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ABSTRACT

The term “Enlightenment” has become synonymous with “secular,” or “irreligious.” But such a conception is a simplified interpretation of the complex reality. In this reality, the Enlightenment did not function as a complete break with the past, but rather based its conceptions of a secular world on the religiously oriented structures of the past.

Two women, Madame de Tencin and Rahel Varnhagen, exemplify this realistic conception of the Enlightenment. As salon hostesses, they epitomize the emphasis on intellectualism and Enlightenment trends of thought. Yet, their words and actions show them to maintain strong connections to the religious past, even as they advocate for progressive change. This thesis aims not to narrate their lives, but rather investigate the paradoxes they suggest. Why would two women so strongly associated with the French Enlightenment, a period that inspired the ideal of secularization, and sparked notions of progress and modernity, reflect such ‘antiquated’ connection to the religious?

Tracing the origins of Enlightenment appeal to the initial disillusionment found within vitriolic religious warfare and perpetuation of oppression within family structures, this thesis then examines the question: how does religion continue to be expressed within a “secularized” society?

As key members of societies that have now forgotten their merits, unearthing their personal stories and the role that religion played in their lives is necessary to understand a period of time that has long been generalized as “secular.”
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Tal Grebel
2011
INTRODUCTION

On July 14th, 1789, furious French revolutionaries stormed the cold Bastille prison. The revolutionaries were angry; they wanted change; they wanted down with the old values of the past! The cleavage between the Ancien Regime and the modern period is mythically attributed to that invasion on July 14th, 1789. Indeed, the day has become the French national day of independence, an attribution immortalizing the day’s importance. But the fact that no one was there highlights the day’s place as a symbol of separation rather than a realistic break.

The active storming of the Bastille during the Revolution is a vivid climax of Enlightenment rhetoric. That rhetoric called for a destruction of the Ancien Regime and, correspondingly, a strict separation of church and state. The implication of transcending the Ancien Regime, then, is that one surpassed the corrupt models of the past. Modern historians who focus on a definitive break with the past, though, forget the continuous nature of history, where the past is always a part of present culture. The separation of church and state inspired by the Enlightenment and visually embedded into French mythology by the Revolution is symbolic, not realistic. Secularization embraced during this disillusionment with religion does not preclude a perpetuation of past religious ideology within a secularized mentality.

The progressive theory of modernism eliminates the possibility that secularism and religiosity are compatible. Eminent historian Peter Gay generalizes that “the men of the Enlightenment united on a vastly ambitious program, a program of secularism.”¹ He claims that “[b]y the eighteenth century, unbelievers and believers alike had lost the key

to the symbolic language of medieval Christendom.”

But his philosophy focuses only on the loss of faith in religion as a politically powerful institution. Ignoring the fact that not all men of the Enlightenment can be generalized as perceiving the same ideal, his characterization of the term “secularism,” as one by which all religious identity is lost, is incomplete. As even Peter Gay recognizes, religion is a composite creation that also addresses symbols – he references the “symbolic language of medieval Christendom” – personal expression, and identity in addition to faith and institution. Religion is a thought process that is not distinct from lives that people led. In fact, it is highly integrated within daily existence, and continued to structure society well past the diminishment of Church authority.

The salon structure expressed this undercurrent of religiosity even as it dispersed Enlightenment trends of thought. Salon hostesses gathered around them “the philosophe: the facile, articulate, doctrinaire, sociable, secular man of letters” (his italics). During those dynamic salon gatherings, the salon hostess was an integral member who either led or inspired philosophical discussions characteristic of the Enlightenment. Historian Dena Goodman effectively connects the work of the salonnières with that of the philosophes in describing how, “[l]ike the philosophes who gathered in their homes, the salonnières were practical people who worked at tasks they considered productive and useful. They took themselves, their salons, and their guests very seriously.”

Indeed, the “conversation became an indicator of certain established attitudes and values which may be seen in

\[2\] Idem, 352.
\[3\] Idem, 10.
other aspects of French culture of this period.”⁵ In leading these salons, these women epitomize the intellectually secular trends of the time period.

This dialogue was not pedantic in any way, but rather expressed a “volatile sense of gaiety and wit, that especially characterizes the French society.” Because, as those vivid words evoke, “it glitters from a thousand facets, it surprises us in a thousand delicate turns of thought, it appears in countless movements and shades of expression,” the basic spirit of the salons cannot be caught.⁶ But their importance can nonetheless be understood. Through the work that they were doing, salonnières “were conducting the Enlightenment.”⁷

The salon structure began in the 1630s with Madame de Rambouillet’s first, French salon.⁸ There, she introduced the importance of polite etiquette and a structured society. Rather than emphasizing the break with the past, Ancien Regime, the polite society of salon culture emphasized the continuous nature of religion through acquiescence to communal authority. In order to participate in Enlightened dialogue, one needed to follow the generally accepted norms of correct conduct. Indeed “religion fosters the internalization of norms, advocates particular guidelines for behavior, gives its adherents a firm notion that there are right and wrong ways.” (my italics)⁹ By conducting polite society, French salonnières such as Madame Geoffrin and Madame de

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⁶ Amelia Gere Mason, *The Women of the French Salons* (New York: The Century Co., 1891): 2. While recognizing that this historian hails from the 19th century and therefore has a particular manner of staring into the face of history, this historian believes that her words reveal incontrovertible truths relevant to the discussion of religion in a secular environment.
Stael perpetuated this moral component of religion, even as they reinforced Enlightenment trends through an emphasis on parity and dialogue.

Salons held by German *salonnières* of the 19th century built on the foundations formed by their French counterparts. Jewish salons, specifically, first appeared in Berlin in the 1780s, with the dissemination of French Enlightenment ideas into Germany.10 Inspired by their French forerunners though they were, they were by no means accorded the same respect as their Christian brethren. What that means: their very ‘Jewishness’ externally identified them in a way that being Catholic never identified the French *salonnières*. They were subjugated on the basis of that Jewishness, criticized by anti-semites, and demeaned as baseless creatures even by some who attended their salons.11 These women attempted to maintain an Enlightened character that transcended their Jewish roots. But, like their French counterparts, integrating Enlightenment rhetoric and even transforming religion into an intellectual philosophy from an ideological belief system, these women perpetuated religion’s significance in society.

Madame de Tencin and Rahel Varnhagen were, respectively, French and German *salonnières*. Understanding that background is necessary in identifying the subsequent complexity of religious expression. Separated by country borders, distinguished by religious orientation, and raised in vastly different environments, their very difference makes them powerful examples of the integrality of religious perception, one which was not limited to a specific city or even country. This thesis aims not to narrate their lives, but rather investigate the origins of their Enlightened orientation and the paradoxes they suggest. Why would two women who are strongly associated with the French

10 Bilski and Braun, *Jewish Women and Their Salons*, 15.
11 Idem, 19.
Grebel

Enlightenment, a world that gave us secularisation, and sparked our notion of progress and modernity, reflect such ‘antiquated’ connection to the religious? By investigating historical opinion and fact, which are, at times, contradictory, rather than attempting to prove one particular facet of Enlightenment opinion, this thesis will allow for a better understanding of the main question: how did religion express itself during the Enlightenment?

An analysis of the time period’s context is necessary to understand how and why religious undercurrents exist. The first chapter of this thesis is thus dedicated to providing a general overview, defining ‘what is religion’ even as it identifies the origins of peoples’ disillusionment with religion. That disillusionment welcomed Enlightenment rhetoric, yet does not obviate the tenacity of a basic religious mentality. It is one which persists even in the most ascorbic environments.

Because of the naturally indirect nature of the research, the second chapter – an in-depth analysis of the two women’s lives – will focus on how their general expressions demonstrate a perpetuation of basic religious rhetoric and values. For Madame de Tencin and Rahel Varnhagen, even though they professed opposition to their respective religions, they could not eliminate it entirely from their lives. Claudine-Alexandrine de Tencin, typically and henceforth referred to as “Madame de Tencin,” spent years trying to escape the constraints of convent life, consistently protesting her vows in front of official notaries, ultimately and formally breaking her vows in 1712.\(^{12}\) Yet in 1714,

Madame de Tencin negotiated a lease with nuns, specifically members of the Convent of the Conception, for an apartment on the rue Saint-Honoré. For a woman trying to escape her own, religious order, it is highly ironic that she should seek out other nuns for lodging, signing with them a lease that would require consistent communication. Rahel Levin Varnhagen, on the other hand, spent years crying out against the societal subjugation associated with being a 19th century European Jew, a fact to which Hannah Arendt’s emotive biography attests. And yet, the German Jew, Rahel Varnhagen née Levin, did not convert to Protestantism until the late age of 43. Both women were modern thinkers of a revolutionary time period epitomizing progressive ideals, and yet, both maintained ties to past religion.

Last, but not least, the third chapter will delve into primary research, examining the women’s letters in search of religious expression. These personal missives highlight the prevalence of religious values and perceptions, as the two women reveal their innermost beliefs through unguarded language exchanged with friends and family.

The values of the past, of the Old Regime, were not entirely overturned by the Enlightenment. Underlying the transformation of society is the ideology used by Enlightenment thinkers as a base for their conception of an ideal society; this base is reminiscent of religious rhetoric. Because the period, though, tried to focus on how it was different from the past, the modern historian must analyze subtle expressions of this religious continuity. The reader must understand the indirect origins of the research. No

philosopher will directly state that the religion they oppose formed the base of their opinion. On their own, each tidbit might seem trivial, but as a whole, their collection changes the modern perception of the Enlightenment as a secularizing experience.

This message of religious disappearance was a recurring theme in a class I took at La Sorbonne, a Parisian public university, in the spring of 2010. The topic: France’s religious history from 1789-1914. As I was immersed within the French culture through this study abroad program, I achieved a very real understanding of French religious perception. Throughout the duration of the course, the diminishment of religion was consistently attributed to the Enlightenment, a source of secularization highly respected by my French history professor. With that question in mind, of faith and the Enlightenment, I returned to France in January of 2011 for a two-week intensive research trip that brought me to the National Archives, departmental archives, and the BnF – France’s national library. There, I breathed in the history laying still in the French archives and libraries. There, I achieved an intimate sense of my two protagonists, one which I hope to convey through this paper. Here, I hope to convey my passion for a subject which took me across the Atlantic in search of answers.
CHAPTER I: The Three R’s - Religion, Revolution, and Rearing

Religion in the Enlightenment

From about 40 CE to 64 CE, Saint Paul spread Jesus Christ’s Christian ideals throughout the Roman Empire. 15 Though the specific origins are unclear, 16 Judaism, according to the Bible, flourished after the Exodus from Egypt. 17 And according to authors Jacob Bronowski and Bruce Mazlish, the French Enlightenment began with Descartes’ Discourse on the Method published in 1637. 18 Simple mathematics show that even if one starts with the origins of Christianity – at which point both monotheistic religions existed simultaneously – and counts to the origins of the Enlightenment, one calculates at least 1573 years of religious value. That is at least 1573 years where religion held sway over the European populations, not even counting the 93 years it would then take for Voltaire to combine Newton’s scientific philosophy with that of Descartes and created a more modern conception of the French Enlightenment. 19 Influential though Enlightenment thought may be, to even consider that one movement could completely reverse 1573 years of cultural heritage is preposterous.

Close analysis of intellectuals’ arguments reveals discrepancies in their hypotheses concerning Europe’s secularization. For example, sociologist Liana Giorgi posits a difference between “religion, as an identifiable system of beliefs and practices

16 Robert M. Seltzer refers to the obscurity of exact Jewish origins in his encyclopedic entry “Jewish People,” Encyclopedia of Religion, ed Lindsay Jones 7.2 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 4854-4865. Specifically, he alludes to uncertainty of Jewish relations with ancient groups such as the Amorites, Hyksos, and Canaanites.
17 Religious delineations are limited to these two religions for the purposes of focusing the paper (Claudine-Alexandrine Guérin de Tencin was raised as a Catholic and Rahel Varnhagen was brought up in a Jewish family).
19 Ibid..
that finds expression in and through the institution of the Church” and the religious, the “all-too-human urge to seek and evolve ideational meaning system.” According to Giorgi, an institution, such as the Church, characterizes religion, while being religious is a solely spiritual condition distinct from religion. And because her quantitative experiment of church attendance demonstrates that fewer individuals in Europe overall attend Church, she concludes that the continent has largely been secularized. As for France, in particular: “historical and other cultural factors have over-powered religious culture in determining the orbit of the spiral of secularization in France.” Not only has Europe been secularized, but there is also no possibility that religious spirituality could affect French society and permit religious expression.

As was briefly noted in the introduction, Religion encompasses multiple facets of individuals’ lives. Giorgi’s statement concerning the existence of an institutional component of religion as well as a spiritual aspect of society reflects an understanding of that complexity. For even though she implies that being religious has naught to do with the secularized religion practiced in those countries, she claims that France has no religious culture because of “historical and cultural factors [that] have overpowered religious culture.” She recognizes the existence of a religion-based spiritual component of society, one which would result in a religious culture distinct from institutional Church attendance. The word ‘culture’ distinguishes the expression from the general religious “ideational meaning system” that she references earlier in her article. A culture implies an “identifiable set of beliefs and practices” visibly expressed by people who act in

21 Idem, 654.
22 Ibid.
similar ways. Giorgi identifies this style of expression with religion, not with the “religious.” In so claiming, she contradicts her own central caveat, which distinguishes between these two aspects of society – that which is institutional and that which is spiritual. By specifically claiming that France has no religious culture, she also recognizes the potential existence of a religious culture distinct from institutional Church attendance. Those who do not attend church and may not be visibly religious still can express a certain religious identity. Giorgi’s own claim arguing for the secularization of society itself proves the persistence of religion within the new society.\(^{23}\)

The historian Robert Jared Staudt more directly refers to the importance that religion held and continues to hold in society when referencing early twentieth century historian Christopher Dawson. He establishes that “religion’s vision gives purpose to each aspect of humanity’s social life.”\(^{24}\) Religion’s vision, its moral foundations, is imbued within the social fabric of daily life. In his article on the spirit of the Enlightenment, the historian Robert M. Baird reinforces the importance of morality. While referring to Alasdair MacIntyre’s book After Virtue, Baird criticizes a mistaken conclusion of the liberal Enlightenment: it maintains that “a fundamental set of moral principles and/or a certain kind of political arrangement could be rationally defended independently of any heritage.”\(^{25}\) In fact, though, the reasoned morality that the Enlightenment introduced was not invented by the time period, but was rather based on past tradition and heritage. Rather than opposing religious faith, reasoned morality, in

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\(^{23}\) The French historical culture referenced encompasses will be addressed later on in this chapter.


fact, was based on religious values. It is that religiously moral and ideological vision imbedded in culture on which this thesis will reflect.

This religiously moral and ideological vision does not obviate the expression of rationality and reason found within the Enlightenment. As Edward Breuer indicates, religion and rationality are not incompatible. He brings up the example of Moses Mendelssohn, a German philosopher who is also one of the most celebrated thinkers of the Enlightenment. In his *Jerusalem*, Mendelssohn expresses “an autonomous and rationally-oriented view of modern religion” deduced from reading scripture.  

26 This is a rationality that, as Jewish historian Allan Arkush presents, considers Reason to be the source of morality and moral inclination. And, following this line of thought, Reason is a function of natural law which itself is provided by God.  

27 Morality, which, “signifies the habits and norms of behavior that establish right and wrong conduct for individuals in particular societies” was derived from God, according to Mendelssohn. For as historian David Sorkin reinforces, “all moral issues had a metaphysical foundation for Mendelssohn, since they were grounded in God's freedom.”  

28 Mendelssohn’s example demonstrates the possibility of combining religious and rational thought, even though not all Enlightenment thinkers followed his theistic belief in the existence of a supernatural being.  

29 His philosophy negates the view that secularism precludes retention of religious

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30 Though Mendelssohn reflects on the relationship between modern Judaism and rationalism, his theories can also be applied to Christianity; the source of his reasoning is found in the Old Testament, which both Jews and Christians read.
philosophy, because his consideration of morality was established from reading Jewish scripture.

The extant religion of the Enlightenment does not contradict the central tenets of the period’s ideology. Rather, the religious values expressed themselves concurrently with ‘secular’ thought. Such vestiges exist within different facets of life outside of the institution, including culture, spirituality, and morality. When the religion as an institution was reduced in power, then, its impact did not disappear. Those historians who claim that religion’s influence was dissolved identify only the loss of institutional power. They make no mention of the various ways in which religion structures life on an unconscious level. Indeed, religion, as Moses Mendelssohn so powerfully relates, is not only compatible with the Enlightenment, but it created foundational principles on which society is based.

Origins of conflict

What distinguishes the French and German examples from other national studies is the vitriolic environments that preceded their Enlightenments. In both countries, virulent warfare between Catholics and Protestants birthed nations disillusioned with their clergymen. In France in particular, “the clergy marched incorrigibly, inexorably, on its self-destructive way, arousing powerful antagonists, striking at unimportant opponents, and blandly underestimating the real adversary.”31 For while both countries endured conflict, abuses in France were, “glaring enough to invite the most scathing criticism, while the machinery of repression was inefficient enough to permit critics adequate room for maneuver.” Philosophe passion for change derived from a very real

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sense of anger against religious institution and power, though not against religious principles.

François-Marie Arouet, also known as the famous philosophe, Voltaire, was a deist whose passion for Enlightened change reinforces the compatibility of secular rhetoric and religious values. He believed that the essence of Protestantism was to make Reason a core principle of belief, and because Protestants had already taken the first step in breaking with Catholicism, they were potential philosophe. He disputed the validity of institutional religion, favoring instead one focused on the individual. Indeed, it was the institution which created such societal discord and discontent, and the creation of the Protestant religion only reinforced an innate desire to escape religion’s constraints; it was one step away from becoming a ‘philosophe.’ The Protestant Reformation laid the ultimate groundwork for reformative philosophical Enlightened ideals.

German history birthed the Protestant Reformation. In 1517, Martin Luther, creator of the Lutheran Protestant Church, was a Catholic university professor at Wittenberg. That year, to inspire an academic debate on indulgences, he posted 95 Theses on the door of the castle church at Wittenberg. He did not intend to spark a worldwide reformation; he simply followed a general tradition of the university to call attention to a matter of interest to academic debate, when questioning the validity of paying for the privilege of escaping punishment in the afterlife for sins committed in the present. But his words inflamed the public after being translated by an unknown individual from Latin into vernacular German. The very fact that his inquiry expanded when it entered the public sphere demonstrates that his words touched a cord with

32 Delattre, André.
34 Idem.
individuals. His precise theological arguments ultimately birthed Christian churches distinct from the Roman Catholic faith such as the Lutheran, Calvinist, and Anglican churches. The creation of these ideologically distinct churches – still united, though the belief in a monotheistic God and Jesus as the saving prophet – highlights the expression of discord within the Christian institution.

It is the discord created by the Reformation that resulted in the devastating Thirty Years War. This war, which was inspired by simmering religious frustration, began through political power plays. In their quest for control, two ambitious princes, Maximilian I, the Duke of Bavaria, and Frederick V, the elector palatine, manipulated the religious tension found between Calvinists, Lutherans, and Catholics in Germany. C.V. Wedgwood bemoans the legacy of a war which was “[m]orally subversive, economically destructive, [and] socially degrading.” The destruction created a system of indifference in Germany. And as Gay highlights with regards to the German system of toleration: “A tolerance based on indifference or on calculation only encouraged indifference or calculation in turn.” The war not only changed the political structure of governance in the region, but it also changed societal values, making the region more susceptible to Enlightenment values.

Concurrent to the German conflict, France was embroiled within its own ideologically and religiously based conflict, the only difference being that religion played a far more central role within the clash. I refer to the Huguenot rebellions, which were

well underway by 1621, and were inspired by the French Wars of Religion.\footnote{Arthur Herman, “The Huguenot Republic and Antirepublicanism in Seventeenth-Century France.” \textit{Journal of the History of Ideas} 53.2 (April-June, 1992): 255.} In 1562 Catherine de Médicis, then regent-mother to the eleven-year-old boy-king, Charles IX issued an edict “recognizing the legal right of French Protestants to exist and even worship in a few limited areas of the kingdom for the first time.”\footnote{Mack P. Holt, “French Wars of Religion,” \textit{Europe, 1450-1789: Encyclopedia of the Early Modern World.} ed. Jonathan Dewald 6 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2004): 192.} Civil war erupted, entrenching the entire population in the conflict. Not only did the Catholics and Huguenots battle each other with armies, but citizens also fought each other within towns and cities.\footnote{Holt, “French Wars of Religion,” 193.} Though the fighting ended in 1598 with King Henry IV’s Edict of Nantes, by 1610, Henry’s son Louis XIII already sought to dissolve the protections granted the Huguenots, and in 1685 the edict was revoked by King Louis XIV, King Henry IV’s grandson.\footnote{Idem, 197. The Edict of Nantes pleased the Catholics in declaring that Catholicism was the only true state religion, while affirming Protestants’ right to practice their own faith.} By the early 17th century, two decades after the Edict of Nantes supposedly solved the crisis, Protestant-Catholic tensions again bubbled to the surface.

Giorgi’s inability to accept that the French could ever overcome the ravages of war makes more sense when considering the French concern with religion.\footnote{Giorgi, “Religious Involvement”,654.} The French, more than any other nation, approached their religious opinion with extreme seriousness, be it during the religion-centric Ancien Regime or human-centric Enlightenment. The French coronation ceremony underscores the close relationship between church and state:

The language and symbols of the French coronation went far beyond the usual ecclesiastical overtones surrounding other monarchs of western Christendom, all of whom paid homage to their Lord as the true dispenser of their authority and on whose behalf they acted as his secular sword on earth. For French kings as well as their subjects the anointing with the sanctified oil of the holy ampulla, the explicit promise to defend the church from heresy, and the public display of the celebration of mass in both kinds were all signifiers full of meaning, as well as
evidence that in France there was a special relationship between church and state that was not duplicated elsewhere. (my italics)\textsuperscript{44}

The relationship between French subjects and the church was stronger than in any other country. Recognizing the depth of that relationship is key to understanding the extent to which the religious wars ravaged French cultural consciousness. The severity of the wars between the Catholics and the Protestant is not simply characterized by the high death toll associated with any war; this civil war identified core values on which Frenchmen disagreed. And when contrasted with the importance that Frenchmen place in national unity, their disagreement appears even more extreme.\textsuperscript{45} Religion defined who these people were.

The French Wars of Religion was an ideological fight over the direction that society, not just religion, was headed. The massacres on Saint Bartholomew’s night on August 24, 1572, part of those wars, demonstrate tensions between general civilians, not just different armies. He stresses:

Viewed by Catholics as a threat to the social and political order, Huguenots not only had to be exterminated – that is, killed – they also had to be humiliated dishonoured [sic], and shamed as the inhuman beasts they were perceived to be. The victims had to be dehumanized – slaughtered like animals – since they had violated all sacred laws of humanity in Catholic culture.

This emotive description of a terrifying night highlights the extent to which religion epitomized individual identity. While historians such as Mack Holt might disagree on the wars’ end-date – some say ended with the Edict of Nantes of 1598, and Mack P. Holt claims are not distinct from the Huguenot rebellions of the 1620s – all agree that the tensions certainly lasted much longer. When considering the length of the emotionally

\textsuperscript{44} Mack P. Holt, \textit{The French Wars of Religion: 1562-1629}. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 8

\textsuperscript{45} This historian experience this cultural consciousness of national unity firsthand when living in Paris for six months in the spring of 2010.
draining time period involved, the French propensity toward acceptance of humanistic rather than institutionally religious ideals becomes much more understandable. The French people needed a more unifying understanding of society that did not involve the killing of their neighbors.

Liana Giorgi claims that Frenchmen’s experience precludes their acceptance of a religious culture while Peter Gay claims that German history of tolerance rejects an associative religious identity. But what Giorgi and Gay do not seem to understand in reference to the French and German cultures, respectively, is that a propensity towards Enlightenment values does not necessitate a negation of religious values. At the core of the matter exists the corruption of the Catholic faith, which inspired the Protestant tradition and the idea that there was not just one form of Christianity for all. The exasperation of the French and German people can be concretely tied to an identifying institution, the Church, which no longer could be trusted to provide a valid sense of identity. In both cases, conflict laid the seeds of discord and hostility towards the church, but that friction did not entail a curtailment of religious values. Those religious values which had served the public so well in the past were transposed onto an ideal, that of the Enlightenment, one transcended the terror of a war-torn environment.

Educational Background

Progress, though, is slow, and the evolution of revolutionary Enlightenment thought was more gradual than abrupt. Even in the face of oncoming change, families still tried to retain traditional values. The ensuing conflict between simultaneous expression of oppressive familial tradition and a growing awareness of liberating
Enlightenment ideals reinforced children’s propensity and desire to escape traditional constraints. Madame de Tencin and Rahel Varnhagen form particularly powerful examples of this complex antipathy towards religion. It is vital to understand from where that negativity towards religion originated. It is imperative to recognize the influence their upbringing had in branding these women.

On April 27, 1682, a woman was born into a relatively innocuous setting. Her name: Claudine-Alexandrine Guérin de Tencin. Her father was the president of the parliament in Grenoble, and her family was titled, yet her birth was one of simplicity rather than pomp and affair. According to the departmental archives of Isère, unlike her privileged oldest brother, the fils ainé, a simple vicar, rather than town bishop, baptized the youngest addition to the family. And later, again following in the tradition of the religiously dominated French Ancien Regime, the youngest daughter of a titled family would be packed off to a convent.

Unlike Claudine-Alexandrine, our second protagonist was never placed within any religiously structured forum of education. In fact, she never received any formal training, nor was she French or Catholic. Rahel Varnhagen, née Levin, was a German Jew born on May 19th, 1771 and schooled at home. And yet, as with Claudine-Alexandrine, she was a dominant member of society, a salonnière whose childhood left an unmistakable imprint. In particular this historian would like to note that Rahel grew

48 Idem.
49 According to Ellen Key, Rahel Levin’s father would not permit birthdays to be celebrated, and so all she knew of her birthday was that it was on a Whitsunday, 1771, and that it fell in May.” Again, according to Key, “her biographers have ascertained that in that year it was May 19th.” Citation found within: Ellen Key, Rahel Varnhagen, (Wesport: Hyperion Press, Inc, 1913): 18.
up in a relatively prominent Jewish home, to parents named Chaie and Marcus Levin.\textsuperscript{50} The oldest child of five siblings, Rahel was expected to care for her brothers and sister.

Life as a Jew in Berlin, Germany was not an easy existence. Rahel’s father, a jeweler and businessman, was fortunate enough to have been granted “protected” status in 1763 under Friedrich II’s regime. This recognition permitted him freedom of movement and living unavailable to the majority of his peers, a freedom which itself was not without limitations.\textsuperscript{51} But for most Jews living in Berlin, Germany, stringent laws restricted their movements. In her book on Jewish High Society in Old Regime Berlin, historian Deborah Herz describes how “Frederick William I (1713-1740) and Frederick the Great [(1740-1786)] successively restricted the scope of Jewish economic activity and increased the taxes imposed on the community.”\textsuperscript{52} More specifically, restrictions hindered the ability to enter Berlin, to live there, to marry, and to have children.\textsuperscript{53} Herz even indicates that “[j]ewish Germans did not receive all the rights of citizens until 1871.\textsuperscript{54} The reader will remember that Rahel Varnhagen was born on May 19, 1771, a century earlier. All of these restrictions culminated in an overall socially repressive atmosphere tolerant of the Jews insofar as much as they could pay for the privilege of living in Berlin.

Similarly, life in a convent provided a harsh atmosphere. Mita Choudhury provides a piquant and emotive recounting of oppressive convent life for girls during the 18\textsuperscript{th} century. In her book, Convents and Nuns in Eighteenth-Century French Politics and

\textsuperscript{50} Tewarson, Rahel Levin Varnhagen, 20.
\textsuperscript{51} Idem.
\textsuperscript{53} Idem, 40-42.
\textsuperscript{54} Deborah Herz, Jewish High Society in Old Regime Berlin, 13.
Grebel

*Culture*, she notes that part of the repressive atmosphere resulted from an ambiguity that “helped engender a dualistic image of nuns as both saintly women and sexual creatures.”55 Women were revered for being saintly, and yet the convent existed to fill a need, to restrain sexual creatures who could not be allowed to freely extol their favors. The convent therefore simultaneously expressed a chaotic dichotomy between voluntary devout expression and forcible enclosure. The writer, Claire Walker, even notes how “Jansenist nuns […] felt victimized by parents and abbesses, [and] superiors [were] accused of despotism, and counterrevolutionaries.” And ultimately, citing Choudhury, Walker notes that all of these effects collectively created a sense in “French political and literary discourse [that] the cloister increasingly functioned as a symbol for everything wrong with the triad of institutions bolstering the Ancien Regime – church, family, and monarchy.”56 Rather than maintaining a sense of religious values, the convent was a place of dissolute despair where women were forced to relinquish their freedom in favor of subdued subjugation.

The very fact that they were tuned to the outside freedoms made their social separation more difficult to bear. Girls were aware of secular learning distinct from religious life, though they themselves were not allowed to revel in the freedom of the outside world. Some were better informed than others. The fact that the “*Traité de l’éducation des femmes* (1779-89) was completed on the eve of the Revolution, calling for a curriculum and rationale for an entire system of girls’ schools that would overhaul convent school education and institute extensive studies, including the hard sciences” by

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Madame de Miremon, shows that the general education of convents was insufficient. In most convents, “education was subordinated to catechism repetition and instruction in manners,” though in an ideal few, education was effectively transmitted. Madame de Maintenon’s Saint-Cyr was one of those ideal few which “in the late seventeenth century […] served as a model for the better convent schools, [teaching] mythology, sciences, ancient philosophy, and secular history.” Madame de Tencin, specifically, was not well educated. Jean Sareil notes that her education began after leaving the convent, in “the salons, in contacting a group of men of remarkable intelligence and erudition, and also in the reading that she would do, that that she did do.” That said, it may have been her choice to ignore any instruction by the institution that she saw as a prison, for Sareil defends the convent in saying that she “excused herself to the pope for not knowing latin, which was, then, a rudiment of all education.” Either way, Montfleury did teach her a love of hosting, for, as Pierre-Maurice Masson reveals, during the few visits with friends and family, the “outer room’ of the convent became her first salon.” Such visits were the mark of a more liberal convent, one where, as Sareil comments, “the discipline was so light.” Liberal, though it may have been, by being located at the top of a mountain, Montfleury was, by its very nature, isolated from general society. Considering their

57 Idem, 81.
58 Idem, 78.
63 Congregation Of the Holy Cross, “Montfleury.” In Ave Maria, 890-892. N.p. : N.p, 1883. Members of the religious order, the Congregation of the Holy Cross, noted their experiences in visiting the Dominican convent, which was destroyed in the French Revolution.
forced enclosure in a world where they could only hear about, yet never take part in, the freedom right outside their door, it is no wonder that the convent girls described by Choudhury despaired of their lot in life.

While education served to subjugate the French convent girls, it liberated and defined the Jews of Berlin. As collaborative writers Emily D. Bilski and Emily Braun reflect, “the Talmudic tradition of hermeneutic interpretation – the value of intellectual life – permeated the household and influenced the Jewish woman’s propensity for dialogue and debate.”64 This, compounded with the education that “the Jewish daughters of ambitious fathers” were provided in the home, such as “learning music and foreign languages,” and “not in inferior convent schools like their Christian counterparts,” ensured the Jewish salonnières’ intellectual capabilities for leading salons discussions. This was, of course, education obtained by Jews whose economic means privileged them to have a higher education. In that regard, Rahel was atypical of the international Jewish community, for she was a “member of a family that was tolerated for its importance in business.”65 But, using Deborah Herz’s statistics, 300 families were ‘protected’ in Berlin, constituting as little as two-thirds or as much as one half of the Jewish community. German Jews thus provide the exception to the rule of general poverty within the Jewish community as a whole.66 Liberal education was a central component of general Jewish German tradition and a way in which Jews could intellectually escape the physically prohibitive atmosphere.

65 Margaret Mary Daley, Women of Letters, 48.
66 Herz, Jewish High Society, 42.
Only physical escape or legislative action could mitigate the pain of incarcerated convent girls, and those options provided only minimal hope. If they escaped, where to? What were their options? Prostitution? As for legislative action, the research demonstrates that it was not a wide-spread option. Choudhury notes that between 1731-1789, only two women attempted to formally break their vows before the *officialité*.⁶⁷ Mita Choudhury uses those statistics to posit that happily devout girls may, in fact, be the norm of 16th and 17th century convent life. But along with the burgeoning force of the Enlightenment, the 18th century brought with it a hope for secular regulation of religious life that was not necessarily even considered during the Ancien Regime of the earlier centuries. And Choudhury herself cites the legitimate memories of injustice recorded in memoirs by Marie-Michelle de Couhé de Lusignan. She also admits that the period’s negative perception of convent life was based on legitimate articulate writings. Citing Denis Diderot’s *La Religieuse*, based on the real-life story of Marguerite Delamarre, she reveals that the story inflamed the public’s heart.⁶⁸ Comparable to how Luther’s words sparked a revolution, the writings on convent corruption struck a realistic cord with the French public. Convents were not solely shelters for the devout; they were also the overseers of oppression. Those who escaped by breaking their vows were in the minority, yet as the period’s perception highlights, those in pain existed in untold numbers.

Madame de Tencin came from a noble family. Rahel Levin Varnhagen came from a bourgeois family; Madame de Tencin was of the Catholic majority, Rahel was of the Jewish minority; Madame de Tencin was French, Rahel was German. The two women

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⁶⁸ Idem, 105.
contrast in a variety of ways, but they have one basic similarity: both suffered a degree of oppression which is unique in its imprint on their individual lives. And through it all, their religious childhood indelibly marked their personal identities. Madame de Tencin experienced a life of catechisms and religious stories, which she later used to manipulate her peers for political power. Rahel was ingrained in the Jewish Talmudic tradition, and imbued with a sense of familial loyalty. As women who opposed and tried to transcend their oppressively institutional realities, they are secular; as women who could not escape their past heritage, they are religiously-oriented.
CHAPTER II: Women of the Enlightenment

Enlightened Women

“‘Women,’ said Lord Chesterfield, ‘are only children of larger growth. . . . A man of sense only trifles with them, plays with them, humors them, and flatters them, as he does with a sprightly and forward child.’”

It is difficult to put a positive spin on such words which clearly diminish women’s importance to society. Though he is English, the Lord’s words reflect a common trend of thought found in Europe throughout the 18th century. He sees women as objects with which to play, toys which have no authority to speak of. According to Evelyn Gordon Bodek, the historian who cites Lord Chesterfield’s profound thoughts, “The enlightened century perpetuated the usual stereotypes by which women were judged biologically, socially, and intellectually inferior.”

Women’s status was not improved by the illuminated ideals of Enlightenment humanitarianism. Rahel Varnhagen and Madame de Tencin as well are affected by this categorization, and in fact are well aware of their gendered societal position.

In 1815, in a letter to her sister Rosa, she writes that “To us remain only the little affairs which are appended to theirs [to those of men]; isolated fragments, which drag us down.” As inferior beings, “it could only be true if a woman had no higher thought in her whole world than the requirements and claims of her husband, or the wishes of her children.” Her sarcasm reinforces an unfortunate reality, where a woman is second to the desires of her family, most particularly that of her husband.

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70 Idem.
But even as she recognizes the status quo, she maintains a need to look past its dictates. Rahel, as an independent woman, does not accept that her only role in life is to serve a man and children. She holds that even though women do care for their families, they must enjoy other interests as well. In the same letter to her sister, she asserts that:

Undoubtedly we watch lovingly with careful solicitude the wishes of those dear to us, we make them our most urgent occupation; but it is not possible that they should at all times suffice us for work, for refreshment, for rest; not possible that they alone should strengthen us for further activity or nerve us for further endurance.\(^{71}\)

One must look outside the family for fulfillment and meaning, to “strengthen us for further activity or nerve us for further endurance.” In one of many notes, dated March 12, 1828 by the biographer who assembled them, Rahel notes how important it is for a woman to follow her passions. “If she is a great writer, she must do it in any case.” Even if it might be unfeminine to write – a fear expressed by Madame de Staël, the aforementioned Paris *salonnière* – one should do so without concern for societal reputation. As Rahel so forcefully puts it, the question of “whether a woman should write at all is […] almost too absurd to answer with gravity.”\(^{72}\) Maintaining the status quo should be, and is not, second to following personal passion.

That fear, though, of conforming to maintain reputation is nonetheless legitimate. Especially in the eighteenth century, for a woman to succeed, she must be perceived as complying with the status quo, even if her intent or true action opposes her rhetoric. As the celebrated French historian Mona Ozouf clearly notes in her *Essay on French Singularity*, “Reputation is everything for them, as the example of the woman writer so

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\(^{71}\) Jennings, *Rahel: Her Life and Letters*, 172.

\(^{72}\) Idem, 231.
clearly shows.” It is this reputation that women of the time period establish, in part, through letter-writing. Historian Dena Goodman charges that the females who wrote letters “came to see themselves as both human beings and women, as modern subjects who, because of their gender, could not realize the full promise of the modern public sphere” Letters allowed women personal assertion in a world where expression was mainly reserved for men. They, women, could not take part in the public sphere, and so they communicated through the private sphere. Letters permitted a dual purpose: their writers could “see themselves” more clearly, and could communicate an intentional personal expression of self. Women were thus able to both maintain their reputations and simultaneously achieve a measure of freedom otherwise unattainable.

Madame de Tencin was aware that as a woman, she must remain within the private sphere and leave the matters of the public sphere to men. The historian Renee Winegarten quotes Cardinal Fleury’s remarks to Madame de Tencin: “prudence requires that above all a person of your sex should only intervene in matters relating to her proper sphere.” To give context, the Cardinal was angered at Madame de Tencin’s attempt to position her brother in line for his Cardinalship. As a woman, Tencin had no right to enter into political discourse, an action reserved for men. Immediately, as Winegarten indicates, Tencin rebuts his argument by replying that “I must have explained myself badly in my letter […] In asserting that I did not intervene and have never intervened in current affairs, I may not have stressed adequately the distinction I make between knowing about things and intervening in them.” Tencin is quick to write that she has not overstepped her boundaries as a woman in a man’s world. While she may know

about political intrigue, she herself – or so she claims to the Cardinal – does not in any way act on that knowledge. In so doing, she recognizes the delicate invisible boundaries of power.

Yet Madame de Tencin does not leave off her attempt to influence the political domain. In letters which will be explicated in the next chapter for their religious significance, Madame de Tencin kept up a constant correspondence with the Duke de Richelieu, a lieutenant-general in the army. In them, she persuades the Duke de Richelieu to act in her stead, in matters concerning diplomatic sensitivity. She does so under the convenient context of keeping her dear friend up-to-date of the latest news at the Versailles court. In one specific instance, she asks the Duke to write a letter to the German court, where Voltaire – the writer-turned-spy – was stationed. She wanted him to help increase the Frenchman’s influence while abroad. At her behest, the male Duke would conduct political action prohibited by the female Madame de Tencin. She was certainly aware of the political boundaries separating the gendered spheres and actively tried to surpass them.

Her request also shows her to be aware of her relatively uneducated status. In an article on “Gender and Language in the Old Regime,” the historian Dena Goodman references the minimal education that convents provided their young charges. Goodman reveals that “the convents in which young ladies were formed tended to teach writing as they did music and dancing – as an accomplishment necessary to demonstrate polish in le monde.” The formal education that girls in the eighteenth century received was

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“notoriously brief and only minimally academic.” Women were not provided with the same education available to men, and so they wrote differently than they did. Their substandard education is confirmed by feminist reformer Poulain de la Barre, who fights for women’s rights: “they should be accorded the same right to education as men.” The letter that she asks the Duke to write is one that would be signed anonymously. If his seal was not necessary, then technically she herself could have sent the letter that she so assiduously dictates to him. But, as any historian who has taken the time to analyze her personal letters would know, her orthography and handwriting are atrocious and would not have held up to scrutiny. Because of her feminine education, she would not have been able to pass as a German diplomat informing his court of necessary details.

Goodman particularly notes the *shame* that uneducated women felt in having poor grammar. According to Goodman, “poor spelling was the mark of intellectual inferiority, the counterweight to the material wealth and social and political superiority of the *salonnière*.” Madeleine de Puisieux, cited in Goodman’s article reflects that “it is the manner of writing that distinguishes the ordinary woman from a woman of wit. Speak well, write even better.” Madame de Tencin fulfilled the first category; Marmontel’s observation of her while standing in the midst of “men of science or letters,” was that of “a woman of brilliant intellect and profound judgment.” Yet the latter category, she did not realize. In writing a history of the French language, Ferdinand Bruno “provided ‘specimens’ of women’s poor spelling and called attention especially to that of such well-

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78 By declaring that women and men should be accorded the same right to education, Poulain de la Barre implies that they are not yet afforded that equality.
known writers and friends of the philosophes as Madame de Tencin” among others. She may have been of ‘brilliant intellect and profound judgment,’ but when it came to writing, Madame de Tencin was lacking.

Rahel Varnhagen was well aware of the areas in which she herself was lacking, due to her gendered position. In a letter to Karl Jaspers cited by the historian Heidi Thomann Tewarson, Rahel reveals two personal, familial-related shortcomings:

These qualities of mine, however, are: too much gratitude and too much consideration for human feelings. I would sooner reach for my own heart…and hurt it than offend another person or even see an offended one. And I am too grateful because I always fared badly and always immediately think of helping and forgiving; and also because I alone always helped … All this is because…my rough, strict, violent, moody, genius-like, almost mad father, overlooked this naturally strong heart and broke it.

For Rahel, the empathetic personality that evolved from her painful childhood was a shortcoming. And while her father did not single her out – in fact, she was his favorite child – Rahel suffered doubly because she “also bore the pain inflicted on her good, gentle, but intellectually somewhat limited mother.” The family dynamic created by differentiated gender roles impacted the eldest daughter’s development.

Whether or not her father’s influence was truly negative is up to the reader to determine. In fact, historian Ellen Key cites how, even in her later years, guests were “still charmed by what Varnhagen [her husband] calls her ‘talent for life’ by which she ‘gave beauty and harmony both to social life and to solitude.’” The very same gendered family dynamic that Rahel bemoans as breaking her heart in fact allowed her to transmit an appreciation for life’s beauty.

82 Idem.
83 Tewarson, Rahel Levin Varnhagen, 21.
84 Key, Rahel Varnhagen, 238.
She expressed this appreciation through her letters – 6,000 of which survive from the purported 10,000 that she wrote. It was an expression which, unlike that of Madame de Tencin, was not manufactured for political clout, but rather intellectual expression. In her letters, Rahel repeatedly notes her distaste for the same politics that Madame de Tencin adores. In a letter dated Saturday, December 9, 1808 to August Varnhagen, her eventual husband:

I entreat you not to write me a word about politics. My head aches and throbs as I think over the course of public affairs; there is a sense of grim amusement, however, in watching the follies of these corpse-like figures, all destined to be overthrown before great coming events.”

She abhors politics, yet at the same time acknowledges their power in changing the course of history. She recognizes that politics allow for history in action, where male politicians, otherwise known as ‘corpse-like figures,’ all become ‘destined to be overthrown before great coming events.’ Rahel had no compunction in avoiding the grim male politics that were barred to her female admission, preferring instead a more sensitive appreciation of life.

As women living in male dominated societies, Madame de Tencin and Rahel Varnhagen were by no means the subordinate submissive girls that society dictated they should be. For Madame de Tencin, historian Renee Winegarten notes her particular frustration of being subordinated “as the advisor and agent of men.” The reality was that it was she who played the strings of power. As for Rahel Varnhagen, as Liliane Weissberg comments, even though she “repeatedly states and deplores her social limitations as a woman, Goethe suspected Varnhagen [her husband] as the woman and

85 Jennings, Rahel: Her Life and Letters, 71-72.
Rahel as the man on the occasion of the anonymous public presentation of their opinions on Goethe’s writings.”

Through her articulate intellectual expression, Rahel transcended gender stereotypes during an anonymous public presentation of opinion. In both cases, the salonnière’s intelligence allowed them to interact with men as equals, if not superior to them in ultimate influence.

As strong-willed women, Rahel and Madame de Tencin found means at their disposal to escape the constraints imposed on them as women. They used the private sphere of salons and letters in order to establish their own, public liberty. Their words, though, demonstrate more than just their strength of character. The emotional implications of their rational expression – letters were, after all, carefully crafted – attribute a sense of self-awareness that is important to remember when analyzing the way they each expressed religious values. With that understanding in mind, their actions become much more significant – these thoughtful, intelligent women were well aware of their oppressive environments, their capabilities, and how the world perceived them. That knowledge begs the question: if they had genuinely opposed religion, would historians today still be able to extract a sense of religiosity in their life and writings?

Secularized Women?

In focusing on progressive, intellectual value through their work as salon hostesses, Madame de Tencin and Rahel Varnhagen epitomize Enlightenment philosophy. Historian Peter, Gay would categorize them as ‘secular,’ for after all they were losing touch with medieval symbols of Christendom. And sociologist Liana Giorgi would concur, noting that they did not attend either church or synagogue. But as

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previous analysis has demonstrated, an adherence to humanist values and institutional attendance is a superficial indicator of secularization. An in-depth, personal analysis is necessary to determine the reality, one which reveals the presence of religious perpetuation in society within a “secular” Enlightened framework.

Within their origins lies the key to understanding Madame de Tencin’s and Rahel Varnhagen’s apparent antagonism to their religious identity. Madame de Tencin, for one, was sent to the convent at the tender age of eight.\(^8\) It is this writer’s conclusion that even at such a young age, the young “Alexandrine” (as she would later sign her letters) expressed her dominant character. This was a woman against whom it was, as the Cardinal Gualterio later testifies, “impossible to argue with this lady who maintained such a rising sense of wit.”\(^9\) Why else would the father feel that it was necessary to control his daughter through early religious education? Indeed, the average age for women to enter the Ursuline convent between 1700 and 1749 was 20 years of age.\(^9\) Granted, the Montfleury convent in the young Madame de Tencin was placed was Dominican, not Ursuline, but the specific study in question reflects a similar demographic pool to those present in the Montfleury convent (the wealthier members of society in the South of France). In any case, in order for Antoine Guérin de Tencin to most successfully consolidate his inheritance, it was imperative that his youngest daughter remain subdued within convent life. That action would eliminate her as a viable candidate for inheritance, a practice that was typical of elite families, as Mita Choudhury

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\(^8\) René Vaillot, *Qui étaient Madame de Tencin... et le Cardinal?* (Paris: Le Pavillon-Roger Maria Editeur, 1974): 23
notes. Maintaining the inheritance was predicated on Madame de Tencin’s integration into convent life, rather than resistance. The willful child was sent at a young age to ensure acceptance of her new religious life. Life in the convent would have been an oppressive struggle for many young girls, Madame de Tencin in particular as a strong-willed individual.

Rahel Varnhagen, likewise, had to endure a suppressive childhood, albeit for different reasons. As already outlined, Jews were tolerated, rather than embraced, in late eighteenth early nineteenth century Berlin. In her case though, the origins of repression were reversed. She, unlike Madame de Tencin found refuge within her religious community from the outside oppression, rather than ultimately in the outside world away from her confining convent. As a child she became close friends with other Jews, such as Dorothea Mendelssohn, daughter of Moses Mendelssohn, and Henriette Herz, another eventual Jewish Berlin *salonnière*. The irony lies in the fact that the very designation of ‘Jew’ limited her intellectual opportunities. Margaret Mary Daley describes Rahel’s letters that “express her desire to escape the social entanglements” and that she “entirely understood the multiple means others used to exclude her from the intellectual literary society.”91 Her ultimate wish to transcend that social ostracism resulted in a desire to “annihilate herself and her origin.”92

Her pain at being ostracized, though, does not predicate a denial of her heritage. Arendt seems to think so, focusing on how Rahel wrote to her brother, saying that “the Jew must be extirpated from us; that is the sacred truth, and it must be done even if life

92 Idem, 130.
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were uprooted in the process.”

The theoretical implication of such an act, though, of “annihilation,” is that Rahel’s Jewish faith was no more, or no less, important than an old coat that is out of fashion and so can no longer be worn. The realistic application is, though, nigh impossible. One cannot easily shed centuries of tradition, nor does individual affirmation always change the way that others perceive us. Her dream of an unprejudiced future is just that: a dream of a better life. Even after she converted to Christianity in 1814, supposedly ridding herself of her Jewish background, she could not ignore her religious identity. Key describes one of Varnhagen’s salon meetings (post-conversion) where “the conversation first touched upon a question of religious orthodoxy” before passing on to other topics; her background ultimately formed a table for discussion. The very fact that religion remained an integral part of discourse shows it to be an important aspect of her life, social frustration notwithstanding.

Similarly, Madame de Tencin protested her convent life. Twice a week, when her implacable father came to visit her at the convent, she would plead with him to be allowed to leave. The biographer René Vaillot even notes that he was not only firm, but physically abusive during those visits. And at the age of 16 she cleverly registered an official complaint against her tyrannical father with the aid of a notary on the basis of that abuse. It was the first in a procession of protests which would form the foundation of her request to annul her vows after her father’s death in 1705. In 1711, she used that paper trail to prove the illegitimacy of her vows during an investigation which ultimately

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93 Ibid.
94 Key, Rahel Varnhagen, 238.
95 Masson, Une Vie de Femme au XVIIIe Siècle, 28.
96 Idem, 10. When her father came to visit, a chambermaid witnessed a sobbing Alexandrine beg for mercy from a father who “répondit durement”, responded harshly, to her pleas. The following day, November 26, 1698, she registered her complaint with a notary.
97 Idem, 17. For example, in 1702, de Tencin renewed her earlier official complaint.
led to their annulment. There, she notes the origins of her protests: her father threatened to “enclose her within four walls.”\textsuperscript{98} Citing the strength of her protest, French historian Pierre-Maurice Masson creates what seems to be a hastily configured syllogism in defining Madame de Tencin’s secular character. The Montfleury convent is religious in origin; Madame de Tencin rejected the Montfleury convent; therefore Madame de Tencin must have rejected all that was religious. For that reason, “secularization would consistently characterize her life.”\textsuperscript{99} But opposing the confinement of convent life described in the first chapter does not necessitate a secular mindset. It shows her to oppose the institution, not the values.

Ironically, the institution still identified her as ‘religious,’ even when she left the convent in 1705, following her father’s death. Masson cedes that, in the five years that followed her leaving the convent, “she was still religious, but her superiors appeared to accept or tolerate her half-emancipation.”\textsuperscript{100} As the introduction to a compilation of her letters aptly describes, “madame de Tencin led a life shaken by passion;”\textsuperscript{101} her sexual intrigue characterized her younger years. These affairs occurred even before she annulled her vows. In those five years, the only difference between being ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ was the denomination of being a nun. Though she would have to wait eight years for the formal release of her vows, for all intents and purposes, the twenty-three year old woman was no longer tied to Montfleury, nor did she follow the institutionally

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\textsuperscript{98} Idem, 10, in Registre du Greffe de l’Officialité du Dioceze de Grenoble : Commence le 30 Juillet 1708,» Archives Départementales de l’Isère, 6G3, 86, 90-1. Original Citation: « l’enfermer entre quatre muraîles. »
\textsuperscript{99} Masson, Une Vie de Femme au XVIIIe Siècle, 17. Original citation : « elle fut tenace ; et sa secularisation fut son oeuvre. »
\textsuperscript{100}Idem. Original Citation: ‘Elle est encore religieuse, mais ses supérieurs semblent accepter ou tolérer sa demi-émancipation. »
\textsuperscript{101} Marie Gigault de Bellefonds de Villars et al., Lettres de Mmes de Villars, de La Fayette, de Tencin et Aïssé: précédées d’une notice et accompagnées de notes explicatives (Paris: Léopold Collin, 1805) : xxvii. Original citation : «madame de Tencin eût mené une vie agitée par les passions ». 
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religious lifestyle. Indeed, Masson mocks the religious order for letting her leave under pretext of ‘sickness.’ In his opinion, “conventional life was nothing more than a piece of fiction. She went out, showed herself in societal circles, and cleverly profited from the admirers that she found.”

Yet, ‘she was still religious’ in the face of this half-emancipation. The term ‘religious,’ here, accepts a flexible connotation distinct from an associated set of traditional practices. ‘Religious,’ in this instance identifies a woman with a knowledge of religion and its values, rather than one who happens to pray in Church every day. Madame de Tencin was personally religious, even though she technically dissociated herself from the religious community by annulling her vows.

Rahel never completely removed herself from the Jewish community. Though she did ultimately convert, she did not do so until her prospective marriage to Karl August Varnhagen, and then only in anticipation of the marriage. She had the opportunity and the potential motivation to do so during two previously tumultuous love affairs with Christian men: the German Count Karl Finck von Finckenstein and the Spanish diplomat Don Raphael d’Urquijo. She does not turn away from Judaism for either of them. This is important considering that she was even at one point engaged to the Count Karl von Finckenstein, “despite anti-Semitic objections from his family” as noted by the author MargaretMary Daley. By choosing to quietly retain her Jewish identity in the face of opposition, even as she claws at the resulting limitations of her social confines, Rahel shows her dedication to her background and culture. And though she did eventually convert in 1814, she did so to marry her husband, Karl August

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102 Masson, Une Vie de Femme au XVIIe Siècle, 19. Original citation: “la vie conventuelle n’est plus pour elle qu’une fiction. Elle sort, se montre dans les cercles mondaines, et profite habilement des admirateurs qu’elle y trouve.”

103 Daley, Women of Letters, 49.
Varnhagen. As Heidi Thomann Tewaron verifies, “formal conversion was then a condition of the church for any union between a Christian and a Jew”\textsuperscript{104} and Steven Lowenstein corroborates that “In Germany, the marriage of a Jew and a Christian was legalized in the late nineteenth century.”\textsuperscript{105} Rahel was already dead, having passed away in 1833, when civil marriage finally became legal in 1871. Her decision to convert was based on practical circumstances rather than a desire to extricate herself from the community.

For Rahel actively supported, rather than ignored, her family and community. The historian Hannah Arendt was previously quoted in this paper as saying that Rahel wished to “be divorced from [Jewish] interests,” thus demonstrating Rahel’s desire to separate from the community. And yet, during the Napoleonic wars, that same historian reveals that Rahel not only joined other Jews in organizing help, collecting money and clothing for the wounded, and more, but she railed against her Christian counterparts for not helping as her fellow Jews did: “If only the Christians gave as generously as the Jews.”\textsuperscript{106} She was proud of the Jews and the work they did, even as she suffered under a sense of inferiority to other Christians.

She was loyal to her community, as well. In Count S---’s 1801 diary entry he describes one of Rahel’s salon gatherings where one woman “was introduced to [the Count] as the sister-in-law of Mademoiselle Levin, but with whom she seemed to have no intellectual relationship.” The Count was surprised to see their close relationship, considering that Rahel was far more intelligent than her dim-witted cousin. He was

\textsuperscript{104} Tewarson, \textit{Rahel Levin Varnhagen}, 139.
\textsuperscript{106} Arendt, \textit{Rahel Varnhagen}, 194.
“struck by the affectionate and careful way in which she was treated by the hostess, and her unimportant remarks turned to the best account.”\textsuperscript{107} Distinct though they may be, as Brinckman, a guest, explains to the Count, not only was Rahel Levin generous and accepting of everyone (regardless of intelligence), but she was also “\textit{a thorough Oriental} in the tenacity with which she held to all family ties, that she was specially attached to this sister-in-law, and passionately fond of her two little girls.”(my italics)\textsuperscript{108} Literary interests notwithstanding, Rahel Levin never forgot her Jewish cultural roots and familial ties.

Historian René Vaillot incorrectly believes that Madame de Tencin forgot her own roots. According to Vaillot, in 1714, both Madame de Tencin and her lover, the abbot Dubois were “purely secularized.” Dubois, for one, “like many abbots of the court, of the academy, or of salons, he only shaved his head and wore the [proper] clothing; he only followed orders to be promoted to archbishop.”\textsuperscript{109} His actions were empty of meaning, and therefore superficial rather than religious. Tencin, by having a close relationship with Dubois, becomes part of the irreligiosity that characterizes society; she sanctions his unsanctimonious behavior and even participates in his devilish deeds. Because religiously institutional practice is not considered sacrosanct, as it was in the past, individuals are not longer considered to be ‘religious.’

In fact, though, the two individuals perpetuated the system of religion, rendering intent obsolete. The abbot, for one, was an active member of the clergy, and Madame de Tencin, for another, was active in his religious politics. According to Julia Kavanagh,

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\textsuperscript{107} Jennings, \textit{Rahel: Her Life and Letters}, 45.
\textsuperscript{108} Idem, 46.
\textsuperscript{109} Vaillot, \textit{Qui étaient Madame de Tencin}, 70. Original citation: « Or l’abbé Dubois n’est pas prêtre : comme beaucoup d’abbés de cour, d’académie ou de salons, il n’a pris que la tonsure et le costume ; il ne recevra les ordres que pour être promu archevêque. En 1714, tous deux sont strictement laïcs. »
\end{flushleft}
Grebel

“Tencin helped Dubois to become a cardinal.”¹¹⁰ She also, as Kavanagh continues, “had thrown herself into the foremost ranks of a [...] religious war: that caused by the Bull Unigenitus,”¹¹¹ in opposition of Jansenism and in support of the Catholic faith. Neither opposed religion in its entirety – both found use within religion as a source of power and political influence. In taking ideological sides in a religious debate, they become part of the religious fabric that was maintained by secular activists; religion remains meaningful to human communication and understanding in society. Whether or not Madame de Tencin believed in a God is a qualitative assumption that is irrelevant to the discussion of religious perpetuation. By virtue of her active ideological expression, Madame de Tencin clearly maintained a tight grip on her past heritage.

Just because she expressed a sense of rationality in line with Enlightenment thought does not indicate a separation with that past heritage. Vaillot argues that Madame de Tencin expressed none of the mystical devotion necessary for being a religious nun. “She was born with the realistic and rational spirit of the Tencin family,” he says. To prove that point, he highlights how in the first novel she ever wrote, Histoire d’une religieuse par elle-même, there is no trace of mysticism nor is there any mention of the word “God.”¹¹² First of all, considering that her brother, Pierre Guérin de Tencin would rise to become a well-respected archbishop of Lyon, evidently not all members of the de Tencin family were solely focused on rationality over religious philosophy. Secondly, while this historian found no proof of the existence of said novel outside of Vaillot’s reference, her other novels, including Mémoires du comte de Comminges,

¹¹⁰ Julia Kavanagh, French Women of Letters: Biographical sketches (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1862): 142
¹¹¹ Kavanagh, French Women of Letters, 141.
¹¹² Vaillot, Qui étaient Madame de Tencin... et le Cardinal ?, 31. Original citation: « elle était née avec l’esprit réaliste et rationnel des Tencin. »
Malheurs de l’Amour, and Siège de Calais decidedly contain religious references. Malheurs de l’Amour, for example, uses fiction to reference the pain of religious life. “[I]n the convents: the girls are imprisoned” and there, a desire for, and lack of, freedom become “chains [that] are quite heavy.” And the Mémoires du comte de Comminges references God when describing her intimate passion for a lover as she cries how “Yes, my God! It is for him that I entreat you, it is for him that I pray, it is for him that I pour tears, it is his interest that brings me to you […] your grace will be felt in my heart.” The rational spirit of the Enlightenment may have inspired her philosophical salon interest, but her convent background certainly expressed itself through religious literary themes.

Those themes are found not only in her fictional literature, but as topics of conversation within her salons. Voltaire was one of Madame de Tencin’s bêtes, pets, who frequented her salon and read his own work at her gatherings. One of his plays, that of the Zaïre focuses on two “star-crossed lovers – a sweet Christian slave and a debonair Muslim sultan struggling to marry in war-torn thirteenth-century Jerusalem.” Indeed, as a study conducted by Milton Albrecht investigated and confirmed, literature “reflect[s] cultural norms and values.” If in fact, the Enlightenment period inspired what Elizabeth Colwill terms a “secular religion of ‘moral sciences’ as the bedrock for

114 Madame de Tencin, “Mémoires du comte de Comminges,” Oeuvres de Mesdames de Fontaines et de Tencin (Paris : Garnier Frères ): 179. Original citation: “Oui, mon Dieu! C’étoit pour lui que je vous prisois, c’étoit pour lui que je versois des larmes, c’étoit son intérêt qui m’amenoit à vous. […] votre grâce se fit sentir a mon Cœur.”
republican ethics and social regeneration,”¹¹⁷ then why look to the religious past as a progenitor for values?

Colwill states that Voltaire, in general, is notable for his ‘secular rationalism.”¹¹⁸ It is this rationalism that epitomizes the “secular religion of ‘moral sciences’” so characteristic of the Enlightenment; in her terms, then, the play would be a rationally secular play. And Weber, author of a literary critique on the drama indirectly supports that categorization when she identifies the following key issue introduced by the play: “What is the place of alterity and contingency in a system that locates all moral value in one radically exclusive, purportedly transcendental principle?”¹¹⁹ In other words, what is the value of religion if it is extremist in its tendency to exclude moral opinions, especially those which fall outside the boundaries of its structure? Weber’s context for supporting the secular derivation of Voltaire’s thought processes originates within the story’s central conflict between the Christian and Islamic faiths. In highlighting their divergence of opinion, Voltaire implies the inefficacy of the religions at hand. The inter-religious conflict that Voltaire disparages, though, is superfluous. What both historians forget when reading Voltaire is his emphasis on how religion assigns value. Morality is not a secular invention of the Enlightenment, but rather has its foundations within religion; in this case, thirteenth century Jerusalem. Voltaire might rationalize and philosophize on the contradictions created by differing moral systems, but the fact remains that those systems exist. Voltaire is not, and cannot be, the “secular rationalist” that Colwill describes and that Weber supports. He highlights the morals and values that religion

assigns the members of its orders, even as he assesses the controversy it introduces. The very same arguments that Colwill and Weber introduce identify Voltaire’s interest in religion. By discussing religion, one maintains its presence in society. Secularization, on the other hand, implies the dismissal of religious philosophy.

As a deist who believes in a higher power, Voltaire is by no means an atheist or an agnostic. And though he defines his faith differently than members of the traditionally religious order – it results from Reason rather than God – ultimately, he does believe that a God exists. Seeing as how God is a central tenant of religion, his belief system is not a complete renovation of religion, but rather a progressive derivation of traditional belief.

It might even be said that Madame de Tencin is ultimately defined more by religion than by secularization. The introduction to her collection of letters characterizes the last twenty years of her life as one of a renunciation of “intrigue, the heat of theological disputes, of love’s pleasures and torments.” What succeeded her chaotic past was a “life regulated and sedentary; to erase the notoriety that gave her […] success and failure, she aspired to reflection provided by wise leadership, talents well used, and the friendship of men of merit.”120 The wisdom of age inspired in her a desire for respect and meritorious conduct achieved through a regulated and sedentary, rather than chaotic life. Morality, remember, originates in religious doctrine, and structures life in distinguishing between good and bad conduct. One achieves the love of the Lord by following good and moral behavior. But even though Madame de Tencin did not necessarily believe in the

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120 Villars et al., Lettres de Mmes de Villars, xxviii-xxix. Original citation: « Elle renonça tout à la fois à l’activité de l’intrigue, à la chaleur des disputes théologiques, aux plaisirs et aux tourments de l’amour; le loisir, doucement occupé, remplaça l’agitation des affaires; à la dissipation succéda une vie réglée et sédentaire; pour effacer la célébrité peu honorable que lui avoient donnée ses […] ses succès et ses torts, elle aspira à la considération que procurent une sage conduite, des talents bien employés, et l’amitié des hommes de mérite. »
existence of God – belief is a qualitative value that her one-sided extant letters do not address – the fact remains that such faith achieved respect in society in the Old Regime. Do not forget the importance that religion held, as evidenced through the coronation process of French monarchs. And even with a diminishment of church attendance, following the polite moral structure inspired by religion still accords respect in society.

Comparably, there is no question that religion defined Rahel’s life. Israeli journalist and author Amos Elon believes that her religious attitude classifies her as a “self-hating” 121 Jew. After all,

She hated her Jewish background and was convinced it had poisoned her life. […] She considered her origins ‘a curse, a slow bleeding to death.’ […] The idea that as a Jew she was always required to be exceptional - and go on proving it all the time - was repugnant to her. ‘How wretched it is always to have legitimize myself! That is why it is so disgusting to be a Jew.’” 122

Yet even though her origins may have been a ‘curse,’ until her death, even after having converted to Protestantism, she identified as a Jewess. Peter Mercer-Taylor opens his novel on Moses Mendelssohn by citing Rahel’s positive nostalgia on her deathbed in 1833:

What a history! A fugitive from Egypt and Palestine, here I am and find help, love, fostering in you people. With real rapture I think of these origins of mine and this whole nexus of destiny, through which the oldest memories of the human race stand side by side with the latest developments. 123

Frustrating though life may have been, to constantly have to prove her own, Jewish value, she still identified with the Jewish people. Until the very end, she was a ‘fugitive from Egypt and Palestine,’ a Jew. Her appreciation for the Jewish culture might come from the ultimate recognition that Jewish women, as compared to gentile women, “were ‘naturally more unconventional and could more easily ‘network’ between different

122 Ibid.
groups and thus become well known – ‘famous among intellectual elite.’” As a Jew she ironically had the opportunity of transcending the same intellectual boundaries that she finds to be a limiting ‘curse.’

In reflecting on their lives, Madame de Tencin and Rahel Varnhagen have good reason to oppose the religion that defined their lives. Indeed, Madame de Tencin was stifled by life in the Montfleury convent, and Rahl Varnhagen was stigmatized for being a Jew. The fact that they both demonstrate the perpetuation of religion highlights how integral its expression is to societal understanding. This perpetuation is not relegated to the institutional church or synagogue sphere. After all, when given the choice, the two women did not frequent those establishments. Rather, in supporting her family and community and finding success as a Jewish salonnière, Rahel maintains her religious heritage. And in actively working within the religious political sphere and expressing moral behavior, Madame de Tencin maintains the value that Religion holds in society. Religion becomes a communal unifier, as each of the two women achieve respect and recognition by basing their work on religious principles.

CHAPTER III: Letters of life, love, and politics\textsuperscript{125}

Epistolary Writing

In a time period that is only accessible through the writing left behind, the one-sided conversations of historical figures provide insight into their emotions, thoughts, and feelings.\textsuperscript{126} More private than their public expression – now lost to time – these letters nonetheless provide an introspective look into their authors’ lives otherwise unavailable. Reading their letters is vital to understanding the source of their opinions and sense of self-expression.

Letters in the 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} centuries were carefully crafted in the privacy of the home. The very virtue of being a part of the private sphere reflects a sense of intimacy unavailable to the public sphere. Unless letters were intentionally published in newspapers, discussed among friends, or intercepted in their trajectories – this last point was a main reason that Madame de Tencin actually coded the names of figures in her letters – they did not become part of public discourse. In her article on “Letter Writing and the Emergence of Gendered Subjectivity in Eighteenth-Century France,” the historian Dena Goodman reinforces the personal context of letters. According to Goodman, around 1700 people came to distinguish between a “private” sphere as opposed to a “public” sphere.\textsuperscript{127} The deliberation and familiarity associated with the

\textsuperscript{125} Because of the limited availability of letters, this chapter was based on a selection of epistles, and is not comprehensive in analyzing every single letter that each woman wrote. Moreover, more material was found for Madame de Tencin than for Rahel Levin Varnhagen. Out of all of the letters found for Madame de Tencin, this thesis will focus on those found within a transcribed book of letters: \textit{Correspondance du Cardinal de Tencin Ministre d’Etat, et de Madame de Tencin sa soeur, avec le Duc de Richelieu}, (N.p : N.p, 1790).

\textsuperscript{126} One-sided because when reading compilations of their letters, the modern historian does not always have access to the replies and responses their letters engendered.

private letters lends meaning to otherwise simple words. These words reflect important values, not just careless phrases bandied around.

According to Goodman, with the aid of letters, an “individual unfolds himself in his subjectivity.” In addition to using letters as a useful source of communication, authors revealed their personalities through writing. As compared to Tencin who wrote about political intrigue and Varnhagen who wrote about her literary fascination, Goodman focuses on the sense of gender expressed by two girls, Geneviève Randon de Malboissière (1746–1766) and Marie-Jeanne (Manon) Phlipon (1754–1793). That said, all the letters reveal a measure of the writer’s identity. The words of these women inform the modern historian of what they considered to be important, hundreds of years in the past. And what they leave out, a formal tone, reiterates the personal sense of these letters which reflect ideologically core values.

Madame de Tencin: political fiend

Letters, for Madame de Tencin, were a manipulative tool of power. As French historian Pierre-Maurice Masson, recognizes,

Once liberated from the convent, she held no grudge: she would forever guard – if not devotion itself, which she doubtless never had, at least not of a taste for religious devotion, a mediocre affection for the ‘monks’ intrigues’ [which she describes in a letter to the Duke de Richelieu in 1742] – but a sense of the ecclesiastical diplomacy.  

His statement is important for two reasons. First of all, it recognizes distinctions in religious observance, in this case between spiritual devotion to God, and institutional...
obligation. Mason believes that while Madame de Tencin may have been part of the convent, part of the institution, she did not have any of the spiritual devotion necessary to be considered ‘religious.’ Second of all, he notes that throughout her life, Madame de Tencin maintained a sense of ‘ecclesiastical diplomacy.’ Even if Madame de Tencin had no devout inclinations, though she nevertheless used her religious education for powerful ends, and in so doing reinforced the place of religion in society as a source of communication and understanding. In arguing that Madame de Tencin was a secular individual, Pierre-Maurice Masson unintentionally recognizes the reality of the situation: religious expression is a complex process that cannot simply be defined as compliance with devout, institutional regulation. In Madame de Tencin’s case, religious rhetoric was an effective means of rising in the ranks of societal prestige.

Take, for example, a book transcribing letters from 1742-1757 that she and her brother wrote to the Duke de Richelieu, who served under Louis XIV. From the very first pages, the reader will discern an expression of biblical beneficence. On page 2, Madame de Tencin ends her letter, as she does with most of them saying, “Kisses” or “Hugs,” depending on how you choose to read the sentence. The translation reflects a manner used to express friendship even today, yet a more literal version reads: “I kiss you,” or “I hug you,” read: I bestow the gift of kindness upon you. On page five she expands on this expression by saying: “I embrace you with all my heart.”

Modern usage notwithstanding, there are religious and familial implications associated with such a familiar act. Similar to Jesus Christ who embraces his fellow man within Biblical text, Madame de Tencin presents herself as a mother figure to the letter’s recipient, the Duke.

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131 Idem, 5. Original citation: « Je vous embrasse de tout mon coeur. »
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de Richelieu. Ironically, a mother kisses a child in an act of unconditional love and compassion, and here, Madame de Tencin embraces the politically-useful figure, the Duke de Richelieu.

One of the next few letters printed then directly reinforces the importance of compassion to her epistolary writing in beginning with “I want to speak to you, my dear Duke; it is [for reasons of] pure friendship [that I am writing], for I have no new requests to make”\(^{132}\) (my italics). In referring to the friendship between them, Madame de Tencin creates a legitimate base of communication, rather than one which is intentionally manipulative. In expressing herself as a legitimate friend, the Duke has greater reason to support, rather than question, the validity of her claims. He is more prone to follow her advice concerning courtly manipulation if he feels that she is acting in his interests, rather than her own. In reality, her letters prove her political agenda. The moral code of friendship, upon which Jesus Christ’s teachings are based, becomes a manipulated tool for networking.

Historical context of friendship: A section of John 15 notes the importance that Jesus Christ held in friendship. It reads: “\(^{15}\) I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. \(^{16}\)” (my italics)\(^{133}\) As Jesus is open and honest with his friends who, through friendship become his equals rather than servants who do his bidding, so too is Madame de Tencin a friend of the Duke Richelieu.

\(^{132}\) Tencin, Correspondance du Cardinal de Tencin, 3. Original citation: “Je veux causer avec vous, mon cher duc; c’est de pure amitié, car je n’ai pas de grandes nouvelles à vous mander.”

Jesus flatters his servants, by saying that they are now friends with a holy man. So, too, does Madame de Tencin flatter the Duke. On page nine, in a letter referring to the King, she casually notes that “you know that I have not the same influence on his spirit.”\(^{134}\) She highlights his power and influence with the King, reinforcing his ego and his personal sense of greatness in the process.

Her flattery is directed, rather than innocent or unintentional. On June 18, 1743, she sends a missive to the Duke describing how, as her friend, she has faith in him and trusts him to keep secret certain information, such as the fact that Voltaire is functioning as a spy abroad. She plies him with platitudes, showing him how important and powerful he is, for after all it was his idea that Voltaire should become a spy, and she told no one else of the reality. She then casually asks him to “send the letters like I told you to.”\(^{135}\) These letters would help Voltaire increase his influence while abroad. Upon his inaction, she sends him another letter, on June 21, 1743, with more direct orders, and less pretty speech. There, she tells the Duke that “one must write a letter to Wernik, sent to the prince de Deux-Ponts, by an unknown hand, and where there will be German phrases.”\(^{136}\) The missive is specific and concise in its intention – she dictates exactly what he should write. She herself, as a subjugated woman, cannot act, and so she compliments the Duke so that she may act through him.

That same letter from June 18, 1743, includes in it a moral code based on religious values. She identifies the letters that the Duke should send as “always good,

\(^{134}\) Tencin, *Correspondance du Cardinal de Tencin*, 9. Original citation: “Vous savez que je n’ai pas le même pouvoir sur son esprit.”

\(^{135}\) Idem, 65. Original citation: “Envoyez des lettres comme je vous l’ai mandé.”

\(^{136}\) Idem, 71. Original citation: “Il faudroit faire ecrire une letter a Wernik, envoye du prince de Deux-Ponts, par une main inconnue, et ou il y eut des phrases allemandes […]”
because they cannot do any evil.” Morality, which characterizes conduct as good or bad, here classifies the letters as ‘good.’ Whether or not the letter succeeded in persuading the Duke to write a letter – it did not, she had to send him a more direct missive following his passivity – the fact stands that her attempts at persuasion were derived from what Masson terms ‘ecclesiastical diplomacy.’

John 15, the same section that highlights the importance of friendship to Jesus’ teachings, also refers to the contractual relationship between friends. It reads:

9 “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. […] Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command.” (my italics)

By keeping Jesus’ commands, his friends will benefit from his love. Following the same line of reasoning, by following Madame de Tencin’s orders, her friends will stay in her good graces.

She closes a letter to the Duke on July 18, 1743 by saying that “you have given me a great proof of your friendship, of having the patience to read this volume […] I embrace you, and love you with all my heart.” More than simply embracing her friend, as she typically closed her letters, just as Jesus loves his friends, so too does she love the Duke with all her heart. She states this just before asking the Duke to aprise her of new politically-relevant information. She may love the Duke, but it is not an innocent love. She expects her good friend to do as she commands.

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137 Idem, 65. Original citation: “Elles sont toujours bonnes, puisqu’elles ne peuvent faire de mal.”
138 “John 15.”
139 Tencin, Correspondance, 101. Original Citation “vous me donnez une grande preuve de votre amitié, d’avoir la patience de lire ce gros volume […] Je vous embrasse, et vous aime de tout mon cœur.”
Grebel

One of those commands asks the Duke to “persuade [the King] to go [to Plombieres], in the name of God.” Whether or not she believes in a God is irrelevant to her statement. She references God as an underlying factor for how and why the Duke should persuade the Duke to go to Plombieres, a Belgian province. Or perhaps her words signify an underlying tension – she does not understand why the King has not already gone to Belgium. Acting in the name of God, here, would signify an obvious moral direction not yet taken. Anthropological considerations notwithstanding, the historical context of her words is based on a religiously-defined society. As a metaphor, evoking God’s interest adds urgency to an irreligious action.

Madame de Tencin’s religiously-imbued language choice strengthens the power of her statements. In a letter dated November 2, 1742, she lightly remarks that, regarding a matter with the king, “If the current affair, which has not yet been concluded, does not succeed, you can be sure that it will be the devil to establish it.” (my italics). The frustration of a difficult act is multiplied by the metaphoric association of the devil to the situation. Not only will the task take time to accomplish, but there is also an element of evil that will foil the goal at hand. Religion is used as a warning for future negative consequences.

Similarly, in a letter dated December 1, 1742, Tencin chooses to describe Maurepas as one who has a “perfidious heart.” Clearly, Madame de Tencin is not fond of Maurepas, a member of the court who would later be banished in 1749. As a side

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140 Tencin, Correspondance, 65. Original citation: “faites-l’y aller, au nom de Dieu.”
141 Idem, 3-4. Original citation: “J’ai reçu des nouvelles de l’Esperoux [dit le roi]. Si l’affaire qui se traite actuellement pour lui, qui n’est pas encore conclue, ne réussit pas, vous pouvez compter que ce sera le diable pour l’établir.”
142 Tencin, Correspondance, 20. Original Citation: “Maurepas a le Cœur perfide.”
note, in banishing the Count, the King, Louis XV, apparently agrees with and reinforces Madame de Tencin’s negative characterization of Maurepas, thus giving credence and weight to her opinion. In the very same December letter, only a few lines before establishing his “perfidious heart,” she warns the Duke Richelieu that it would be dangerous to work with Maurepas; her strong description clinches that classification. Within a historical context, the word “perfidious” originates from the word “perfidy” whose connotations, according to the online etymology dictionary, in the 1590s originated “from Latin *perfidia* ‘falsehood, treachery,’ from *perfidus* ‘faithless,’ from phrase *per fidem decipere* ‘to deceive through trustingness,’” and ultimately “from *per* ‘through’ (see *per*) + *fidem* (nom. *fides*) ‘faith.’” One word, “perfidy” implies the act of deceiving trust by treachery of faith. The key juxtaposition remains the balance between treachery and faith, where a lack of faith or manipulation thereof implies negative origins. This negativity is reinforced by the associated word, “felony,” where according to the online etymology dictionary, in the late 13th century, the term was found in Anglo-French common law “from O.Fr. *felonie* (12th century) ‘wickedness, evil, treachery, perfidy, crime, cruelty, sin,’” and from the Gallo-Roman language of “*fellonia*, from *fellanem* (see felon).” The online dictionary logically links those who are wickedly evil felons with a treacherous and dangerous lack of faith, a characterization that falls in line with the religious associations of the Middle Ages which birthed the word. And the supposedly secularized Madame de Tencin plays on the religious power of the word “perfidy” in arguing against Maurepas’ viability as a political partner.

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145 Ibid.
For Madame de Tencin, religious vernacular was useful in expressing a sense of authority. As a female, she should have had none, the public sphere being close off to her entry. But in consciously basing her legitimacy on the ecclesiastical diplomacy that she learned in the convent, she was able to convince the Duke to act on her behalf. He was her proxy into a world of power. Even if her language is unconscious, the fact of the matter stands that such language was useful in her aim of networking. In the Enlightened salon society of the 18th century, religious values still underpinned general communication and provided viable currents of understanding.

Rahel Varnhagen: Cutting introspection

Unlike Madame de Tencin who uses letters to exert influence, Rahel’s focus more on self-expression. Moreover, she uses her letters to keep in touch specific individuals, and therefore not only is what she says important, but also to whom she writes. Together, those two facets of her letter writing establish a decidedly Jewish character.

As Monica Richarz reiterates, “Education became a fundamental concept for nineteenth-century German Jewry. Education […] lead to the social recognition of the Jews among the Germans.” Education, then, was key tenet of the Jewish German Enlightenment. This is an education that, as the first chapter notes, falls in line with rational, Jewish thought. By expressing Enlightenment values, Rahel reiterates her Jewish background. As Mrs. Vaughan Jennings notes:

“Where then are we to look for that intellectual society of which we have so often heart? It was but developing in the families of a few learned Jews, first in that of Moses Mendelssohn. His daughters, like all German girls, possessed an intimate circle of friends, married women and maidens, who quickly caught the infection of their eager intelligence. Among them were Henriette Herz and Rahel Levin,

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and it was through the intellectual activity of these young Jewesses that the spirit of the new era first became imperceptibly diffused.”

The intellectually stimulating Enlightenment was propagated by members of the Jewish community and Rahel’s central placement within the Jewish community facilitated her reception of Enlightenment thought. In perpetuating Enlightenment ideals she expressed a Jewish character.

By writing deeply introspective letters in the individualistic style of the Enlightenment, she does not distance herself from her religious heritage. The historian, MargaretMary Daley describes her analytical correspondence as a “work of art that freezes, explores, and transcends an important moment in communication: it is the moment in which the self extends outward, in the direction of another, without ceasing to focus on itself. This is the egocentric self.” It is an expressed egocentricity which is itself a virtue, rather than a vice, because her correspondence “yields a new understanding of autobiographical self-presentation and displays a development of her female self.”

Her analytical understanding of herself follows the rational thought process of the traditional Jew, Moses Mendelssohn.

In sending her introspective thoughts to other Jews, she maintains ties with her Jewish roots. Doctor David Veit, a Jew with whom she regularly corresponded, provides one such example. She opened up to him, allowing him to see a facet of her personality not available for public view. For example, she criticizes herself, writing in 1794 how “I have not managed to make progress, to rid myself of the irresistible passion to answer misdirected questions – and especially, and nearly always, if they are concerning myself

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148 MargaretMary Daley, Women of Letters, 55.
149 Idem, p. 56.
– always with misdirected answers.”¹⁵⁰ She continues describing this desire for self-betterment in 1811, bemoaning how “my words, and yours! Like exercized soldiers in beautiful uniforms, everything of yours is standing there; and everything of mine, like an unruly mob of rebels with sticks!”¹⁵¹ She recognizes her own merits each time, introducing the first point by saying that “In many cases I am surprisingly calm and patient, and I have also managed to get rid of many of my ways that I could not stand; but in one thing,”¹⁵² and the latter by saying how “I know quite well that I am writing to you things that are worth reading.”¹⁵³ But even with a healthy sense of self-worth, she is harsh in criticizing her own faults, and her desire to “make […] progress”¹⁵⁴ and “understand why”¹⁵⁵ she cannot change. Celebrated though she was as a salon hostess, with David Veit, a close Jewish friend, she reveals her vulnerable fears.

To family members, she was less philosophical, but nonetheless maintained an active correspondence. Mrs Vaughn Jennings describes a letter sent to her sister Rosa, where she asks her to “Tell [mamma] I congratulate her from my whole heart – the more that she never knew any joy through me – it was not God’s will.”¹⁵⁶ The specific event is unclear – she only notes that “in [mamma’s] place I should have had great compassion for such a child.”¹⁵⁷ Vague though the event may be, the short sentence reveals her loyalty to her family. She congratulates her mother from her ‘whole heart’ even though, as Jennings admits, “From all the letters of this period we gather that matters were not

¹⁵¹ Idem, 166.
¹⁵² Idem, 168.
¹⁵³ Idem, 166.
¹⁵⁴ Idem, 168.
¹⁵⁵ Idem, 166.
¹⁵⁶ Jennings, Rahel: Her Life and Letters, 12
¹⁵⁷ Ibid.
smooth in the Levin home.” This loyalty to family was typical of the Jewish community, for the Jewish community distinguished itself from general bourgeois society through the importance of family ties. Familial disputes notwithstanding, she nevertheless maintained close contact with her family, and even congratulated them when the occasion arose.

She also references a common Jewish expression in noting that it was ‘not God’s will’ for her to get along with her mother. “[I]t was not God’s will,” was and is a common and important refrain within Jewish society. Jews strongly believe that God’s will decides the fate of the future and the episodes of the past and present. If ill will falls, such as a discordant relationship among individuals, it was God who willed it, not the humans involved. And she ends the letter by saying “Tell mamma this. God strengthen you.” God not only determines what will happen, or has happened, but is also the source of individual empowerment. Regardless of religious belief – the modern historian cannot infer a qualitative devout feeling from her writing – that one sentence illustrates a perpetuation of Jewish thought and tradition.

Rahel herself recognizes the prevalence of religious philosophy. In a letter to her eventual husband, Karl August Varnhagen, dated October 27, 1808, she refers to Jean-Paul’s writing – a contemporary author – remarking how “the modern ‘sensibility’ half terrifies him by its boldness and tendency to Catholicism.” Ideally, the modern sensibility, the modern awareness was supposed to be Enlightened and secular. But Jean-Paul, according to Rahel, did not know how to address the religiously imbued reality with his desire to express a secular environment. Rahel’s tone is one of mocking

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158 Idem, 9.
159 Bilski and Braun, Jewish Women and Their Salons, 18.
condensation, for she sees his quandary as ridiculous. It is obvious to her that society has maintained religious tendencies, and it is silly, in her opinion, to impose a sense of secular modernity onto an existence which is not.

Her quick wit and familiarity characterize her letters, as compared to Madame de Tencin’s, which are full of dripping flattery and remarks about social status. But different as she is from Madame de Tencin, Rahel Varnhagen, too, expresses a sense of religious identity. In an age where letters were carefully constructed, the opportunity to revise her communication, to eliminate the sense of religion which led to her – relative – social ostracism, was ever-present. And yet, through her letters she maintains ties with her family and community and speaks the ‘Jewish language,’ if you will. While using the German Vernacular, she uses such Jewish idioms as ‘it was not God’s will’ and communicates to her mother that ‘God strengthen you.’ The very same background that she protested molded her personality and identity, allowing for a sense of religious expression incongruent with an assumption of the time period as solely ‘secular.’
CONCLUSION

Ironically, the conclusion of this work is no conclusion at all, but rather an introduction; an introduction to a necessarily forthcoming body of work. Significant questions were raised that must be more fully developed. Yet, in so claiming I do not obviate the importance of the current endeavor, but rather highlight its place as an overview and a starting point of study. In fact, this introductory piece is vital to enhancing a fuller understanding of the complexity of the Enlightenment climate. It is a complexity created by the ravages of war, by the diversity of opinion, and at its core, by the impact that religious culture had and has on individual identities.

This religious culture transcends the institution. As a multifaceted entity, religion enters the vernacular and provides a sense of morality and cultural heritage indistinguishable from Enlightenment conception of values. Even those who are strongly disposed to oppose it – such as Madame de Tencin and Rahel Levin Varnhagen – themselves participate in its perpetuation. Their own, carefully crafted letters could have been revised to eliminate a sense of religious expression, yet they nonetheless illustrate basic religion’s unconscious, pervasive power.

In using her religious background as a tool for political manipulation, Madame de Tencin highlights the conscious use of religion as an antecedent to power. It is an effective tool that speaks to the levels and layers of communication between individuals. As the coronation process, dominant from around 800 CE to the Enlightenment, elucidates, religion was intrinsically tied to French identity. Focusing on the humanistic ideals of the Enlightenment does not negate the importance that such communication continued to hold in society. The reduction of institutional religious power and the
perpetuation of religious values are not ideologically opposed realities. They are mutually beneficial in progressing society past the oppression of institution through the use of structured, moral, positive intention. Such a conscious decision by a *salonnière*, epitome of ‘secularizing,’ philosophical ideals, cannot be taken lightly.

Likewise, Rahel Varnhagen’s decision to remain loyal to her Jewish family and community was not a casual one. She may have dreamed about the freedom associated with a fully assimilated, converted identity, but she only converted at the age of 43. Ever the pragmatist, her decision actually falls in line with religious pressures. Her conversion supported her immediately-following marriage ceremony, a core of religious tradition. And even though critics may rail against her for formally separating with the Jewish community, until her death, she self-identified as a ‘fugitive from Egypt,’ a Jew. Religious culture structured her identity, even as her decision to convert might imply otherwise to the superficial observer.

Critical intellectuals, themselves, reinforce the strength of religious retainment through their own, contradictory arguments. Peter Gay and Liana Giorgi, to name a few, posited the theory of generalized secularization. But all that such intellectuals effectively demonstrate is the change in a power structure; the power of the Church was transferred over to the government. That, as an argument, does not deny the power of religious value in society. In fact, both Gay and Giorgi reference the symbols and spirituality associated with religion as an institution. They never prove that such facets of society lost meaning for those who claim to be secular.

The reality shows us that even within a progressive environment, individuals are not as distinct from their past religious heritage as the myth of generalized secularization
implies. People continue to use a religiously-based thought process even within a ‘secular world.’ The humanistic ideals of the Enlightenment were based on, rather than opposed, the religious principles of the past: there is correct and incorrect conduct, and there is a central, philosophical tenet to live by. Previously, society was focused on the supernatural ‘God,’ and currently society centers on the humanistic ‘Reason.’ Both are philosophical conceptions created to understand the complexity of a chaotic world.

Different as contexts and environments may be throughout Europe, across countries, individuals still expressed religious values. Madame de Tencin and Rahel Varnhagen were separated by almost a century, at least one revolution, country borders, and societal status. Indeed, one was a member of the Jewish minority, and the other was a member of the Catholic majority. Yet both figures of the Enlightenment still based their rhetoric and action on religious principles, albeit in slightly varying manners.

Contemporary psychological investigation of society reinforces the ubiquitous presence of the past in modernity. Critically acclaimed, rational journalist David Brooks recently wrote a book called “The Social Animal,” where he examines human interaction through psychological tools. Philosopher Thomas Nagel, who reviewed the piece, sums up Brooks’ intent in one, short sentence: “Nondeliberate emotion, perception and intuition are much more important in shaping our lives than reason and will.” Humans are functions of decision-making factors which they cannot command: ‘nondeliberate emotion, perception and intuition.’ People assume that they reasonably control their own

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161 They were born in 1682 and 1771, respectively.
162 The French Revolution.
163 One being from France, the other from Germany.
decisions, but in fact, their mode of processing has been predetermined by the values which shape emotion, perception, and intuition. And those values are, in turn, imparted to society by Religion. This is a religion separate from institutional participation, but which, as Madame de Tencin and Rahel Varnhagen highlight, directs the individual to moralize ‘good’ versus ‘bad.’

Humans can attempt to rationalize their rule of emotion, understanding, and decision-making, but the tangible truth shows that the traditions of the past form a foundation for present and future understanding. Transformative though the Enlightenment may have been, it is part of continuous history. This continuity reinforces the validity of learning from the past to understand the future. These strains of thought are so integral to societal expression that they cannot be easily cleaved out of communication through the elimination of religion as a political institution. They continue as unobtrusive elements within general societal discourse. Understanding the tenacity that religion continues to hold on our environment is essential to understanding its impact in molding our rational thought. Madame de Tencin and Rahel Varnhagen are just two examples of a larger societal trend. People are not distinct from their emotions and heritage. They are indelibly formed by past experience.
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