THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING REVOLUTIONARY: OATH-TAKING AND THE ‘FEELING RULES’ OF VIOLENCE (1789–1794)

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Abstract—Historians of the French Revolution have identified many cultural and ideological sources of its violence: ideological commitments to virtue, the inevitable clashes involved in founding a new order, the emotions of fear and anger unleashed by political upheaval, and religious commitments to Catholicism. Rarely, however, have they explored how civic religious practices gave rise to violence. This article shows how the practice of oath-taking generated emotional “sacred” commitments and a propensity for violence in maintaining them. Given the legal and institutional weaknesses of the new regime, oath-taking helped establish political allegiances, but oaths often came into conflict with other sacred commitments, old and new. The widespread practice of oath-taking during the Revolution offers a revealing vantage point to understand the sacred, civic-religious dimensions of these various political commitments. The imperative to maintain vows, I argue, prompted contemporaries to see violence as extreme but necessary.

Liberty or death is probably one of the most popular quotes historians use to explain the entanglement between death and revolutionary enthusiasm in France during the years 1789–99. The expression was already embroidered onto the banners of certain districts of Paris in the summer of 1789 and, evoked many times in the debates of the Assembly, it was the favoured wording for the first federative oaths coming from the provinces.¹ A deputation of Bretons and Angevins, joining the meeting of the Paris Jacobin club on 29 March 1790, reenacted the oath taken by their communities the previous 19 January in Pontivy:

Let us swear on our honour and the altar of the nation, in the presence of the God of armies, to remain forever united by the bonds of the closest brotherhood, to fight the enemies of the revolution,

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¹ E. Liris and J. M. Bizières (eds), La Révolution et la mort (Toulouse, 1991), 10.
to uphold the rights of man, to support the new constitution of the
kingdom; and at the first signal of war, the rallying cry of our armed
phalanx will be: To live free, or to die!2

This formula already contained the key elements of revolutionary oaths: the
tendency towards religious experience, the ambition to create a sense of community
between the oath-takers that excluded outsiders, the invitation to stay vigilant and
proactive, the reference to the motivation supposedly instilled by the performance. These few words, therefore, are the epitome of the two facets of revolu-
tionary violence: violent death (the price revolutionaries should be ready to pay to
fulfil their vow) and violent justice (the price they should be more than ready to
make their enemies pay).3 The purpose of this article is to analyse how the prac-
tice of oath-taking played a role in making the emotional experience of violence
a consequence of a religious commitment to the Revolutionary cause. Taking an
oath was indeed part of those civic religious practices that gave meaning to the so-
cial experience of the Revolution. In that sense, the constellation of these practices
seems to generate something very similar to the definition of religion given by
Clifford Geertz: ‘(1) a system of symbols (2) which acts to establish powerful, per-
vasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men (3) by formulating concep-
tions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such
an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic’.4

It is probably this image of religiously motivated violence that rekindled sociolo-
gists’ interest in the French Revolution after the outbreak of terrorism in our time.
Marc Sageman, for instance, decided to start his recent study of the emergence
of modern political violence with 1789.5 Sageman used the French Revolution to
show how the recourse to political violence is not a consequence or indicative of
a particular ideological stand. In his view, to understand how and why different
groups or individuals commit violent acts we should instead use a social identity
perspective. He even went as far as to suggest that all the major themes charac-
terizing modern political violence fit the example of Charlotte Corday, Marat’s
murderer. In the model adopted by Sageman, much attention is given to the cog-
nitive process of self-categorization that is the basis of human understanding of
the world. Ideas can help social actors to self-categorize into a group in contrast to
others, but they are not enough to explain why they turn to violence.6

Historians might choose to ignore some of the general stances on the French
Revolution taken by this sociologist, former CIA officer and counter-terrorism
consultant. But they could also benefit from the challenge of finding new ways to
illuminate our understanding of the recourse to violence during these years. This

2 Moniteur, 31 January 1790, in A. Aulard (ed.), La Société des Jacobins: Recueil de documents
4 C. Geertz, ‘Religion as a cultural system’, in The Interpretation of Cultures (New York, 1973),
90.
5 M. Sageman, Turning to Political Violence: The Emergence of Terrorism (Philadelphia,
2017).
6 Ibid., 90.
article aims to investigate the link between violence and religious self-representation during the French Revolution, using oath-taking as an exemplary viewpoint. When taking an oath, people first give a definition of themselves: they declare to be the people described in the formula. French revolutionaries did not just strive for their principles; they also strove for their social and cultural identity—for their face, as Erving Goffman would say. Oaths helped keep their commitment on track and elicited emotions that were crucial for being considered good citizens.

Establishing a link between oath-taking and the recourse to violence does not mean that swearing an oath made the brutal treatment of enemies and those outside of the sworn community inevitable. It just means that the practice of oaths contributed to give meaning to the ‘feeling rules’ of revolutionary violence, that is what historians of emotions would define as the norms and the modes of expression relating to violence accepted by that particular society. They expressed the motivation of actors and the legitimacy of their actions; they conveyed the modes of emotional expression that could lead to violent acts; they were used in order to stage the emotions revolutionaries started to perceive as fundamental qualities of citizenship. In a nutshell, displaying a willingness to take up arms had both external effects on society during those years and more personal effects in the definition of self that revolutionaries gave themselves while emoting.

At the same time, it is also important to remember the political stakes involved in the entanglement between violence and the Revolution. Declaring oneself a revolutionary ready to fight for the constitution was not just a powerful self-representation technique or a rhetorical pose. Bearing arms was also an attribute and a duty of active citizens, the only Frenchmen who could fully exercise political rights in the new regime established in 1789. In establishing the feeling rules of violence, the revolutionaries were also forging a model for modern and democratic citizenship.

The relationship between violence and revolution has long been a critical problem within the historiography, but it acquired a new prominence in the 1970s when François Furet and Mona Ozouf, among others, began to look at the French Revolution through the lens of totalitarianism. Their intention was to offer a political interpretation of the revolutionary years, one that would challenge the classic ‘circumstance argument’ usually associated with the

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occupants of the chair of French Revolutionary History at the Sorbonne. These authors and those connected with the so-called *école critique* were able to provide new insights, even if their tendency to identify the ideology that supposedly motivated the radical revolutionaries with the totalitarian horrors of the twentieth century was often anachronistic. Following a certain ‘historical fatalism’, these historians saw the violence and the Terror’s policies as embedded in revolutionary ideas.

Conversely, other historians have evoked cultural reasons to explain the rise of violence in the French Revolution: the inevitable clashes involved in founding a new order, religious commitments to Catholicism and the brutality of a civil war. More recently, Timothy Tackett and Sophie Wahnich have focused attention on the emotions of fear and anger unleashed by political upheaval, offering the most updated statement on the question and proving the success of a new paradigm for the understanding of revolutionary violence. While Patrice Guennifey has argued that this violence arose because of the radicalization of discourse that had taken place in the years before the Terror, Marisa Linton instead describes the side effects of intense friendships, which degenerated into personal mistrust and enmity held by different factions of revolutionaries.

All these new approaches have made it possible to understand how the Terror cannot be isolated from the revolutionary process and established a new agenda for research. As Jean-Clément Martin put it, rather than merely writing a history of the Revolution and its violence, we can now interpret the Revolution through its violence. What can the recourse to violence tell us about the revolutionary world? To answer this question, it is worth focusing on some of the cultural practices that contributed to the meaning of revolutionary violence or offered a context for its legitimacy. Similar to the goal set by Carla Hesse in 1996, paying attention to these cultural practices can finally end the historiographical guerre idéologique of the twentieth century. Among these practices, oath-taking is particularly relevant because of its constant presence in the history of the French Revolution. As this article will demonstrate, oaths punctuated the revolutionary decade and dictated the pace of the radicalization of politics.

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Many historians have studied the Revolution’s oaths and the meanings attributed to them. While Mona Ozouf understands oath-taking as an imposition from above with few implications for individual consciences, Timothy Tackett’s ground-breaking study of the civil constitution of the clergy showed how attitudes towards the civic oath could reflect perspectives on the Revolution itself. A certain tension between these two positions still informs Bronisław Baczko’s and Lynn Hunt’s contributions to the debate, while Pierre Serna and Anne Simonin have demonstrated the material consequences that taking an oath could have for those who had sworn one during and after the Revolution. More recently, Charles Walton has demonstrated oaths’ polarizing impact and the ‘significance of struggles over defining the place of religion in the new order even before the Civil Oath was imposed on the clergy’.

While indebted to these historians, this article’s approach considers oath-taking as the carrier of emotions that made it possible and legitimate to engage with the Revolution and its discourse. Oaths, as repetitive as they were, concretized the militancy of the revolutionaries. The history of the French Revolution is also the story of its oaths because of the personal motivation driven by these promises. The Tennis Court Oath of 20 June 1789 was only the first in a series of similar oaths, taken during moments of intense crisis in successive Revolutionary assemblies, most notably following the crisis of Varennes in June 1791, during the debates on war on 14 January 1792, during the insurrection of 10 August 1792, on the eve of the king’s execution on 20 January 1793 and immediately after Robespierre’s arrest on 9 thermidor II. It comes as no surprise that these revolutionaries tried to institutionalize their feelings by proposing oaths to mobilize citizens. Oath-taking served to instil courage in patriots who were swept up in their own actions; it transmitted the principles of the new order through simple means, and it served to expose those who were openly against the Revolution and reveal those who remained hidden under the veil of conformity. For these reasons, looking at oath-taking during these years allows us to enter the symbolic world of the men and women of the Revolutionary decade unlike any other topic. Following this perspective, this article aims to explain the ‘feeling rules’ of violence embedded in the practice of oath-taking.

19 A general analysis of the power of oaths during the Revolution will be the core of my forthcoming monograph, an adaptation of my dissertation: “Je jure”. Histoire de la fidélité politique des Lumières à Napoléon’ (PhD, Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne/Scuola Normale Superiore, 2016).
The conflict between Revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries over the meaning of oath-taking and their hegemony over what was referred to as the *religion du serment* began early in the Revolution. In February 1790, just as the Federation festivals and the civic oath taken by the authorities began to become well known throughout France, a reactionary libel described the revolutionary events as the result of a secret plot against every human principle, oaths included. Embracing the revolutionary process implied regaining the meaning of oath-taking.

The new model of oaths had to be coherent with the new basis of citizenship: in the new era being loyal to institutions could not just mean respecting the laws and the authorities. That was the passive obedience of the Ancien Régime, a model the revolutionaries rejected. Citizens, as *les hommes nouveaux*, had to engage fully with the government and the cause of the Revolution. Whereas Ancien Régime monarchies might only demand the arms of their subjects, by violence if needed, revolutionary institutions demanded their citizens’ hearts, so that they would feel personally the need to fight for the benefit of the political community. Being a true citizen implied feeling the call for action when the nation was in danger. In order to achieve this ambitious purpose, revolutionary elites thought they could rely on the power of oaths. Traditionally administered by the Church and considered ‘an act of religion’ by almost all eighteenth-century manuals of devotion, the institution of oath-taking was revived by the French Revolution. Since the very beginning, following the example of the *Serment du Jeu de Paume*, oath-taking was supposed to confer a religious seal upon revolutionary commitment. In October 1789, the Constituent Assembly decided that active citizens could only exercise their political rights after swearing an oath. On that occasion, Mirabeau explained how by taking an oath the citizens were meant to devote themselves to the nation:

> It is important to show young people the relationship they maintain with their nation, to seize the movements of the human heart early on and direct them towards the general good, and to link the first affections of men to the chain linking their entire existence to the obedience of laws and the duties of the citizen.

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20 *Religion du serment* was the expression usually employed to designate the sacredness of an oath in theological treatises, especially in the aftermath of the dispute between Jansenists and Roman Catholics. Both Protestant and Catholic books dealing with cases of conscience considered oaths among the holiest acts of religion. F. Gabriel, ‘Une réponse aux “artifices de parole”: la religion du serment. François Desmarest sur le pas de Simon Vigor’, *Les Cahiers du Centre de Recherches Historiques*, 33, (2004).

21 *Les chefs des Jacobites aux Français* [16 February 1790], 3.


Obéissance des lois and devoirs du citoyen: even at the very beginning of the Revolution, membership of the political community was only possible through emotional involvement, and the oath was essential in transfiguring this emotional involvement into a religious commitment. This interpretation of oath formulas may appear implausible to modern and sceptical readers; their novelty can be mistaken for just another effect of revolutionary emphasis. Nevertheless, those who faced the obligation of taking such an oath took this innovation very seriously. Even an apparently innocuous formula such as that of the civic oath of 1790 could cause distress, proving how the new ethics of loyalty were established and disruptive from the beginning of the Revolution.24 Even if there were no explicit references to glorious deaths or to hate, some members of the Assembly refused to take the oath, since—as they put it—swearing to ‘maintain the constitution’ with all their power would imply an ‘active’ engagement, something very different from the traditional submission to the authorities. Submission: that was all these moderates were prepared to swear. An anonymous libel took care to respond to the protests of one of the opponents of the oath, the mesmerist Nicolas Bergasse:

But isn’t the defence of the constitution an integral part of your obedience? You [Bergasse] only promise the submission of slaves, and you refuse the active service of the free citizen. The constitution that you swear to be faithful to condemns this inaction as a crime. She does not command you to bow your head in front of her, but to stand up and march to ensure its execution.25

The Constitution did not tolerate political laziness; citizens had to engage personally to be true citizens, true revolutionaries.

This model was also adopted for soldiers and military officials, and provoked resistance among them too. The issue of the troops’ loyalty was raised from the beginning of the revolutionary process: one of the underlying questions that preoccupied many pamphlets in the summer of 1789 was precisely to whom those serving in the army owed allegiance. How could the revolutionaries trust those who served in the army for a monarch? How could they take upon themselves the right to mobilize their violent acts in the name of the Revolution? Once again, the new religion of oaths offered an answer to these fears.26 Under

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24 ‘I swear to be faithful to the nation, to the law and to the King, and to uphold with all my power the Constitution decreed by the National Assembly and accepted by the King.’ This was the oath taken by the members of the Assembly on February 1790 and then celebrated by the Festival of the Federation.
26 [M.-J. Chénier], Lettre à M. le comte de Mirabeau, l’un des représentants de l’Assemblée nationale, sur les dispositions naturelles, nécessaires et indubitables des Officiers et des Soldats Français et Étrangers [1789], 7–8. Another letter asked to abolish the exclusive oath to the king: after the revolution soldiers had to swear loyalty to the representatives of the nation: Extrait d’une lettre écrite de Paris, en réponse à celle d’un lieutenant-colonel d’infanterie à son régiment, en garnison en Bretagne, le 15 juillet 1789 [Paris, 1789], 8.
the pressure of this debate, the National Assembly approved a decree imposing a new oath for the *milices*: soldiers were now asked to swear obedience to the nation, the law and the king in the hands of the municipal officers. Significantly, soldiers were still asked to ‘obey’, even if the reference to the nation and the law made it clear that this was not the traditional form of obedience. The new formula seems to have left many members of the army quite perplexed.\(^{27}\) The transition was far from being smooth. One year later, when discussing a reform of the army, Jean-Louis Carra felt the need to point out that soldiers had to conform to the new principles of active loyalty by taking an oath.\(^{28}\) Soldiers were expected to be driven by their activism more than their discipline. Passive obedience could not be enough even for them. An apprenticeship in revolutionary citizenship meant dealing with this new approach to loyalty, something men accustomed to taking orders would obviously struggle with. In fact, a similar issue was raised regarding the National Guard after General La Fayette’s resignation as their Commander in April 1791, an event that helps us understand how the new ethics of loyalty started to impact on revolutionary dynamics. La Fayette’s resignation followed the rioting that prevented the king and his family from leaving the Tuileries to spend Easter in St Cloud. The Parisian crowds were already agitated by fears that the king could flee to organize a counter-revolution from abroad, offering fertile ground to the clubs that managed to convince some national guardsmen to join the human barrier that blocked the royal carriages’ departure from the palace.\(^{29}\) Disobeyed by his troops, La Fayette resigned his commission. Some Guards battalions, however, did not react well to the news. The *Blancs-Manteaux* battalion, for example, declared they still considered La Fayette their general in spite of everything and took an oath of personal allegiance to him, which was soon emulated by other battalions in the capital. Moreover, they made it mandatory for all their peers, decreeing that those who refused the new oath would be expelled from the National Guard.\(^{30}\) Dubois-Crancé, a deputy who happened to be enrolled in the same battalion, refused to take such a personal oath, describing it as a step towards slavery:

> It isn’t that I had ever had the thought of refusing, when in the army, legitimate obedience to my superiors: I served twenty-nine years with honour; but I know very well how to distinguish, as a freeman

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\(^{27}\) E.g. the artillery lieutenant Dommartin: ‘We have just renewed our oath; I am not sure what this means; As a soldier, I only knew my king; at the moment, I obey two masters who must, we are told, make my happiness and that of my brothers, if they agree.’ Quoted in A. de Besancenet, *Un officier royaliste au service de la République, d’après les lettres inédites du général de Dommartin* (Paris, 1876), 24.


\(^{30}\) Aulard, *Jacobins*, ii. 354.
today, the passive subordination of a soldier from the reasoned sub-
ordination of a national guard, for I do not want to become a slave
again.\textsuperscript{31}

The Guards had already sworn an oath during the Festival of the Federation
celebrated at the Champ-de-Mars on 14 July 1790, and that federative oath did
not require any restrictive clauses. This controversy dominated public conver-
sations for months and it had to do with a core issue: the legitimacy of bearing
arms in the name of the Revolution. As the debates in the Parisian Jacobin club
testify, there were rumours about men arrested for expressing opinions at odds
with this personal oath or for circulating pamphlets on this matter, but for
many being arrested for not being willing to pay a tribute of obedience to La
Fayette meant betraying the federative oath they had so enthusiastically sworn
on the first anniversary of the Bastille: ‘The weapons that we had sworn to lay
down just before death and that we used to help destroy the dens of despotism
were taken away from us.’\textsuperscript{32} Bailly’s and La Fayette’s attempt to politicize
the National Guard in their favour by removing insubordinates collided with the
active militancy of the frères d’armes, particularly conscious of the value of
their revolutionary oath.

More generally, the problem of policing public violence was among the
core preoccupations of all the revolutionaries. In June 1791, especially after
the events of April, the soldiers’ loyalty and ways of proving it were widely
debated in clubs, the National Assembly and the public sphere. Significantly
enough, this debate focused on the model of obedience expected of soldiers
in a revolutionary country. Once again, the challenge was to imagine a new
standard of loyalty that made armed citizens active participants in the revo-
lutionary process, going beyond military discipline. Once again, oaths were
expected to drive change. If the aim was to create an army of citizen-soldiers,
discipline had to be sacrificed at the altar of militancy—that was the influen-
tial opinion of many speakers intervening at the Jacobin club, for instance.\textsuperscript{33}
New institutions needed new soldiers, and these soldiers needed officers who
could give orders the men could obey without dishonouring their patriotism,
as Robespierre put it.\textsuperscript{34} They needed new oaths too, though, since the aristoc-
ocratic serment d’honneur was not considered appropriate for new citizens.
The different quality of revolutionary commitment required a religious engage-
ment, a religious oath.\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{31} E.-L.-A. Dubois de Crancé, Dubois-Crancé à ses concitoyens [Paris, 1791], in Aulard,
\textit{Jacobins}, ii. 354.
\textsuperscript{32} As a deputation of grenadiers from the section Oratoire put it in the Jacobin club on 29 April
\textsuperscript{33} T. Poirot, ‘Robespierre et la guerre, une question posée dès 1789?’, \textit{Annales historiques de
\textsuperscript{34} 8 June 1791, Aulard, \textit{Jacobins}, ii. 491.
\textsuperscript{35} Speech of Rœderer at the Jacobin club, 10 June 1791; ibid., 493.
We have seen how revolutionaries started to describe their political engagement as a religious commitment quite early on. Civic religious practices such as festivals, oaths and the new rituals carried out in honour of the martyrs of the Revolution gave a concrete sense of this new approach to patriotism.\(^\text{36}\) Being a true Revolutionary was a matter of faith. Sometimes, and especially during the first months of the Revolution, Christianity and the new religion of the nation tended to overlap, especially for patriot priests such as Henri Grégoire and Claude Fauchet. This sort of syncretism affected religious practices too. Even one of the most traditional rituals of the Catholic Church, Holy Communion, could be used as an occasion to enact allegiance to the nation. In June 1791, for example, a group of young boys entered the Jacobin Club in Paris just after their First Communion to swear another ‘sacred’ oath: after being admitted in the ranks of the Church, they gained access to the community of patriots by declaring themselves ready to fulfil their duty as citizens.\(^\text{37}\)

This seems particularly true when the Revolution had to find a language to praise its first martyrs. How was it possible to make sense of the death of fallen revolutionaries without evoking an afterlife? The sermons of the partisans of the Revolution were quite keen on introducing some of the key elements of revolutionary ethics into the stream of the traditional Christian discourse on martyrdom. When Claude Fauchet talked about the virtues of those who fell at the Bastille in a sermon on 5 August 1789, he proposed an interpretation of the perfect Christian that could fit the habitus of the active citizen:

> The desirable death that gives life to an entire Empire! [...] Yes, Christians, it is no longer only the justice of Nature; it is the justice of Religion that we must recognize in the Revolution that sets us free: it is in the principles of the Gospel that we can see our Liberators as Martyrs of the Public Good.\(^\text{38}\)

When evoking the idea of martyrdom to define the sacrifice of the vainqueurs de la Bastille Fauchet was not being hyperbolic.\(^\text{39}\) He knew that his audience was more than willing to believe his grandiloquent emphasis in those days of widespread enthusiasm: by dying at the Bastille they had not just become heroes of the Revolution but saints, since they gained the palms of martyrdom.

This juxtaposition between revolutionary engagement and religious fulfilment became even more evident during and after the crisis of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, in the winter of 1791. In February 1790 a decree had already dissolved most religious orders, revoking any future religious vows:


\(^{38}\) C. Fauchet, *Discours sur la liberté française prononcé le mercredi 5 août 1789* (Paris, 1789), 1–2, 6.

\(^{39}\) J. Clarke, *Commemorating the Dead in Revolutionary France: Revolution and Remembrance, 1789–1799* (Cambridge, 2007).
those same revolutionaries who were establishing the new rules of political
loyalty described ecclesiastical vows as ‘prisons for consciousness’, obstruct-
ing the performance of social duties. Significantly enough, even the opponents
of the new regime felt the frequent comparison of oaths with ecclesiastical
vows was shaking the basis of the concept of loyalty, undermining the prin-
ciple of obedience.\textsuperscript{40} Describing revolutionary engagement as a religious ex-
perience had consequences for the way in which members of the Assembly
tried to police Catholicism. Confronted with the refractory clergy’s refusal to
take the civic oath, revolutionaries developed more compelling bonds between
themselves, and the practice of oath-taking played an essential role in this pro-
cess. Réfractaires and constitutionnels were defined by their attitude towards
the civic oath, and revolutionaries embraced this opposition, making more
and more references to their sworn allegiance to the cause of the Revolution.
Patriotic libels against the réfractaires dramatized the antagonism between
two sworn communities: on one side the priests who were stubbornly at-
tached to the vows given to Rome; on the other, the real patriots who found in
the Revolution or in the political associations that animated it a new religious
family. Facing the reluctance of the réfractaires, on 9 January 1791 the Paris
Jacobin club sent its affiliates a call to action against those who threatened the
constitution ‘that we swore to defend’ provoking a new ‘war of religion’.\textsuperscript{41}
The central society urged regional clubs to counteract the propaganda of the Civil
Constitution of the Clergy’s opponents, while also raising the possibility that
the love of freedom might lead to excesses against those who refused to take
the oath—being loyal to the new institutions also meant controlling instincts
of violence when the nation needed calm. At the same time, however, the letter
was also meant to promote an idea of political commitment that derived from
the oath and that was represented as a religious mission:

\begin{quote}
It is very comforting for us, gentlemen, to think that from one end
of France to the other, united by the purest patriotism, we will all
work to avoid the evil threats of the enemies of the public good. It
is at this time of crisis that we should be proud to form this holy
coalition of Friends of the Constitution. Priests and missionaries of
freedom, let us swear once again to be always faithful to its cult and
to defend it against the attacks from the perpetrators of despotism.\textsuperscript{42}
\end{quote}

The references to a renewal of the oath led to a new conception of it, even
more openly similar to a religious sacrament. The sworn community of the
Amis de la constitution was presented as a religious community devoted to

\textsuperscript{40} L’enthousiasme du serment civique confondu par les plus simples lumières de la raison
(1790), 26–7.
\textsuperscript{41} Lettre de la Société des Amis de la Constitution aux sociétés qui lui sont affiliées (Paris,
1791).
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 4–5.
the cult of liberty, a principle supposedly under attack and which had to be defended.

The Jacobins' willingness to be vigilant against the Revolution's enemies was tested that same month. In the wake of threats from the monarchical Club des Impartialux, on 24 January 1791 the Jacobins took an oath to monitor and denounce the enemies of the public good, to reconnect all the partisans of freedom. That same oath was endorsed by numerous sections of Paris, despite protests by more moderate figures, and contributed to the progressive polarization of the political debate in Paris. Even more, it encouraged other societies to fraternize with the Jacobins, generating other oaths and therefore other sworn commitments to combat common enemies.\textsuperscript{43} Feelings of enmity were therefore embedded in the concept of active citizenship and were meant to fuel the revolutionaries' commitment and to inform their policies. The insurrection of 10 August 1792 and the fall of the monarchy was the turning point in the cementing of an idea of a united citizenship against alien forces from without. The state born on 10 August would have needed even more patriots to strengthen freedom once and for all. This was probably how the practice established in many sections of eliminating the division between active and passive citizens gained a new political significance. But the politicization of citizenship was possible, once again, first and foremost through a civil promise. Indeed, in the following days, the same oath the deputies took on 10 August became required for all civil servants, slightly modified during the month of September. Citizens were now asked to swear ‘to be faithful to the nation, to maintain freedom and equality, or to die defending them’.\textsuperscript{44} The war, then, catalysed the patriotism of the revolutionaries for years, adding a certain imperialist breath to their zeal. The conquest of Belgium, Nice and Savoy encouraged patriots not to set limits to the expansive forces of revolutionary ideals, even if it meant using bayonets. In this context, the oath was part of the arsenal available to revolutionaries to give meaning to the experience of war. On 3 November 1792, for example, Vergniaud, recalling the dead in recent battles, swore ‘in the name of universal brotherhood’ that each battle would have been a step towards peace, humanity and the happiness of all peoples.\textsuperscript{45}

More generally, this quest for human bonds and enemies contained the seeds of the principles of revolutionary government set out by Robespierre in his speech of 5 nivôse year II (25 December 1793), several months before the loi de prairial:

> The function of revolutionary government is to direct the moral and physical forces of the nation towards the goal of its institution. The goal of constitutional government is to preserve the Republic: that

\textsuperscript{43} Discours prononcé à la tribune de la société des amis de la constitution séante aux Jacobins, par une députation de la société des jeunes amis de la liberté, établie rue du bac, section de la fontaine de Grenelle (Paris, 1791), 6.

\textsuperscript{44} AP, 47, 641.

\textsuperscript{45} Tackett, The Coming of the Terror, 227.
of revolutionary government is to found it. The revolution is the
war of freedom against its enemies: the constitution is the regime
of victorious and peaceful freedom. The revolutionary government
needs extraordinary activity, precisely because it is at war [...]. The
revolutionary government owes the good citizens all national pro-
tection; it owes the enemies of the people only death.46

The ‘extraordinary activity’ Robespierre described as compulsory was obvi-
ously a reference to the derogations of constitutional laws (October 1793) and
provisions on fundamental rights, but the way he phrased these principles of
revolutionary government made them recognizable to the Comité de salut
public and to those who read the written version of this speech. By 1793 all
revolutionaries were familiar with the idea that active commitment was essen-
tial to call oneself a citizen. In his speech during the Festival of the Supreme
Being on 20 prairial II (8 June 1794), Robespierre went so far as to say that the
execution of the king and the death of the enemies of the people were the re-
results of a sentence God had engraved from the beginning of time on the hearts
of men. Revolutionaries just executed it—Dieu le veut!, we might say.47 Just
two days after this Festival and this speech, the Law of 22 prairial against the
‘enemies of the people’ was enacted, providing a direct link between the legal
foundation of the Terror and the radicalization of revolutionary loyalty.48

Generally speaking, these references to oath-taking were far from being
rhetorical or just a tribute to an obsolete political institution. From early in the
Revolution, many contemporaries had conveyed the novelty of the new revolu-
tionary politics by reference to its religious oaths. In one diatribe against the
constitution in March 1791, the factions of the political clubs were directly as-
sociated with the leagues during the French Wars of Religion:

Finally, good Frenchmen, know that all club members are bound
together by terrible oaths. They imitate the cruel fanaticism of
these famous leaguers whose names have only been preserved in
history to perpetuate the horror which our ancestors felt against
them. Your Friends of the Constitution are as fanatical, as cruel, as
the members of the Holy Union. The leaguers swore, in the face
of heaven, to sacrifice those who did not share their wrath: your

46 M. Robespierre, Rapport sur les principes du gouvernement révolutionnaire (Paris, 1793),
2–3.
47 ‘Is it not he whose immortal hand, by engraving in the heart of man the code of justice
and equality, traced in it the death sentence of tyrants?’, Discours de Maximilien Robespierre,
Président de la Convention Nationale, au Peuple réuni pour la Fête de l’Être Suprême (Paris,
1794), 2.
48 P. Gueniffey, La Politique de la Terreur, 278–94; A. Fairfax-Cholmeley, ‘Reassessing revolu-
tionary justice: suspects, the Paris Revolutionary Tribunal and the Terror in France, 1793–1794’,
unpublished PhD thesis (Queen Mary University of London, 2012), and ‘Mapping the Terror: the
Paris Revolutionary Tribunal and the development of a national system of revolutionary justice’,
European History Quarterly, 44 (2014), 5–32.
Friends of the Constitution also swear to sacrifice those who can betray neither their conscience, nor their king, nor their God.\textsuperscript{49} Describing oath-taking practices as an expression of radical faith and the process of polarization of the different political clubs as triggering a new religious war reveals the importance that was attributed to those practices. It also suggests the sense of consolation that revolutionaries derived from oath-taking during the most difficult moments of the decade. From 10 August 1792, the deputies did not limit themselves to swearing in the different classes of citizens. In the name of these oaths, revolutionary politics came alive, in its rawest moments, when the mutual violence between Girondins and Jacobins could be justified by an accusation of perjury. At all these moments, in fact, the confidence that oaths could represent powerful instruments to shape the future was never questioned. Although they were emphatic, these promises were credited with a profound power, which is difficult not to recognize in the memories of those who took one or more of them.

As historians, we have to take the effect of these civic religious practices seriously and ask ourselves, as Albert Soboul did, if we have to consider the religious feeling these rituals could generate.\textsuperscript{50} How far could these political practices religiously motivate actions of violence perpetrated by social actors? This essay aims to demonstrate that the sacred attachment to the cause of the Revolution gave meaning to revolutionary experiences, even the most violent ones. Indeed, one thing is certain: civic oaths and other civic religious practices were used to legitimate violence in the accounts many actors gave. As one volunteer wrote to his father in October 1793:

\begin{quote}
On our side, we are eager to resume our revenge. And although our military affairs at the moment are not looking very good, we are not discouraged; on the contrary, it is time to show energy, courage and republicanism. We have sworn to live free or to die ... I can assure you that we will not perjure ourselves.\textsuperscript{51}
\end{quote}

Oaths and religious practices may not have been the primary motivation for revolutionary violence, but they certainly gave meaning to it.

\section*{IV}

Following this direction, a clear demonstration of the connection between these religious practices and revolutionary violence comes from one of the most popular genres of revolutionary pamphleteering: accounts of \textit{journées révolutionnaires}. Describing the violent actions of the crowd, these texts

\textsuperscript{49} \textit{Avis aux Français sur les clubs} [March 1791], in Aulard, \textit{Jacobins}, ii. 271.
\textsuperscript{50} A. Soboul, ‘Sentiment religieux et cultes populaires pendant la Révolution. Saintes patriotes et martyrs de la liberté’, \textit{Archives de sociologie des religions}, 2/1 (1956), 73–87.
offer a taxonomy of legitimate violence and a useful parable illustrating public engagement as a sacred commitment. The political message underlying most of these accounts is clear: citizens were allowed, and more importantly they were morally compelled, to take up arms when faced with the danger of being deprived of their freedom. Always on the alert, every citizen and every community should be ready to resort to violence if necessary. These pamphlets insisted that revolutionary institutions should never condemn popular violence in itself, because it was one of the most precious safeguards of the Revolution and one of the most sacred duties of citizens—a duty consecrated by civic oaths. On the other hand, acts of violence not regulated by this religious practice were to be considered a violation of the rules of patriotism.

Many revolutionary journées or episodes of violence between patriots and counter-revolutionary crowds revolved around oath-taking and its per- formative effects. The rioting that erupted in Montauban on 10 May 1790 exemplifies this entanglement. In April 1790, just after the refusal of the Assembly to declare Catholicism the state religion, many conservative or noir deputies raised their arms to swear they were ready to sacrifice their own lives to defend the Catholic Church. The new forms of political expression were employed by conservatives to mobilize reactionary masses, and the tensions between Protestants and Catholics in Montauban seemed to be influenced by this climate and the race for the monopoly on oath-taking. Beyond Paris, the Revolution had triggered a resurgence of confessional conflicts, especially in the Midi, where old rivalries found a new framework. In Montauban, the question of oath-taking was key to those conflicts. Here, the Protestant-dominated National Guards’ attempts to take the civic oath were repeatedly thwarted by a municipality anxious to avoid legitimizing an opposing faction’s right to bear arms. Many pro-revolutionary accounts of these riots insist on this detail: patriots felt their violence was sanctioned and sacralized by the oath and they needed to take that oath before taking up arms. By contrast, the recourse to violence by the populace was left to the uncertainty of popular passions.

This is the same script followed by most accounts of the day of the riot. Civic oaths and other civic religious practices were used to legitimate the intentions of the National Guards and to condemn the actions of the counter-revolutionary crowd. The dynamics of the riot lent itself to such a narrative. After listening to incendiary discussions in the church of the Cordeliers and under the belief a ‘company of dragoons, mostly protestant’ was about to massacre the Catholics, the crowd attacked the Maison Commune where municipal officers were still refusing to confer arms to the National Guard ‘not even by taking

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53 Récit historique et fidèle des faits qui ont précédé ou suivi la fatale journée du 10 mai 1790, à Montauban (Montauban, 1790), 10.
a civic oath’. What may seem a small detail in the larger picture of violence in the Midi is instead a clear example of the importance of oaths in the revolutionary ethos. Generally speaking, taking an oath was supposed to ensure that violence was resorted to for civic purposes alone. By contrast, the violent acts of the populace were not mediated by any rituals, and these pamphlets lingered over this description to imply that the reactionary royalist crowd was blind in its fury while revolutionary violence derived from the strength of political iron will. Significantly, the report on the events presented to the Assembly by the Citoyens de Montauban ended with an oath: ‘We swear in your hands that we are ready to sacrifice the remains of our existence for the maintenance and execution of your decrees.’ Their sacrifice on 10 May 1790 acquired a political meaning under the spell of a new sworn formula.

Two years later, the radical journalist Jacques René Hébert’s account of ‘all the events that happened since last 10th August’ in Paris offers another example of this approach to violence. Hébert’s account of the journée opens with the defensive claim that the king was preparing ‘a new Saint-Barthélemy’ in order to depict the Revolution’s enemies as bloodthirsty and dangerous. This reference to the wars of religion describes the clash between the patriots and the counter-revolutionaries as a battle between two incompatible faiths and in similar vein, his description of royalist forces slaughtering patriots stressed the blood shed by the king’s defenders. When describing the violence committed by the national guards, Hébert changed register and adopted the language of sacrifice and selflessness, thereby sparing the reader the gory details of the violence they had committed. In Hébert’s account, the massacre was a necessary hecatomb to save the Revolution and to prove the national guards’ attachment to the patriot cause, but crucially this account also connects the national guards’ actions directly to the oath the members of the Assembly were taking at the same time. For Hébert, the citizens in arms and their representatives shared the same faith, and what the former did at the Tuileries was consecrated by the solemn promises of the latter in the Assembly. The battlefield was defined by the force of these oaths: a sworn community of political fighters proving their faith with action versus the ‘perjurer-king’, le roi parjure.

On the night of 9 August, hearing the sound of gunshots from the Tuileries, and frightened by the conflicting and confusing news of shooting incidents between the fédérés and the palace guards, the members of the Assembly felt that a new oath was needed. Encouraged by the people present at the debate, they swore to uphold freedom and equality or die defending them. In the days that followed, the same oath, soon to become iconic, was extended to all public

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54 Rapport des malheurs, dont la ville de Montauban a été affligée le 10 Mai 1790 (1790), 9.
55 Ibid., 26.
57 Hébert, Grande relation, 6.
58 AP, 47, 10 August 1792, 641.
servants and tighter laws against the réfractaires were decreed. This penal pressure was one of the reasons why the capital's prisons were overcrowded that summer and stimulated fears of counter-revolutionary plots organized by prisoners—that is to say, it was the fuse for the explosion of the September massacres. When these acts of violence were perpetrated, on 4 September, the deputies took a new oath to ‘fight with all their might against kings and kingship’.\textsuperscript{59} Defending a constitution was not enough. It was time to go on the offensive. Oath-taking revealed its real power when it could restrain the instincts of the crowd, when it could determine the feeling rules of revolutionary violence.

\section*{V}

Did oaths open the door to violence, wittingly or unwittingly? Or did they just help justify the violence that was probably going to be enacted anyway? Were they symbolic features or drivers of violence? It is clear that oath-taking had consequences for the way revolutionaries viewed themselves. One of the legacies of the French Revolution was a new political identity based on sacred commitments to enact violence. These commitments were made through oaths that drew on the conceptual grammar of religion. Bearing in mind the notion of a transfer of sacrality proposed by Mona Ozouf, one might ask which came first, religions or oaths taken on their behalf?\textsuperscript{60} The discussion on the religious status of sworn promises has often taken the form of the debates on the birth of the proverbial egg and chicken. For a long time, the paradigm of the primacy of the sacred prevailed: the effectiveness of an oath was judged on the basis of the social force of the magical-religious sphere from which it derived; with the decline of religious faith, the use of the oath would also decline. Historians, linguists and philosophers have often situated its origins in a pre-historic phase of human development, a time when every aspect of life was informed by religion.\textsuperscript{61} Nevertheless, another fruitful perspective has been opened with the recognition that it is not always useful to distinguish between the legal and the religious: the oath could be a phenomenon that is not, in itself, either only legal or only religious, but which can allow us to completely rethink what law and religion are.\textsuperscript{62} The history of the oath therefore offers an excellent perspective from which to refute the hypothesis of a Western society distinguished from the rest of the world by a constant dualism between religion and politics, encouraged by the presence of Christianity within it. The sacred is always

\textsuperscript{59} AP, 49, 4 September 1792, 335.
\textsuperscript{60} M. Ozouf, \textit{La fête révolutionnaire (1789–1799)} (Paris, 1976).
derived from the agencies that contain it, sometimes state power, sometimes the Church, sometimes political and religious movements. In the case of the French Revolution, rather than transferring the sacred to the sphere of political practices, the new religion of the nation was nourished by a force that traditional cults were not able to monopolize: the sacredness of oaths.

This article has also tried to demonstrate the link between these sacred oaths and Revolutionary violence. Mary Ashburn Miller has recently suggested how revolutionaries used metaphors drawn from nature to justify their violence. Through this prism, she tries to prove that the public crimes ‘relative to the Revolution’ were eventually pardoned because committed under the effect of the *effervescence* of spirits—as one tribunal put it. The use of natural metaphors would therefore prove that in the revolutionary imaginary these crimes were ‘agentless, collective, and ultimately blameless’. Despite this linguistic clue, I would argue that making recourse to oath-taking before any violent action implies a greater awareness among revolutionary crowds than historians are usually ready to acknowledge. Oaths can be seen as the rituals that led revolutionaries to voice their agency. Revolutionary commitment was indeed like a script one had to be ready to recite, but this does not diminish its concrete impact. The roles revolutionaries gave themselves functioned as a second skin. Oath-taking marked the moment when they wore this second skin before society; that is to say, the moment they exposed themselves to social reprobation if found betraying their promise. This is why those who took an oath were supposed to remember it with fondness and a shiver. Both the revolutionary elite and crowd might don the clothes of the *Horaces* or of the popular vaudeville characters that depicted revolutionary events on the stage. In both cases, they presented themselves as the revolutionary figures they were familiar with—the figures they swore to be.

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