jaurès and the Radicals was that the latter saw separation of Church and State as the final act of one long political process, whereas the former saw it as the first act in another – the move towards Socialism. But, in order to make that move towards Socialism, Jaurès and his friends believed that it was necessary to form a close political alliance with the Radicals over separation.

The third Socialist group was the one animated by Edouard Vaillant. Grouped together from 1898 within the *Parti Socialiste Révolutionnaire*,² they constitute the “extreme” anticlerical wing of the Socialist movement, advocating an intense political and ideological crusade against the Church, if possible leading to its physical suppression. In this struggle, they rejected the Jauresist tactic of a formal alliance with the Radicals. Thus they were opposed to the Guesdists mainly

¹ There were a minority of Radicals who did hope to bring about the total destruction of the Church. About thirty of them were to vote with the “Revolutionary Socialists” during the debates on the separation of State and Church in 1905. See below, p. 181, note 4.

² Vaillant’s faction took the title of Comité révolutionnaire central until 1898, when it became the Parti Socialiste Révolutionnaire. After 1902, this party merged with the Guesdists to form the Parti Socialiste de France.

on doctrinal or ideological grounds and to the Jauressists mainly on political grounds.

Studies of Jaurès abound. His influence within the French Socialist movement was paramount, and his position on the question of anticlericalism and separation of Church and State is amply documented.¹ As for the Guesdists, their approach has been given recent clarification by the publication of Claude Willard's monumental thesis.² However, the attitude of the Vaillantists, who came to embody the spirit of intransigent Socialist anticlericalism, remains obscure. The only major work on Edouard Vaillant yet published, that of Maurice Dommanget,³ scarcely touches on this question. The present article is therefore an attempt to fill in a major gap in what was one of the great Socialist debates of the early Third Republic.

Historically, the most important tradition of Socialist anticlericalism in France is that associated with Blanqui. After 1848, conscious that the Catholic Church was in many ways the most reactionary force in France, Blanqui became the champion of an unrelenting and extremely virulent anticlericalism.⁴ Blanqui was not content merely to attack the political power of the Church. He also attempted to provide an ideological or philosophical basis for the Socialist anticlerical struggle. In so doing, he introduced into the debate an element of confusion which was to continue to bedevil the Socialist anticlerical campaign under the Third Republic. For Blanqui's vigorous advocacy of the merits of atheism appears to contain a basic philosophical contradiction. On the one hand, he sought to counter the Christian version of the Creation and of the origin of the universe with a materialist view of that process based on the scientific discoveries of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. On the other hand, Blanqui's onslaught against what he regarded as the evil of spiritualism assumed the proportions of an idealistic crusade which stressed the importance of human reason as a determinant behind social and political change. As Dommanget has put it: "tout se passe chez lui comme s'il y avait dans son cerveau, séparé en deux compartiments, d'une part la conception matérialiste, d'autre part la conception idéaliste. Ce n'est pas la fusion, c'est la juxtaposition des deux conceptions qui est la règle et, finalement, c'est toujours la conception idéaliste qui prévaut."⁵

¹ Harvey Goldberg, *The Life of Jean Jaurès* (Madison, 1962), ch. 11.

² Claude Willard, *Le Mouvement socialiste en France (1893-1905). Les Guesdistes* (Paris, 1965).

³ Maurice Dommanget, *Edouard Vaillant, un grand socialiste* (Paris, 1956).

⁴ Dommanget, *Les Idées politiques et sociales d'Auguste Blanqui* (Paris, 1957), pp. 271-72.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

It was the primacy of this idealist approach to anticlericalism which was to become the subject of intense controversy among French Socialists during the Third Republic. The controversy was aggravated by the particular interpretation of Marxist materialism professed by the Guesdists of the POF. They applied a rigid and inflexible historical materialism, which occasionally went so far as to argue that the phenomenon of clericalism and its attendant religious forms was organically linked to the rise of capitalism; they concluded that the influence of the Church could not be touched until the capitalist mode of production had come to an end. In effect, this was an over-rigid interpretation of Marx's own ideas on the problem.

One must consider the historical conjuncture. Marx's principal ideas on anticlericalism were expressed in the *Theses on Feuerbach*, in which he criticised Feuerbach's preoccupation with attacking the theological foundations of religion. In fact Marx was mainly reacting against what he considered to be an incorrect order of priorities on the part of men like Feuerbach, Stirner and Bauer. He argued that, however valid their dismantling of traditional theology might be, the real need was to stress the importance of the struggle against the economic, political and social milieu which gave sustenance to that theology and its institutional forms. Marx never asserted that the influence of the Church could not, at the same time, be weakened by the intellectual and political activity of the progressive elements in society.¹ Nevertheless, historical materialism was invoked in France by Marx's would-be disciples as evidence that anticlericalism was a diversion if not actually an irrelevance.²

Edouard Vaillant and the Vaillantists considered themselves as the legatees both of the nineteenth-century revolutionary tradition associated with Blanqui and of the "Scientific Socialism" of Marx.³ What was their attitude to these questions? In the 1870's and 1880's, Vaillant certainly seems at times to identify himself with the "idealist" crusade against religion, whose most extreme spokesman was Blanqui. The manifesto *Aux Communeux*, which he and the Blanquist refugees

¹ Indeed, in 1875, Marx actually criticises the German Social Democrats for not having given more space in their party programme to the Socialist view of anticlericalism. Karl Marx et Frédéric Engels, *Critique des Programmes socialistes de Gotha et d'Erfurt* (Paris, 1948), p. 37.

² Willard, *Les Guesdistes*, op. cit., p. 550.

³ Jolyon Howorth, "Edouard Vaillant and the French socialist movement. The tactics of 'total action'" (Ph.D. thesis, Reading University, 1973), Pt II. This thesis will be published shortly in revised form by Maspero, Paris. Vaillant was in fact more of a Marxist than a Blanquist. On this point, see Jolyon Howorth, "The Myth of Blanquism under the Third Republic", in: *Journal of Modern History*, XLVIII (1976).

published in 1874, had denounced God as “cette erreur génératrice de toutes les autres”.¹ In 1881, Vaillant declared that the source of all evil on earth was to be located in the dualist, spiritualist conception of the world, and in the Christian idea of God.² Clearly such anticlerical statements as these suggest that Vaillant and his friends were very close to Blanqui’s idealist standpoint.

However, two elements must be borne in mind when considering the nature of Vaillant’s anticlericalism in this early period. First, it should be remembered that the infant Republic was still in the throes of a desperate battle to assert its own sovereignty as against the claims of the Bourbon monarchy, which was strongly supported by the Church. In this battle, the political importance of anticlericalism was fundamental. For the Vaillantists, as for Jaurès, this political struggle was, in many ways, the primary concern. Second, it is the case that, alongside such “idealist” anticlerical statements as we have just examined, one finds an increasing volume of analysis which reflects a solid and coherent materialist interpretation of history.³ If idealism and materialism were, in the 1880’s, more juxtaposed than synthesised in Vaillant’s mind (as they had been in Blanqui’s) this state of affairs was not to last. Materialism was rapidly getting the upper hand and was soon to become dominant. Indeed, Vaillant’s overt atheism of the late 1870’s and early 1880’s may well have been purely conjunctural, a tactical response to what he considered to be a serious political threat from the Church. One must not forget that as early as 1869, in a letter to his friend Ludwig Feuerbach, he had made practically the same point about the relationship between anticlericalism and anticapitalism as Marx had made in his *Theses on Feuerbach*.⁴

The emergence in Vaillant of a coherent “materialist” approach to anticlericalism can be clearly seen in the 1890’s. In a major theoretical article in 1892, he sought to explain why his party attached such importance to atheism.⁵ In this article, he presented atheism in terms of a positive, post-Darwinian comprehension of the evolution of matter. Before Darwin, he wrote, scientists had only been vaguely aware of the possibility of organic links between mineral life and animal cells. In those days, atheism was no more than “une simple négation”. But Darwin had destroyed for ever “l’hypothèse dualiste,

¹ Aux Communeux (London, 1874).

² “La Rentrée des Chambres”, in: Ni Dieu Ni Maître, 30 January 1881.

³ Howorth, “Edouard Vaillant and the French socialist movement”, Pt II, Section II.

⁴ Ausgewählte Briefe von und an Ludwig Feuerbach, ed. by Wilhelm Bolin (Leipzig, 1904), I, pp. 189-90.

⁵ “Athée”, in: Le Parti Socialiste, 28 February 1892.

spiritualiste, religieuse” by showing the “*unité des manifestations de la vie sur le globe, la généalogie des êtres*”. In this way, Vaillant argued, Darwin had provided the key which had been so sorely lacking since Newton, the “*explication rationnelle de l’univers et de son évolution progressive et indéfinie*”.

Of course, atheism in this sense was an interpretation of the evolution of the universe. It was not, as was Marx’s materialism, an interpretation of the history of human society. It was, however, a precondition for an understanding of Marxian materialism. Marx himself, on reading *The Origin of Species* in 1860, had reacted in precisely the same way as Vaillant. To Engels he wrote that the book contained a “*natural-scientific basis for the class struggle in history*”, and concluded that “*not only is the death-blow dealt here for the first time to ‘teleology’ in the natural sciences but its rational meaning is empirically explained*”.¹ It is certain that most would-be Socialists in the nineteenth century had to cope with the religious problem before going any further.² In short, for Vaillant, as for Marx, atheism was a *pre-condition* for the understanding of historical materialism. It was not, as it was in Blanqui, the mainspring, the very essence of that consciousness or, as Blanqui put it: “*the philosophical thought which will engender the equal and free society*”.³ Blanqui’s atheism was inextricably linked to his idealist faith that education and enlightenment were the only real revolutionary agents. Vaillant’s atheism was a starting point for a fundamentally materialist interpretation of history, which it is impossible to examine further in the present article.⁴

At this purely philosophical or ideological level, therefore, Vaillant considered atheism to be one of the most elementary requirements for the Socialist recruit. It was, he believed, essential in the context of late-nineteenth-century French society for every Socialist to reject unequivocally the Catholic version of God and man. Was this not, after all, what Marx himself had meant when he wrote⁵ that “*the criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism*”? However, Vaillant’s party was alone among French Socialist groups in insisting on this

¹ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Correspondence* (Moscow, n.d.), p. 151.

² Leon Trotsky, who first read Darwin in 1899 at the age of twenty, later recalled how his “*description of the way in which the pattern on the peacock’s feathers formed itself naturally, banished for ever the idea of the Supreme Being from his mind*”. Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed* (New York, 1965), p. 38.

³ Dommanget, *Les Idées politiques*, op. cit., p. 280.

⁴ This question is explored at some length in my forthcoming book on Vaillant.

⁵ Marx, “*Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*”, in Marx and Engels, *On Religion* (New York, 1964), p. 41.

ideological point. Neither Jaurès nor Guesde so insisted. In Jaurès's case, his reluctance to brandish the flag of atheism no doubt stemmed from a feeling that this amounted to a doctrinaire infringement of the intellectual freedom of the individual.¹ In Guesde's case, it was certainly because he saw it as contrary to the teachings of historical materialism – and because he was afraid of turning away recruits!² Yet the Vaillantists were not primarily concerned with fighting or even with winning ideological or philosophical battles. They were far more interested in the down-to-earth realms of concrete political combat. Such combat immediately raised the question of the extent to which Socialists and Radicals could join forces in common pursuit of their joint anticlerical goals. This problem was to present itself with increasing urgency during the late 1890's.

In about 1890, a section of the Catholic Church, under the direction of Pope Leo XIII, began to accept the *fait accompli* of the Republican regime. The encyclical *Rerum Novarum* of May 1891 was widely regarded as the first official call for Catholics to make their peace with the Republic. What was to become known as the *Ralliement* had begun. Vaillant was immediately wary of the tremendous danger of co-optation which this development implied.³ The Opportunists, having consolidated their rule, were now, like Bonaparte, like the Orléanists, like Napoleon III, anxious to accept the support of their erstwhile clerical foe. Christian socialism was beginning to make its appearance at the same time; “du bon patronat exploitant un docile salariat”, Vaillant commented laconically.⁴ All these new developments suggested to Vaillant that the forces of “order” were closing ranks to bar the way to any further change. The advocates of “further change” were the Radicals and the Socialists.

The Radicals represented the long tradition of secular, positivist nonconformity which had characterised the petty-bourgeois and artisanal classes in France throughout most of the nineteenth century.⁵ As we have seen, they considered separation of Church and State and suppression of the religious budget as a political necessity without which the security of the Republic could never be certain. But the Radicals were divided among themselves as to the extent to which

¹ Henri Guillemin, at any rate, argues this case in *L'Arrière-pensée de Jaurès* (Paris, 1966), p. 37.

² Willard, *Les Guesdistes*, p. 60.

³ “L'Évolution socialiste – Vaillant”, in: *Le Parti Socialiste*, 2 August 1891.

⁴ “Concentration réactionnaire”, in: *Le Parti Socialiste*, 27 September 1891.

⁵ For a good, concise presentation of this tradition, see Eric Cahm, *Politics and Society in Contemporary France* (London, 1972), pp. 376-77.

anticlericalism should be taken. Some, belonging to free-thinking circles, like Beauquier, Charles Dumont, Ferdinand Buisson, believed that simple separation was not sufficient, and that the social and ideological influence of the Church in France should be broken. Others simply wished to secure the secularisation of the State. The Radicals had, by the early 1890's, come within sight of governmental power. Their "radicalism" began to be modified accordingly.¹ How did Vaillant react to them?

On occasions, applying a rather blind and narrow interpretation of the class struggle, Vaillant tried to claim that the Radicals had no more intention of bringing about separation than the Opportunists.² He was no doubt influenced by signs like the one in December 1891, when many Radicals voted against separation in order to prevent the government from being toppled.³ However, on other occasions Vaillant accepted the reality of the Radical desire for separation, but stressed the difference between the Socialist view of that process and the more moderate one which was advocated by the moderate wing of the Radicals:

"En ce moment l'Eglise étreint l'Etat et lui commande. Nous voulons échapper à cette étreinte, et c'est à ce titre que la séparation est appuyée de notre vote et de nos efforts, mais non, bien entendu, pour laisser, suivant la formule libérale, 'l'Eglise libre dans l'Etat libre', c'est-à-dire l'Eglise armée de tous les pouvoirs enlevés à l'Etat, libre de le tenir d'une façon plus étroite encore à sa disposition, à son service."⁴

This was Vaillant's view in 1895, and, indeed, this question of how "free" the Church should be after separation was to become the main bone of contention during the debates on the Act of Separation in 1905. In 1895, Vaillant asserted that he was a "resolute partisan of individual liberty" and that he would be the last person to try to prevent anybody from meeting – as long as they did not pose a serious threat to the very fabric of society (which is, of course, the traditional rationale for repression of all kinds). He considered that the Church had shown in the past that it did pose a threat to the freedom of

¹ John McManners, *Church and State in France, 1870-1914* (New York, 1972), pp. 140-43.

² "Cléricaux et opportunistes", in: *Le Parti Socialiste*, 20 December 1891; "Laïcisation", in: *La Petite République*, 19 July 1895; "Réponse de Vaillant", in: *Le Mouvement Socialiste*, 1 November 1902, p. 1938.

³ See on this point Jacques Kayser, *Les Grandes Batailles du Radicalisme* (Paris, 1962), p. 192.

⁴ "Laïcisation", loc. cit.

French society; he did not believe that the more moderate aim of secularisation of the State would remove that threat:

“Ce n’est pas seulement la première et pressante mesure de suppression du budget des cultes et ses 45 millions d’économies qu’il nous faut; c’est la suppression de la mendicité cléricale, c’est l’Eglise hors de l’école prétendue libre, et hors de l’atelier; c’est la restitution des biens de mainmorte, la restitution des Eglises, presbytères et tous autres édifices du culte catholique, protestant ou juif, à la nation; c’est enfin cléricaux et prêtres non plus dans la situation privilégiée que leur ont faite des siècles d’ignorance et d’oppression religieuse, mais dans les mêmes conditions que tous les autres citoyens.”¹

Only under these conditions, Vaillant urged, could spiritualists and other religious organisations meet together without danger to society.

The early 1890’s did not really give Vaillant the opportunity to come to terms with the problems of the relationship between the anticlericalism of the Socialists and that of the Radicals. The latter were still in opposition and it was difficult if not rather pointless for the Socialists to try to make out that there was a *fundamental, philosophical* difference between the two approaches. In any case, Vaillant never attempted to do so. But the *Ralliement* did succeed in restoring the power of the Church;² the scene was set for a major confrontation between Church and State at the end of the decade.

The Guesdists had, throughout the period of the *Ralliement*, continued to look upon anticlericalism as a diversion of Socialist energy. As the Church began to recover some of its strength during the period leading up to the Dreyfus affair, Vaillant began to attack the Guesdists quite openly.³ It was impossible, he insisted, to ignore the *political* threat posed by the Church. It was all very well, he said, to argue that the forces of production were the substructure of a society, which could only be toppled at the roots. There was, he agreed, a fundamental

¹ *Ibid.*

² Despite a great deal of talk about separation of Church and State, it was the lay schools which were actually brought into question in this period, the Cempuis orphanage being a case in point. See Dommanget, *Les Grands Educateurs* – Jean Jaurès (Paris, 1954), pp. 8-9; Emile Levasseur, *Questions ouvrières et industrielles en France sous la Troisième République* (Paris, 1907), p. 853. Vaillant’s own reaction in “Tartuffes et Gredins”, in: *La Petite République*, 16 November 1894. The Church also began to fill many of the official posts it had lost during the initial wave of anticlericalism in the 1870’s.

³ In 1896, he referred to them as “snobs dilettants et sectaires”, “Hors la Salle”, in: *La Carmagnole*, 28 November 1896. The two following quotations are taken from the same article.

truth in this. But all that really meant was that the forces of production were “le facteur principal de l'évolution de cette complexité vivante, dont les éléments ne peuvent être compris, n'ont de valeur réelle que par leur rapport avec l'ensemble, avec l'organisme social en son développement”. In the context of the total action of the revolutionary forces, he argued, it was impossible to neglect one single aspect of that social, political and historical “ensemble”. The Revolution had to strike out at all its enemies, “si elle ne veut se laisser entraîner par celui qu'elle néglige et derrière qui tous les autres, alors, passeront”. Nobody, he went on, was questioning the fact that, once the revolution had been achieved, the Church – and the standing army – would disappear, that once capitalism was destroyed, religious superstition and other dualistic forms of alienation would vanish; but capitalism was not yet defeated, he insisted; it was therefore more than ever imperative to answer the clerical onslaught with counter-fire.

The Church, he claimed once again, was not really worried by the “menace quelque peu distante et platonique” presented by the Radicals:¹ it knew that the only real threat to its existence came from the Socialist movement. As with the question of the defence of the Republic, as with that of reformism and every measure of progress, Vaillant called on the Socialist movement to distinguish itself from the Radicals and other bourgeois parties. Only the Socialists, he claimed, sought the end of capitalism. He admitted that certain elements of the Socialist struggle coincided with the political activities of the non-Socialist elements which, for other reasons, were opposed to certain aspects of the present *status quo*. Therefore, in order to destroy the props of the system – the Church and the army – the Socialists “peuvent et doivent, à chaque occasion propice agir avec tous les ennemis sincères de la religion et des églises”.² But, he insisted, the party could not afford to tack itself on to the campaign led by these non-Socialist elements: it was up to them to join forces with the Socialist-led campaign:

“de même que tous les tenants du capitalisme et de la réaction se sont ralliés contre nous, autour du cléricalisme; que tous les athées, matérialistes et anticléricaux qui ont à coeur de mettre fin au cléricalisme [...] se rallient aux socialistes.”³

However unrealistic this recurring attitude may have been politically, it did have the merit of being consistent. If the bourgeois forces of progress would not join hands with the Socialists, then Vaillant

¹ “Question cléricale”, in: *La Petite République*, 16 July 1897.

² “Action anticléricale”, in: *La Petite République*, 8 October 1897.

³ *Ibid.*

believed that the Socialists should conduct a *separate* campaign which, even if it inevitably paralleled certain aspects of the bourgeois campaign, would nevertheless be clearly seen to be going much further. Under no circumstances, he believed, could the party afford to abandon its own unique position as the standard-bearer of the future.

The crystallisation of the struggle against clericalism which took place at the turn of the century thus highlighted and accentuated the three different tactical approaches adopted by Jaurès, Vaillant and Guesde. I do not intend to go into the general question of party differences during these years. I would, however, like to examine the respective attitudes to the question of anticlericalism adopted by the three Socialist leaders. As I have already indicated, the quarrel between Jaurès and Vaillant was largely political; that between Guesde and Vaillant was mainly doctrinal, but was also overlaid with a political veneer.

For Jaurès, the Dreyfus affair had made one thing clear. The Church and the army had to be tamed before the Republic could begin to feel secure enough to tackle the real political and social issues of the day. Jaurès recognised, in 1899 and in the years that followed, that an increasing number of republican politicians were intent on enacting these essential measures of republican consolidation. He regarded the submission of the Church as the final great work of the 1789 Revolution which remained to be achieved. He considered that, on this issue at least, there was fundamentally no difference between the Socialists and the Radicals. Jaurès, therefore, saw it as vital that the Socialists should provide active and solid support for whatever government was able and prepared to push these measures through. This he intended to do no matter how much he might thereby be obliged to compromise certain Socialist principles which were as dear to him as they were to anyone.¹

The Guesdists, on the other hand, continued to assert that the question of Church and State was a red-herring and that the Socialists could not afford to waste their time on such an issue. Clericalism, they argued, was “un phénomène politique qui ne peut se comprendre que sous le régime bourgeois et en période capitaliste”.² Clericalism, the reader of the Guesdist press was assured, was a revolt, on the part of certain priests, against the authority of the bourgeoisie. Anticlericalism was therefore the bourgeois repression of this insubordination. It was in no way an attack on religion, nor did it alter in any way the nature of society. Socialism, the Guesdists argued, “ne s’inquiète pas de telle

¹ Goldberg, *The Life of Jean Jaurès*, op. cit., pp. 293-300.

² “Pas de Collaborations”, in: *Le Socialiste*, 2-9 August 1903. The two following quotations are taken from the same article.

ou telle croyance. Il s'attaque simplement à ce qui fait la force du clergé, à l'argent et à la propriété". Religious beliefs, it was said, were of no interest to Socialists either before or after the revolution. Before that event, the problem was to be sought elsewhere; afterwards, everyone could afford to ignore the few manifestations of religious belief which still lingered. Such was Guesdist doctrine. As for the political question, it was considered that "La collaboration à une oeuvre bourgeoise, quelle qu'elle soit, entraîne un socialiste à participer à des besognes louches, [...] à se salir les mains, bref, à se diminuer. Toute oeuvre bourgeoise, surtout lorsqu'elle a des apparences humanitaires, est louche et douteuse, par définition."¹

Despite the seriousness of the ideological divergence between the POF and the PSR,² Vaillant attempted, in the interest of wider political objectives, to stress the factors which united the two parties. During the debates on anticlericalism which occupied the Chamber in October 1902, the Guesdist Constans joined Vaillant and Allard in presenting an *ordre du jour* urging the government to proceed forthwith to abrogation of the Concordat, separation of Church and State, and suppression of the religious budget. In his speech, Constans contented himself with arguing that "le servage économique donne naissance [...] à tous les servages". The ministerial Socialists jumped on these words to point out the difference between the Vaillantists and the Guesdists. Vaillant answered these charges in *Le Socialiste*: "Constans avait exposé [...] que le parti socialiste seul, par la destruction du régime capitaliste, mettrait fin au cléricalisme [...]. Allard et moi *ajoutions* [my stress] que par cela même que nous voulions la destruction du régime capitaliste, il nous en fallait au plus tôt désarmer les soutiens".³ Thus Vaillant tried to reduce the difference in approach to one of proportion. The Guesdists believed one thing, and the Vaillantists believed that, *as well as something extra*.

In 1903, in the same way, Vaillant set himself the task of suggesting that the views of the Guesdists, as quoted above, merely represented the first half of the whole picture; their doctrinal approach, he suggested, failed to take full account of political reality. He accepted that Social Democracy was still pursuing certain of the aims of the original

¹ See another article by Bonnier in the same vein, "Renan et Combes", in: *Le Socialiste*, 13-20 September 1903.

² There can be no more striking example of this divergence than a comparison of Bonnier's article "Pas de Collaborations", loc. cit., with one by Vaillant's lieutenant, Emile Landrin, "La Lutte antireligieuse", published on the same page of the same issue of *Le Socialiste*.

³ "Calomnie et Vérité", in: *Le Socialiste*, 25 October – 2 November 1902. Vaillant concluded his article by suggesting that the fact that the two views complemented each other proved the strength of POF-PSR unity.

bourgeois revolutionary democrats. But whereas those aims (the taming of the Church and the army) were for the Socialists merely the first steps to be taken on a long journey, for the bourgeoisie they represented the last steps on a journey which had already come a long way. The Socialist, argued Vaillant, must help to realise those aims. But in so doing, he must stress the difference between his interpretation of them and that of the bourgeois Radicals. There was, he insisted, no need to give unconditional political support to the bourgeoisie – as Jaurès had done.¹ Vaillant still seems to have been unconvinced that the Radicals really intended to press on with a programme of separation which would be effective in reducing the social and political power of the Church.² In a clash with Maurice Allard in the Chamber in January 1903, Combes had explicitly stated that he had no desire to actually weaken the social strength of the Church.³ The Vaillantists were convinced that separation without complementary measures to curb the influence of the Church would have no real effect at all. Hence their vigorous stand over the Act of Separation in 1905.

On March 4, 1905, Aristide Briand presented the report of the Chamber commission charged with studying the various proposals for separation. On March 21, the debate in the Chamber began; it ended on July 3. During that time the original project of the commission was transformed into a very different type of reform from that in the March 4 report.⁴ The Vaillantists' fears about the effectiveness of separation were largely justified by events. How did they act during the debates?

The main advocate of the more "extreme" case for separation was Maurice Allard. It was he who proposed and explained the numerous "extremist" amendments tabled by the "Revolutionary Socialist" caucus.⁵ Allard, born in 1860 in the Indre et Loire, had practised law

¹ "Armement et Désarmement", in: *Le Socialiste*, 16-23 August 1903. This article was an attempt by Vaillant to undo some of the damage caused by the publication of the divergent articles quoted in note 2 on p. 176.

² See in particular "Réponse de Vaillant", in: *Le Mouvement Socialiste*, 1 November 1902.

³ *La Séparation de l'Eglise et de l'Etat*, op. cit., p. 23.

⁴ Witness Suarez: "Dans l'esprit de ceux qui l'avaient décidée, la loi de Séparation devait être un instrument de déchristianisation, une arme contre l'Eglise et la foi. Briand ne veut pas faire une loi qui 'soit comme un révolver braqué contre l'Eglise'. Briand imprègne son oeuvre d'une sorte de sérénité supérieure qui laisse à l'Eglise comme à l'Etat, les moyens de se protéger contre les empiètements mutuels." Georges Suarez, *Briand*, II (Paris, 1938), p. 42.

⁵ The members of the "Revolutionary Socialist" opposition were: Allard, Bouveri, Chauvière, Constans, Coutant, Dejeante, Delory, Dufour, Piger, Sembat, Thivrier, Vaillant and Walter.

in the Department of the Var and had written for *La Lanterne*. In 1897, he had joined Vaillant's PSR and was elected to the Chamber the following year as deputy for Draguignan. Closely connected with free-thinking circles, Allard had gradually emerged as the PSR spokesman on anticlericalism. Speaking as a free-thinker first and foremost, Allard pleaded during the debate on separation in the name of extreme-radical positivism:

“Le Christianisme est un outrage à la raison, un outrage à la nature. [...] quand le Christianisme quitta Rome et la Grèce où il avait étouffé toute civilisation et où il n'avait laissé que ruines et décombres, et arriva en France, il n'y eut plus en notre pays, ni arts, ni lettres, et surtout, ni sciences. Il fallut la Renaissance, il fallut la Révolution française pour redonner au cerveau de notre race sa véritable puissance de normale évolution et sa possibilité de progrès. Sous l'influence du judéo-christianisme, toute lumière avait disparu”.¹

It was not until the very end of his speech that Allard added that religion was a political tool in the hands of the bourgeoisie for the continued exploitation of the proletariat. Allard's speech was that of a rationalist, a lawyer and a free-thinker.²

Vaillant's speech was that of a politician and a Socialist.³ He began by recalling that when separation had first been instituted in 1794, the Church itself had largely been in favour. Church leaders, he claimed, had realised that the civil constitution of the clergy and the measures of de-Christianisation had failed. This, suggested Vaillant, was because these efforts had been the work of a revolutionary minority which had been far in advance of its time. When the Churches were reopened, he noted, there had even been an increase in interest and attendance; in short, the religious beliefs of the masses had in no way been affected by the idealism of the Revolution:

“Dans son premier effort, en décidant la victoire du Tiers-Etat contre les deux ordres et l'ancien régime, en anéantissant les obstacles que cet ancien régime opposait au développement économique et politique, la Révolution, qui créait un régime nouveau où, par les conditions transformées de la production, allait se produire un antagonisme nouveau de classes et une

¹ Journal Officiel, Chambre – Débats, 10 April 1905, pp. 1293-1300.

² He stressed in particular the difference between “liberté de conscience”, which he considered as belonging to the domain of “droit privé”, and “liberté de religion”, which he called a “droit public”.

³ Journal Officiel, op. cit., pp. 1300-02.

mentalité nouvelle, n'avait pu amener une modification, aux débuts, assez grande de cette mentalité pour la préserver des reprises des sentiments héréditaires de soumission et de religion."

Thus, Vaillant concluded, it was perfectly logical that the Church should have flourished after 1794. But the fate of secularism had been wedded to the necessity of separation. The bond had been broken by the political machinations of Bonaparte: "Il lui fallait, en effet [...] recruter une gendarmerie sacrée qui doublât la gendarmerie terrestre et entrât au service du pouvoir." So the Concordat was arranged. But Bonaparte, Vaillant argued, had made one mistake: that of assuming that French Catholics were Frenchman first and Catholics only second. The clergy gradually became more and more *ultramontain* and papist, and the Gallican Church faded away.

"Il est certain que, dès cette époque et plus encore ultérieurement, le clergé catholique avant tout était [...] entièrement [...] au service du pape et que, par conséquent, l'Etat trouvait en lui une puissance avec laquelle il était obligé de compter, soit qu'elle fût en conflit avec lui ou tentât de devenir prépondérante, soit qu'elle lui donnât son concours, quand ils agissaient d'accord, quand l'Etat, instrument de pouvoir de la classe dominante, reconnaissait qu'ils servaient des intérêts communs. C'est ainsi qu'au fur et à mesure que se transformait la société, dans les moments critiques particulièrement et de révolution, l'Etat comprit que, s'il voulait faire obstacle aux progrès de la démocratie, à la République, au socialisme, à la classe ouvrière, il devait combiner ses efforts avec les efforts du clergé."

This, Vaillant claimed had happened under the Restoration, under the Second Republic, under the Empire, in 1871 and at the time of the *Seize Mai* crisis in 1877.

So far, Vaillant's analysis went no further than a practical political analysis of a historically evolving political situation. He continued at this level by attempting to link the economic factors behind the development of the working class with the growing anticlericalism of the workers: "A mesure que la société se transformait par le fait même de la révolution et du développement économique auquel elle avait ouvert la voie, se développait l'antagonisme ouvrier et capitaliste et avec lui l'opposition de la classe ouvrière à l'Etat et à l'Eglise." At the time of the 1789 Revolution there had been, Vaillant noted, no proletariat and no heavy industry. The idea of the master (*le maître*), whether it were employer, landlord or God, had barely been shaken by the Revolution. However, throughout the nineteenth century, he

declared, the development of heavy industry had gradually succeeded in dissipating that age-old aura which had surrounded "the master":

"C'était le développement économique qui créait et agglomérait un prolétariat qui s'organisait et pensait [...]. Ce prolétariat ne jugeait plus [...] le maître comme le représentant du Dieu. Dans le patron, dans le propriétaire auquel il s'opposait [...] il commençait à nier le Dieu [...] et son opposition à l'Eglise croissait avec son opposition à son maître économique et politique."

As industrialisation gathered pace, he continued, the old religious beliefs had withered away proportionately: "Dans l'ensemble de la nation ouvrière, une conception nouvelle, naturelle, rationnelle du monde, de sa transformation, accompagnait constamment le développement de la production formée, accélérée par elle et s'opposait à la conception, à la croyance religieuse."

Society, Vaillant asserted, had already secularised itself "mentally"; gradually, it was now overcoming the resistance of State and Church, and secularising its institutions. But the State, he added, was many things. In one sense it was regarded as the representative of society; as such it had indeed secularised a number of public services. But the State was also, and above all, the instrument of power of the ruling class; as such it was still clinging to its alliance with the Church against the forces of change. For the Socialists, therefore, the task was clear: "Il faut diviser ce double ennemi dont les forces réunies sont plus redoutables [...]. Il nous faut profiter du moment où l'Etat sous la pression de l'opinion s'y décide." Once again, we come across Vaillant's unshakable belief that the Radical government was merely responding to public pressure; once again, his refusal to accept that the Radicals were bent on establishing a secular and democratic Republic. At the same time we note Vaillant's exaggeration of the extent to which the community was ready for de-Christianisation.

Can one really take Vaillant's argument at face-value? Did he really believe that public opinion was pressing for an all-out attack on organised religion? Did he believe that the Chamber would accept any more than the relatively moderate proposals of the commission? When Allard had first spoken in the Chamber on the Act, Briand had observed that his "excellent friend Allard" knew full well that the proposals of the commission represented the maximum that it was possible to obtain from the current majority.¹ In his own speech, Vaillant had admitted that, even if all the amendments tabled by the "Revolutionary Socialists" were accepted, a great deal would still

¹ *Ibid.*, 27 March 1905, p. 1086.

remain to be done: "Tant que l'Eglise n'aura pas entièrement disparu, tant que la laïcisation de la société ne sera pas faite, notre tâche ne sera pas achevée." He added that, of course, only the revolution which emancipated the proletariat could finish off the remaining tasks of anticlericalism. Nevertheless, he regarded separation as a first and vital step and he ended his speech by stating that, if Allard's amendments were rejected,

"je me résignerai à voter, pour cette séparation, le projet, que nous tenterons d'améliorer, de la commission. Je vois, je le répète, socialement, politiquement, dans la séparation de l'Eglise et de l'Etat, une des conditions du développement de la démocratie sociale, du développement du pays et de l'émancipation de la classe ouvrière."

In actual fact, the project of the commission was, as I have said, considerably diluted during the course of the debates. The Church was left in control of most of its property, its hierarchical structure and social implantation remained untouched. Try as they might, with amendment after amendment,¹ Allard and Vaillant were unable to sway the extremely liberal and moderate sentiment of the Chamber. In presenting his amendment to Article 18, Allard confessed that, before the debate began, he had believed that "il existait, à la gauche de cette Chambre, une majorité, décidée à faire une séparation conforme au vieux programme républicain, c'est-à-dire une séparation qui désarmât l'Eglise, qui tendît à diminuer sa malfaisance politique et sociale".² He had, he admitted, soon realised how wrong he had been. "Mon cher Briand", he remarked, "on vous a changé votre enfant." Every single article which had been voted, he charged, had been different from its equivalent in the original report of the commission. This was an exaggeration. However, it was true, as Vaillant later noted,³ that every important article had been accepted by the Chamber only "dans des conditions favorables à l'Eglise". Allard summed up the feelings of the extremists:⁴

"Nous ne faisons plus la séparation des Eglises et de l'Etat: nous procédons à l'affranchissement de l'Eglise par l'Etat. Mais comme à cette Eglise affranchie vous laissez tous ses privilèges de richesse

¹ Especially to Article 4 (three amendments proposed) and Articles 1, 9, 10, 18.

² Journal Officiel, 20 June 1905, p. 2333.

³ Ibid., 3 July 1905, p. 2688.

⁴ There were 59 deputies who voted in favour of the "extremists" amendment. In addition to the 13 "Revolutionary Socialists" mentioned on p. 177, note 5, there were 12 members of the Parti Socialiste Français (Jauressist) and about 30 members of the "radical-socialiste" group.

et de prestige, elle deviendra demain cent fois plus puissante et plus forte qu'elle ne l'est sous le régime actuel."¹

Again, this was clearly something of an exaggeration. But the fact remains that the separation which Vaillant and Allard had wanted was totally different from that for which they eventually voted on July 3. In arguing for the Socialist view of separation, in formulating, to use his own terms, "la solution socialiste", Vaillant felt he had preserved his political integrity, while at the same time in no way hindering the passing of the Act. In voting for it, he was simply registering his acknowledgement of the degree of historical change which the Chamber had shown itself to be ready for. In fearing that that degree of change would turn out to be no change at all, in pleading that separation such as was voted in 1905 would not reduce the power of the Church, he was in fact being perfectly clear-sighted.

The anticlericalism of Vaillant and his friends is a rather complex phenomenon. It is, in fact, a close reflection of their overall political outlook. Clearly, they were in the tradition of the idealist, rationalist free-thought whose roots are in the eighteenth century. This tradition was the child of the Enlightenment, and, to this extent, essentially part and parcel of the "bourgeois" intellectual heritage. At the same time, however, as a political leader and strategist, Vaillant was firmly in the Marxist camp. It is doubtful whether it is possible to marry Voltaire and Marx in the realm of philosophy. In any event, Vaillant avoided making the attempt. When, during his speech on the separation issue, he traced the history of anticlericalism in France, his account was overwhelmingly Marxist in inspiration. But ultimately it is rather unconvincing. His portrayal of the growth of atheism among the working classes (which, he failed to point out, was far from universal even in the most industrialised areas) is over-deterministic and far too general. One has the impression that Vaillant was searching around for a theoretical rationale to substantiate a political position reached by aprioristic reasoning.

It was in the realm of politics that he did attempt to synthesise the Enlightenment and Marxist traditions. But here too he ran into difficulties. For the former views history as an evolutionary, linear, essentially idealist movement, whereas the latter sees mainly dialectics, conflict, rupture, and is based on materialist premises. In political terms, the task in 1905 was to promote at one and the same time the immediate linear progress of the bourgeois Republic and the long-term dialectical progress of Socialism. Vaillant believed that he alone

¹ Journal Officiel, 20 June 1905, p. 2333.

possessed the solution to this problem. Jaurès, he felt, tended to put the Republic before Socialism. Guesde tended to neglect the importance of the Republic. Jaurès, by adopting the strategy of open collaboration with the Radicals, laid himself open to charges of having betrayed the Socialist movement. Guesde, by underestimating the importance of the republican heritage, was clearly neglecting a vital and essential element of French national life. Vaillant's solution of simultaneous support for immediate progress and propagation of long-term horizons was perhaps the most relevant to the requirements of Socialism in France. At the same time, it was undoubtedly the most difficult strategy to implement.

The anticlerical question is a classic example of the divergence of approach which characterised the three main Socialist leaders of the time. The question of reconciling Marx and Voltaire was not solved in France during the "golden" age of Democratic Socialism. It remains unsolved to this day.