

Civilizing Habits

*Women Missionaries and the Revival
of French Empire*

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Introduction

After an eight-day river and overland trek west from St. Louis, a seventy-two-year-old Frenchwoman stands in a field shaking the hands of seven hundred Potawatomi Indian men and embracing their wives and children. In distant Tunis, a much younger woman, also French, receives permission from the bey to open a pharmacy, clinic, and hospital in the center of the medina, previously off limits to non-Muslim inhabitants of the city. And finally, in the same year, 1841, a woman whom the French king had called a “great man” and who feeds, clothes, shelters, and educates approximately five hundred semifree Africans in an experimental colony on the edge of the Amazon forest writes to the colonial minister offering—no, insisting—to take in an additional four thousand slave children in view of their eventual emancipation. Catholic nuns all, intrepid, determined, and not a little daring, these three women had transgressed boundaries both real and imagined to arrive in these diverse and somewhat surprising places. However individual their journeys and divergent their sites of evangelization, their stories, taken collectively, have much to tell us about the role both religion and women played in the project of constructing French empire in the nineteenth century.

This book began its own journey in the archives of the Soeurs de St-Joseph de Cluny, where I discovered the life of Anne-Marie Javouhey, founder of the order and an early missionary to West Africa and the French slave colonies. In the 1830s Javouhey initiated an unusual colony in the wilds of French Guiana, where sisters from her order oversaw the communal work of more than five hundred Africans seized in the now illegal

slave trade. As a result, she became an advocate for the gradual emancipation of slaves in France's empire, all the while building up a religious order that numbered in the thousands and was present in most of France's colonies at the time of her death in 1851. Javouhey's story—familiar in some ways and surprising in others—was one I wanted to tell. Yet I did not want to write a traditional biography of Javouhey; instead I was interested in the ways in which her life intersected with important developments in religious, gender, and French colonial history in the first half of the nineteenth century. Javouhey was among hundreds of women who founded new, active, and apostolic religious orders in the wake of the French Revolution, revitalizing the French Catholic church from the ground up. Her independence and power as the head of an important religious order defied the emerging ideology of domesticity that trapped women in a set of gender expectations and laws in the early nineteenth century. Moreover, her interest in founding missions in French colonies just at the moment that France was redefining its empire brought women missionaries into the colonial realm for virtually the first time and had important repercussions for both church and state.

Javouhey was not the only woman missionary of this type, though she may have been the most audacious. Through a fortuitous combination of scholarly sleuthing and serendipity, I chose two more women to include in this study, Philippine Duchesne and Emilie de Vialar. Like Javouhey, they were born before or during the Revolution; all three women died in the 1850s. Duchesne was a founding member of the Religious of the Sacred Heart, an important post-Revolutionary religious order, and Vialar founded the Soeurs de St-Joseph de l'Apparition, an order that, like the (unrelated) Soeurs de St-Joseph de Cluny, expanded rapidly. Until the Second Empire, these three orders were the most important suppliers of French women missionaries overseas.¹ Through the collective lives of all three women, then, this book explores the rise of female missionary orders from their origins in the religious chaos of the French Revolution to their dominance under the Second Empire in ways previously invisible to most historians.

As missionaries, however, these women chose vastly different imperial arenas that bring to light the often-forgotten revival of French empire in the early nineteenth century. Duchesne, the oldest of the three and the only one to have entered religion before the Revolution, established the first overseas Sacred Heart mission in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1818, a territory she imagined as part of a lost French empire in North America. Her primary interest, like the Jesuits of seventeenth-century New France, was in evangelizing Indians. Vialar, the youngest of the three, decamped to Algeria a mere five years after the French conquest in order to (re)establish a Catholic presence in North Africa. Forced out of Algeria within a decade because of a dispute with the new bishop, Vialar nonetheless founded missions around the Mediterranean, footholds for the Catholic church in

Muslim lands, and outposts of informal French empire in Ottoman territory. Javouhey, for her part, concentrated on the French empire as it existed at the time of the Restoration, almost entirely slave colonies located in West Africa, the Caribbean, French Guiana, and the Indian Ocean. Often eclipsed by the better-known empires of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, on the one hand, and the post-1870 “new imperialism” on the other, the first half of the nineteenth century was formative in reestablishing France as a colonial power, and women missionaries like Duchesne, Vialar, and Javouhey were an important part of this process.

Historians have usually imagined imperial agents as either male and secular—explorers, merchants, soldiers—or, less often, male and clerical—the priest in the wilderness. But by 1850 these archetypes had been joined by thousands of religious women who displaced the traditional male missionary as educators, nurses, and evangelists to natives and French settlers alike. Because their work was ordinary and everyday and because it was done by individuals schooled in habits of self-abnegation and humility, it often fell under the radar of both contemporaries and subsequent historians. Nonetheless, it is the central contention of this book that precisely because it appeared benevolent and uncontroversial, this work was vital to the cultural construction of empire in the nineteenth century. In promoting Catholicism as universally applicable to peoples of all races and backgrounds, women missionaries like Duchesne, Vialar, and Javouhey laid the groundwork for the expansion of French Catholic culture, whether or not it was tied to institutions of state power.

The ability of women missionaries to participate in the ideological and practical work of empire depended, paradoxically, on religious institutions designed to shield their femininity. Few, if any, laywomen in the early nineteenth century had the freedom that Duchesne, Vialar, and Javouhey exercised as Catholic nuns to travel outside of France, negotiate with colonial agents and indigenous leaders alike, challenge church power, and evangelize among non-Christians, all roles more commonly ascribed to men. This freedom, in turn, was facilitated by changes in the nineteenth-century Catholic church, which became increasingly shaped by the evangelical energy of women. The female religious order of the nineteenth century underwent a radical transformation that allowed women religious to take up new roles in France and overseas. The innovative nature of this transformation, however, was camouflaged by the traditional nature of their calling. The very structure of female religious life and the respect it engendered in lay society allowed scope for experimentation not experienced elsewhere. Within the framework of one of the oldest institutions in French history, nuns carved out a space to pursue new and often controversial agendas, including evangelization on a global scale.

This book is conceived as a collective, contextualized biography. By focusing on three specific missionaries, I show how individual life stories crosscut the French

imperial enterprise, as well as how women experienced the resurgence in French religious life after the Revolution. Their journeys are compelling in and of themselves. However, my primary interest is not in chronicling the lives of these women from cradle to grave—or baptism to canonization, in these cases—but in using their experiences as means to examine how they used the protection and opportunities offered to them by religious habits to spread Catholicism and French culture into global spheres of influence. In their evangelical enthusiasm, their leadership abilities, their skill in exploiting resources and networks to achieve their goals, their facility in adapting to changing circumstances, and, above all, their fierce determination not to compromise their sense of mission even when confronted by opposition in their own church, these three women had much in common. However, North America, the Mediterranean basin, and the French slave colonies presented different problems and challenges. Because Duchesne, Vialar, and Javouhey worked in three very different colonial contexts, juxtaposing their experiences allows us to understand the range of cultural adaptations necessary to successful missionary and imperial work in the early nineteenth century, as well as the limitations of the religious “civilizing” mission as disseminated by Catholic missionaries. Recovering the history of these three women opens up a new perspective on imperial history just as it does on gender and religious history.

Inventing the Modern Nun

The missionary experiences of Philippine Duchesne, Emilie de Vialar, and Anne-Marie Javouhey are incomprehensible without the revolution in active religious orders that marked female religious life after the French Revolution. Before the revolution, the vast majority of French nuns belonged to cloistered convents whose primary purpose was prayer and contemplation.² Some female orders, especially those founded during the Catholic Reformation, such as the Ursulines or the Visitation, also provided educational services to girls who boarded at the convent. Each convent, although it might belong to a religious family sharing the same purpose, charism, and rules, was self-governing and lived under the jurisdiction of the local bishop. The exception to the contemplative cloistered order were the so-called third orders or associations such as the Filles de la Charité, whose members ran hospitals, visited the poor and the sick in their homes, operated soup kitchens, and taught girls needlework, basic literacy skills, and the catechism. Drawn from a significantly lower-class milieu, these women took only annual vows and were not, in fact, considered true nuns but simply pious women dedicated to the service of others. With the exception of the Filles de la Charité, most such orders were small and operated locally. They survived not only because of their utility to

local communities but also because they did not claim a higher status in the church. Attempts by religious women at the time of the Catholic Reformation to create active and apostolic orders—modeled on the Jesuits—that would work in the world failed due to clerical anxiety over the role of women religious in active ministry. Fledgling initiatives were forced into cloister. Only Vincent de Paul, founder of the Filles de la Charité, practicing what he called “holy cunning,” got around these restrictions by denying that he was creating a religious order at all, eschewing perpetual vows, and recruiting among lower-class women who were, in fact, better prepared to take on the heavy work of nursing, visiting, and teaching among the popular classes.³

In post-Revolutionary France, however, the active and apostolic model became the predominant one while contemplative orders languished.⁴ The new orders were distinguished from older ones in two important ways. First, they took up the active work of nursing, teaching, and serving the poor, which required that they leave their convents, breaking with traditions of cloister. Time devoted to these activities reduced the amount of time that nuns in traditional convents had devoted to prayer and contemplation. Second, they had a very different organizational structure. Instead of each convent being self-governing, the order was centralized under the direction of a *supérieure générale* (usually the founder of the order until her death) and an elected council. Members, who were trained in a common novitiate, joined the order with the understanding that they could be moved to any one of its establishments at any time—under the vow of obedience—to undertake whatever work was most needed. No longer would a young woman enter a convent knowing she would live and die within its walls. The superior general had responsibility for the personnel and the finances of the entire order. In admittedly anachronistic modern-day corporate terms, women’s religious orders ceased being franchises and became national—or multinational—corporations run by the latter-day equivalent of a CEO. This centralized structure allowed for a far greater reach geographically and more unity of purpose.

Frenchwomen pioneered in the creation of the active and centralized religious order in part because French religious structures had been destroyed by the Revolution, giving them a new field on which to work. During the Enlightenment, the convent and the nun became widely used metaphors to discuss the tyranny of the monarchy and the calcified structures of the Old Regime.⁵ In 1790 revolutionaries challenged the authority and wealth of the Catholic church, nationalizing its property, requiring priests to take oaths of loyalty to the nation, and transforming clerics into servants paid by the state and elected by parishioners. Reflecting the polemic against regular clergy—that is, nuns and monks—during the previous decades, most legislators felt that they did no useful work in society.⁶ Nuns, furthermore, were believed to have been incarcerated in convents against their will; freeing

them therefore was an act of revolutionary liberty. As a result, in February 1790 lawmakers abolished monastic vows, providing small pensions to compensate for the loss of dowries and inheritance. By the fall of 1792, when the national government seized convents as properties of the state, it was no longer possible, legally at least, to be a nun in France.⁷

Although the Catholic church in general and women religious in particular experienced—and often resisted—these changes as unparalleled calamities, the destruction of cloistered religious life made way for the new apostolic model of the nineteenth century. Catholic women were at the forefront of a grassroots religious revival in France in the late 1790s. Energized by the persecution of priests who refused to take the loyalty oath, the de-Christianization campaign during the Terror, and the closure and ransacking of churches, Frenchwomen hid priests in their homes, sponsored clandestine religious rites, and mobilized to protect churches, sometimes with violence.⁸ In short, they supported an underground church that predated the more formal reestablishment of religious liberty, first under the Directory and then under Napoleon, whose concordat with the pope finally established religious peace in 1801. With these initiatives came also the first stirrings of a return to religious life. The *Filles de la Charité* had regrouped by 1800, as had various branches of the St-Joseph order in central France.⁹ New initiatives, like Sophie Barat's Religious of the Sacred Heart (which counted Philippine Duchesne as an early member), the *Soeurs de la Charité* of Besançon (where Javouhey was briefly a member), and Javouhey's own *Soeurs de St-Joseph de Cluny*, were founded between 1799 and 1808. Active orders were favored because they were more likely to receive authorization from Napoleon, whose vision of the church was utilitarian. Women religious were useful to the extent that they could teach the illiterate, heal the sick, and care for the poor. But women who founded and joined religious orders were not merely responding to leadership at the top. Instead, they saw in the apostolic model a means to re-Christianize France after the religious chaos of the Revolution. Even after the Restoration of the French monarchy in 1815, active orders flourished, whereas contemplative orders languished. For every ten cloistered nuns in 1790, only one remained in 1808, but for every ten apostolic nuns, eight remained.¹⁰ The new orders were built, literally, on the remains of the old orders, as many of the new founders bought or rented former religious buildings that had become property of the state. More significant, they responded to the new religious challenge of rebuilding a church whose weaknesses had been unveiled during the Revolution in a France where religious life had to be reimagined from scratch.¹¹ By and large, they were new—and younger—women. Of the approximately 30,000–55,000 nuns who were forced out of religious life during the Revolution, only 6,700 returned.¹²

The numerical dimensions of this phenomenon are impressive. In 1808 there were 12,300 nuns in France, of whom just under half lived in the new kind of active,

centralized order, both those apostolic orders founded during the Catholic Reformation and new foundations. Between 1800 and 1880, however, almost four hundred new active orders were founded in France, peaking between 1820 and 1860, with an average of six new foundations a year. By 1880, their membership had also multiplied tenfold, counting more than 130,000 sisters and outnumbering male clergy (priests and brothers) three to two. Here, too, the most intense growth phase was before 1860, when French nuns numbered at least 100,000.¹³ In their rapid expansion, the new active orders clearly fulfilled a certain demand for low-cost, devoted workers in fields such as health care, education, and social services. In part, this demand can be traced to the emerging needs of what we now call the welfare state in a century of profound socioeconomic change. However, the supply of women religious met and sometimes precipitated demand. Nineteenth-century Frenchwomen found in the active religious order a model that served their spiritual and secular needs. In a century of increased focus on the role of women within the family, a large number of women escaped the confines of domesticity by joining religious orders. In religion, they did useful and respectable work while ensuring their personal salvation, as well as, they hoped, the salvation of others. Although confined by vows of chastity, obedience, and poverty, they found community and personal security and often acceded to positions of real responsibility.

Those who founded religious orders—as exemplified by the three women in this book—had particular latitude to exercise qualities of leadership and autonomy that were denied most laywomen. This sense of forging new religious identities was strongest for women in the first generation of foundations, especially the leaders of the new active orders. Indeed, the early nineteenth century was arguably the most creative period for French women religious—before the orders they invented became large and institutionalized. During this period, women founders adapted old rules to new purposes, experimented with new roles, and challenged existing notions of acceptable work and behavior. In so doing, they created a powerful model of women’s religious organization that spread throughout Europe either through new houses in other countries or through imitation. Both for the useful work they did and for the otherwise “redundant” women they employed in female-led organizations, Catholic nuns earned the admiration—or envy—of Protestant women in Europe and America, some of whom set up parallel institutions such as Anglican sisterhoods or Lutheran deaconesses.¹⁴ Even Florence Nightingale’s pioneering, and secular, nurses worked within an institutional framework closely derived from Catholic religious life without the permanent vows or, of course, the theology.¹⁵

The new kind of nun—active, uncloistered, seemingly responsible only to female leaders—produced a certain amount of anxiety in the nineteenth-century church even as it reshaped it. On the one hand, parish priests, bishops, and the church hierarchy in

Rome could not afford to ignore or squander the tremendous religious energy and opportunity for spiritual renewal that these women represented. Indeed, many women religious worked closely with male clerics as partners in new evangelization efforts. Nonetheless, conflicts, especially between female superiors and diocesan bishops, were also legion.¹⁶ No longer confined to a single diocese, these orders controlled their own membership, finances, and choice of establishments. Many leaders had networks of friends, relatives, and allies on whom to draw in case of disputes. Their trump card was to appeal to Rome for formal recognition of their status as religious orders that crossed dioceses and were therefore independent of any single bishop. Growing ultramontanism in the church opened a space that gave women religious increased room for maneuver.¹⁷ Yet, in the past, papal orders of women had always been cloistered orders, and the Roman hierarchy responded to these requests with a certain ambiguity that could result in years, even decades, of prolonged uncertainty and conflict. Yet over time, the new model became both acceptable and dominant, representing the main form of religious life for Catholic women, finally officially accepted by the church in 1900.¹⁸ Frenchwomen were its pioneers.

In telling the stories of Philippine Duchesne, Emilie de Vialar, and Anne-Marie Javouhey, this book returns religious women to modern women's history. Despite the large numbers of women who joined religious orders in the nineteenth century and a growing body of historical scholarship on the "feminization of Catholicism," women religious sit uneasily in the dominant narratives of modern French and European women's history, which are primarily concerned with the growth of domesticity, as well as the attempts to resist it. The lives of hundreds of thousands of nuns who lived outside of marriage and the domestic model—all the while upholding domesticity as the pinnacle of womanhood—simply do not figure in this picture. Not invested in marriage themselves, they did not seek to reform it and therefore did not participate in the century's most prominent set of struggles for women's rights. Historians of women have sought instead the feminist heroes of the past—women like Olympe de Gouges or Suzanne Voilquin or Flora Tristan—who wrote explicitly about the rights of women and who sought legal, political, and economic equality with men. Catholic nuns, by contrast, overtly challenged authority only within the structures of the church; otherwise, they appeared to accept both male power and male discourses about power. Indeed, in France, where the Catholic church was a strong supporter of monarchy throughout the nineteenth century, women religious could usually be placed on the conservative side of the political spectrum. I would argue, however, that the ability of Catholic nuns to transgress certain gender norms was intimately linked to their participation in an old and respected institution, the female religious order, which appeared to embody traditional values. If women religious were subversive, then, their subversion is to be found outside the usual categories of analysis.

Although historians now acknowledge that a significant religious revival took place in the nineteenth century, women's disproportionately high participation in this revival is often treated as embarrassing evidence of their failure to modernize—or, more generously, of the second-class status to which they were relegated. Women religious also confound the categories of public and private spheres, which have long served as organizing tropes for understanding the roles of nineteenth-century women. Heirs to a tradition of enclosure and distance from society, as private a sphere as one can imagine, they nevertheless acted as active, visible, and very public agents of social change. Indeed, in a pathbreaking article on Quaker women, Phyllis Mack claims that “in the history of Western culture, it was devout Christian women who demonstrated the greatest degree of agency, particularly that element of agency that involves activity in the public sphere.” In order to imagine this agency, however, Mack argues that it cannot be defined merely as “acts of will” but also as “acts of obedience” and “the freedom to do what is right.”¹⁹ Like the women in Mack's article, the three missionaries in this book sometimes acted in ways that modern feminists would recognize—traveling widely, exercising authority, speaking out—while seeking simultaneously to subjugate themselves to what they saw as God's will. In their minds, these were not contradictory impulses, and they were not fundamentally antimodern.²⁰ Indeed, this book argues that through their missionary work French Catholic nuns were integral to the process of transforming France into both a modern state and a global empire in the nineteenth century.

Between Empires

The early nineteenth century, while representing an unusually creative period in female religious life, was an anomalous moment in the history of French empire.²¹ The first French empire, represented above all by the vast territories claimed by France in North America and the valuable sugar colonies in the Caribbean, was reduced first by France's defeat in the Seven Years' War in the mid-eighteenth century and then the Napoleonic defeats in the early nineteenth. Yet the second French empire, based primarily in Africa and secondarily in Asia, did not really come into being until the second half of the nineteenth century. The period in between those two empires was a transitional period, during which France's empire was made up of old colonies like Martinique and Guadeloupe, as well as emerging colonies like Algeria, and overshadowed by the memory of France's earlier imperial dominance. During the Restoration (1814–30) and the July Monarchy (1830–48), those French officials interested in the revival of French power overseas pursued their objectives in somewhat haphazard, accidental, and experimental ways, from the military adventure in Algeria to the shoring up of French commercial interests

in the Middle East to plans for settlement and agricultural plantations in Senegal and Guiana. Out of these projects and plans, many of them failures, came experience that helped establish the more extensive empire later in the century. However, relatively little has been written about this imperial moment, compared to others. French Canada and Louisiana have been of longstanding historical interest; St-Domingue is now an integral part of French Old Regime and revolutionary history, and the post-1870 French empire (in West Africa, Madagascar, Oceania, Indochina, and the Middle East, among other places) is the object of innovative historical studies. Even Algeria, which has come under increasing historical scrutiny by French historians as a part of greater France, is examined more extensively during the period after 1850 (when, among other reasons, the sources get remarkably better) than in the first two decades after its conquest.²² Neither has much light been shed on lost, imagined, or informal empire, arguably as important to France as actual colonies, in the first half of the nineteenth century.²³

This book concerns itself with three separate arenas of French overseas expansion, each identified with one of the women missionaries under discussion. The first is the lost empire of New France in North America, still surprisingly alive in the French imagination, especially the imagination of French Catholics. When Philippine Duchesne sailed for America in 1818, at the request of the new French bishop of Louisiana, she entered territory that, for her, was still marked as French. Docking in New Orleans and traveling up the Mississippi River to St. Louis, she journeyed through lands that had been controlled by France and settled, however sparsely, by people of French descent until the late eighteenth century. Both upper and lower Louisiana remained French in language, culture, and religion for some time after their transfer to Spain in 1764 and their subsequent sale to the United States in 1803. Although French migration to the United States in the nineteenth century was negligible in comparison to other immigrant groups, French clerics and women religious like Duchesne formed a significant part of the early nineteenth-century Catholic establishment. Revolutionary clerical refugees from France and St-Domingue found new homes in the United States. Before 1850, the bishops of major American cities, including Boston, Baltimore, New York, New Orleans, Louisville, Indianapolis, Mobile, Galveston, and, of course, St. Louis, were French. More than fifty women's religious orders that established houses in the United States (which the Catholic church designated as mission territory up until 1908) also originated in France, beginning with the Ursulines of Rouen, who arrived in New Orleans in 1727.²⁴ These orders established convent schools that spread French culture through their use of the French language and French pedagogical models.²⁵ French missionaries, led by the Jesuits, also reprised work among Native American Indian tribes, evoking an almost mythic connection to the work of seventeenth-century Jesuits in particular, the legendary "black robes" whom, missionaries like

Duchesne claimed, Indians still revered in their historical memory. Back in France, public interest in Indian-American relations was high, whether viewed through missionary accounts, newspaper reports, or popular novels and plays.²⁶

Clearly, American territory in the nineteenth century cannot be construed in any formal way as French. Nonetheless, Harry Liebersohn has traced continuing elite French interest in North America, arguing that French travelers “came to a site of colonial ruins” that “continued to inhabit the imagination of visitors from the metropolis, who followed the trail of former French glory from New Orleans to St. Louis, from the battlefields of upstate New York to the towns and villages of Canada, dreaming of a New France that had but recently flourished, its remnants still scattered across the gray skies and vast forest of the interior.”²⁷ Travelers, exemplified above all by Alexis de Tocqueville, also came to the United States to compare the new world, especially its emerging democratic structure, to the old. By the 1830s and 1840s, utopian socialists also found in the United States a more promising site for experimentation than France.²⁸ Of the three missionaries in this book, Duchesne was the least dependent on either formal or informal structures of French power, but the past French presence in North America and its potential as an outpost of French culture remained surprisingly relevant for her and other French exiles.

The second empire under consideration comprised the actual French colonies at the time of the Restoration: St-Pierre and Miquelon off the coast of Newfoundland, Martinique and Guadeloupe in the Caribbean, French Guiana on the coast of South America, St-Louis and Gorée in West Africa (now Senegal), Bourbon (later Réunion) in the Indian Ocean, and five trading outposts on the coast of India, the most important of which was Pondicherry. By 1827, Anne-Marie Javouhey had established missions in all of these places. These colonies formed an archipelago of French power overseas that was a shadow of its former self. During the Napoleonic period most had been controlled by the British, who now dominated the great trading routes that had enriched French Atlantic cities during the eighteenth century. At the time of the Restoration, these colonies were put under the centralized control of the ministry of the navy and colonies, which increased France’s naval budget and reorganized the system of colonial administration. Excepting St-Pierre and Miquelon and the Indian ports, they were all slave colonies dependent on Napoleon’s 1802 restoration of slavery for their livelihood. Only Martinique and Guadeloupe could be considered prosperous, though they were pale imitations of the great wealth brought in by that other Caribbean island, St-Domingue, which liberated itself in 1804 as Haiti and still hung over the remaining colonies as a specter of all that could go wrong in a slave colony.²⁹ With the outlawing of the slave trade—nominally in 1817 and enforced after 1830—and anticipating the abolition (again) of slavery itself, especially after its abolition in the British Empire in 1834, colonial officials eagerly sought alternatives to economic dependence on slavery. These schemes, in which

Anne-Marie Javouhey participated, largely consisted of agricultural projects for yet unexploited land in the interior of West Africa or Guiana. Unable to coerce local labor, they also encouraged—by and large unsuccessfully—the emigration of French settlers to these distant outposts. With the collapse of slavery in 1848, these projects were abandoned as plantation economies faltered or failed. French Guiana, for which officials had the most grandiose plans, became a penal colony. Only West Africa figured prominently in the next imperial surge.

The third empire represented here was that emerging in the Mediterranean basin. European powers had never lost interest in the Mediterranean world, which was the site of considerable traffic in goods and captives throughout the early modern period. In 1798, a French army commanded by Napoleon Bonaparte invaded and held Egypt, remaining until 1801, when it was driven out by the British. The Egyptian expedition, however brief, whetted France's appetite for Middle Eastern and North African conquest. Napoleon took with him a veritable battalion of scientists and intellectuals whose role was to disseminate French civilization, as well as amass knowledge about the East. State-sponsored Orientalism of this kind prefigured the nineteenth-century empire in its focus on cultural appropriation as much as the control of resources.³⁰ In 1830, France invaded Algeria on a flimsy diplomatic pretext and spent the next two decades bringing it under full French control. At first, public and colonial opinion was divided over the extent to which France should settle or develop Algeria, but by 1848 Algeria had become three French departments, nominally integral parts of the home country, although virtually all of its residents lacked citizenship rights.

From one perspective, Algeria returned France to the colonial game and foreshadowed the successful African empire of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. From another, however, it was France's first permanent colony in territories controlled by the Ottoman Empire. As Ottoman power weakened around the eastern and southern Mediterranean, European powers eagerly moved in to assert their alleged rights. Yet before 1870, the direct control that the French established in Algeria was the exception in this region rather than the rule. Instead, France and other European powers used indirect methods to increase their influence in places like Tunisia, Malta, Greece, Palestine, and even Turkey itself. Foreign consuls asserted their rights over foreign nationals. Business interests increased their activity. Christians went on pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Progressives heralded the liberation of subject peoples like the Greeks from the Ottoman yoke. However, missionaries like Emilie de Vialar, who set up establishments first in Algeria and then in Tunisia, Malta, Greece, Palestine, and Armenia, were also potential agents of French influence. Indeed, the Catholic church became an active player in these lands, claiming a revival of the early Christian empire, seeking to edge out Protestant and Orthodox competitors, and squabbling over control over Christian holy sites in

Palestine. European governments, for their part, sought to co-opt religious initiatives as reasons—or pretexts—for increased control. France, in particular, claimed special powers in Ottoman territories based on sixteenth-century treaties that gave French clerics oversight over Catholic practice and practitioners. Church and state here jostled for power and influence in ways that would help determine the extent of European mandates over the defunct Ottoman Empire after World War I.

Empire of Faith

These three “empires” of the early nineteenth century are by no means the only way of conceptualizing empire in this period or even the only places where France began to exert power before 1850. There is nothing in this book about East Asia or Indochina, for example, and only passing mentions of Oceania, Burma, and Australia, places where Javouhey and Vialar did send missionaries. Nonetheless, the disparity in experiences represented by these three case studies provides an opportunity to examine the relationship between missionaries and the French state in three very different imperial contexts. That relationship was complex. In the first half of the nineteenth century, it was not primarily marked by church-state conflict, as J. P. Daughton has shown for the Third Republic.³¹ Instead, state actors saw missionaries as agents of “civilization” who could be harnessed to their own ends, and by and large the two groups cooperated. In the first half of the nineteenth century, French officials still saw conversion to Christianity, as Robert W. Hefner has called it, as a necessary first step in the “march toward human enlightenment,”³² an attitude they would lose later in the century, when a purely secular version of the civilizing mission took hold.³³ Until then, however, the “civilization” that the French promoted overseas was still—at least nominally—a Christian one. Missionaries could also be useful auxiliaries to the state, especially as imperial interests turned toward holding and settling colonial lands rather than merely exploiting their resources through trade arrangements. The future inevitability of permanent slave emancipation in the French colonies also encouraged a positive attitude toward religious conversion. Even secular liberals believed that Christianity was good for fostering obedience and docility in subaltern groups from women to blacks.

Still, the fact that church and state were often partners in colonization does not mean that their objectives, methods, or impact always coincided. French clerics, including the three missionary women in this volume, saw themselves first and foremost as agents of God rather than agents of the French state. Although willing to exploit French power and protection for their purposes, their goal was the expansion of Catholicism under any flag. Like the British Protestant missionary societies discussed in Andrew Porter’s *Religion versus empire?*, French Catholic missionaries had an

ambivalent attitude to state power.³⁴ Because Catholicism, in their view, was a universal creed and the Catholic church a global institution, it transcended national interests. In addition, often “the missionary frontier ran ahead of empire,” as missionaries chose new locations irrespective of their political allegiance.³⁵ In this volume, only Anne-Marie Javouhey consistently opened missions in actual French colonies of the time, a choice that was determined more by financial considerations than by any particular patriotic impulse. Home ties for missionaries were important but not absolute. Furthermore, in some places, especially Muslim lands, state power stood in direct opposition to Catholic interest in conversion. Colonial officials often desired the “civilizing” benefits of religion without the actual religious content or at least without the overt appearance of proselytization where it might be deemed inflammatory.³⁶ Missionaries, for their part, had to balance their “universalist Christian religious values and the imperial context of those values,” as Jeffrey Cox has put it in his book on missionary work in the Punjab.³⁷ Opposing slavery, for example, was a position taken by some (but by no means all) Catholic missionaries like Javouhey in direct contradiction to French policy. The dictates of faith did not always match the needs of empire.

In the early nineteenth century the Catholic church was undergoing a significant spiritual and institutional revival that fueled the missionary drive. Like the last great missionary push in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation, the impulse to combat religious ignorance and effect conversions overseas was directly related to the same impulse at home, this time the re-Christianization campaign in the aftermath of the French Revolution.³⁸ The new female religious orders in France were at base evangelizing institutions that sought to restore religious faith and practice through example and good works. During the early years of the Restoration, domestic missionaries from male religious orders like the Jesuits traveled the length and breadth of the country, preaching in revival meetings that sought to reanimate French faith after the dislocations of the revolutionary and Napoleonic periods.³⁹ At least one of the women in this volume, Emilie de Vialar, participated in such a mission before her entry into religious life. On an institutional level, Pope Pius VII reopened the church’s missionary arm, Propaganda Fide, in 1817. Although Propaganda Fide had few funds with which to support missions, it did play a critical role in defining mission territory and adjudicating conflicts between religious orders and national interests overseas.

Overseas missionary work also captured the imagination of the public. Following his successful novellas about American Indians, Romantic thinker and writer François-René de Chateaubriand published *Genius of Christianity* in 1802, which discusses French missions at length. His *Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem*, published in 1811, rekindled interest in the Holy Land. The next decade witnessed a flurry of publications or republications of other missionary books, from a new edition of the well-known *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses des Jésuites du Paraguay, des Indes, et de la Chine* in 1815–16,

to a new version, *Nouvelles lettres édifiantes* published by the Société des Missions Etrangères in 1818–21.⁴⁰ In 1822, a pious laywoman in Lyon, Pauline Jaricot, founded Propagation de la Foi, which became a fund-raising organization for Catholic missions abroad, collecting the proverbial “petit sou” for the missions, and redistributing the funds to needy missionaries. Beginning in 1825, it also published an influential journal, *Annales de la Propagation de la Foi*, which kept Catholic subscribers up to date on missionary developments abroad, often publishing missionary letters verbatim. By 1835, Propagation de la Foi was active in nine out of ten French dioceses and collecting a half million francs per year, increasing to two million by 1845.⁴¹ In 1843, the bishop of Nancy founded l’Oeuvre de la Sainte Enfance (the Holy Childhood Association) in order to support indigenous children in mission areas.⁴² All of these organizations saw tremendous growth in the nineteenth century as public interest in missionary work soared. At the same time, interest in missions built support for empire.

The shock troops of the nineteenth-century missionary movement were new and old religious orders, among which French orders predominated. At the death of Pius IX in 1878 three-quarters of Catholic male and female missionaries in the world were French.⁴³ Napoleon reauthorized three important French male missionary orders from the Old Regime: the Congrégation de la Mission (Lazarists), the Société des Missions Etrangères de Paris, and the Congrégation du Saint-Esprit (Spiritains), who reprised their missionary work in the Ottoman Empire, Asia, and the French colonies. New male orders, many of them originating in the pious and prosperous Lyon region joined them in expanding all over the world.⁴⁴

Nonetheless, the novel development in the missionary movement was the entry of female religious orders. Traditionally, in both Catholic and Protestant discourse, Christian missionaries were assumed to be men.⁴⁵ The term *missionnaire* was gendered male in French, and throughout the nineteenth century when statistics were collected on clerics abroad, *soeurs* or *religieuses* were counted separately (if they were counted at all) from *missionnaires*. The model missionary remained the Jesuit or Lazarist priest of the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries, venturing into unknown and often unmapped spaces, confronting indigenous peoples, often at risk to his own life. His goal was the conversion of these peoples as measured by, first, baptisms and then regular practice of the Christian sacraments. The vocabulary was martial: the missionary as a soldier of God, ready to die for the cause. His exploits were publicized and his relics venerated. By contrast, only a handful of women missionaries traveled to French colonies before the nineteenth century. In Canada, under the influence of the Catholic Reformation, a few orders established missions whose work anticipated their nineteenth-century descendants. Exceptionally, Ursuline nun Marie de l’Incarnation became the most celebrated woman missionary, a role model for Duchesne in particular. The Soeurs de St-Paul de Chartres, also an Old Regime foundation, had small establishments on the

Indian Ocean islands of Ile de Bourbon (Réunion) and Ile de France (Mauritius). In Louisiana the Ursulines established a convent in 1727.⁴⁶ But few in number and limited, by and large, from both travel and martyrdom, early modern women missionaries did not challenge the dominant model.

The introduction of uncloistered women into the missionary environment in the nineteenth century changed the nature of missionary work. Catholic nuns could not, under normal circumstances, baptize converts; for these and other sacraments, they were dependent on priests.⁴⁷ They could, however, provide instruction in Christian faith and practice, whether that was formally in schools or catechism classes or informally in soup kitchens and pharmacies or at the bedsides of the ill and dying. For the first time, women and children became the focus of Catholic missionary efforts, in keeping with an emerging domestic ideology that argued that the home was the key to acculturation. The feminization of missionary work put a heavier emphasis on assimilation of non-Europeans to European standards of education, cleanliness, and housekeeping whether or not formal conversion was achieved. Just as Catholic sisters in France provided vital services in education, nursing, and welfare, these same skills in the missionary context gave them new methods for evangelization that Catholic priests lacked. Schools were obvious places to inculcate the faith, but care of the sick and dying, as well as the indigent, runaway wives, prostitutes, and other marginal individuals, provided opportunities to speak of one's faith and urge others to embrace it. Women missionaries did not preach, but they could convert in more subtle ways. Even priests recognized that women religious were now essential partners in their work, citing their usefulness again and again in the sources.

For the French government, eager to tout its "civilizing mission" as a pretext for colonization, women missionaries were the perfect cover. Not only did missionary work in health, education, and welfare make credible the claim that the French were improving local conditions, but the work of women religious was often less confrontational and threatening as well because they lacked the public authority of Catholic priests. There were also, after the rapid expansion of female religious orders in the nineteenth century, more of them to draw upon. By 1900, there were more than ten thousand women missionaries, in comparison to just over seven thousand men.⁴⁸ Unlike Protestant missionary women, also an expanding group in this period, especially in the British Empire, Catholic sisters had the advantage of strong, female-led institutions in the form of the religious order itself, although within the overall structure of a patriarchal church.⁴⁹ Freedom from enclosure allowed them to travel and work in public spaces, yet their habits and rules made such work acceptable for unmarried women, a significant advantage over laywomen.

There is good reason to argue that, by the end of the century, missionary work had become "feminized" not just in the makeup of its personnel but also in its image,

even when practiced by men, as domesticated and nurturing.⁵⁰ The importance of domestic ideology to nineteenth-century empire has been noted by numerous historians, as is suggested by the title of the best-known essay collection on the subject, *Domesticating the Empire*. That collection, like other work on gender and empire, however, contains no information on women missionaries and little evidence before 1870.⁵¹ Influenced by postmodern discourse analysis, much of the recent work on nineteenth-century French empire and gender, in fact, looks less at actual women than at the ways in which imperial lands and peoples were constructed as feminine, which leaves the focus on the men, who did most of the framing. If Anne McClintock is right when she writes that “colonialism took shape around the Victorian invention of domesticity and the idea of the home,”⁵² then the contributions of women missionaries like the three under study here—even if they were celibate Catholic nuns—to this ideology is central to the shaping of modern colonialism.

Until recently, missionaries—of either gender—have been marginal to the history of French empire. Secular histories of empire mention them only in passing, if at all, or assume that their work was simply a pretext for French expansion and cultural appropriation. Catholic historians tend toward the celebratory, lauding the sacrifice made by European clerics in the goal of universal salvation.⁵³ If nothing else, however, the timing—the simultaneous revival of overseas missionary work and that of French colonialism in the aftermath of the French Revolution—suggests that missionaries, especially women missionaries, were important players in the imperial game. Their expansion into missionary work just as the French came to reinvent their empire gave them an opportunity to shape both imperial discourse and imperial reality. At the same time, French expansion provided both opportunities and limitations to the work of French missionaries. Close examination of their work suggests that they were neither villains nor heroes, although, unsurprisingly, they carried with them not only absolute faith in their creed but also assumptions about the superiority of European culture, though not always about Europeans themselves. The three women in this book never doubted that Christianity could bring salvation to all peoples, but they did sometimes doubt that Europeans were the best embodiment of faithful Christians. Yet their view of non-Europeans contained an essential paradox: All people were equal in the sight of God but could express that equality only by embracing a religion that remained bounded by European cultural assumptions.

Writing the Lives of Saints

Finally, this book not only addresses historical and historiographical questions about empire, gender, and religion but also does so through the prism of three individual lives. Biography, like empire, is enjoying a scholarly renaissance, but

today's biographies often use methodological tools that are very different from those of the past. This book has been influenced by the "new biography," which seeks to locate individual lives in larger cultural patterns. After decades of analyzing social forces as abstract entities, historians have come back to biography, as well as narrative, in order to understand the play of those forces on individual lives or to use one life—often obscure—as a prism through which to examine larger forces. These biographies are seldom heroic as their subjects do not so much change reality as reflect it. Their biographers are less likely to make sweeping generalizations about character or personality, and they often employ innovative narrative strategies. Instead of reconstructing the interior life, as psychobiographers tried to do, new biographers, influenced by postmodern theory, are especially interested in the construction of identity and self.⁵⁴ Indeed, historian Joan Wallach Scott goes so far as to argue that traditional biography is fundamentally flawed because it assumes that "agency is an expression of autonomous individual will, rather than the effect of a historically defined process which forms subjects." The four women that she profiles in *Only Paradoxes to Offer* she claims are not "heroines" but "sites—historical locations or markers—where crucial political and cultural contests are enacted."⁵⁵

Although I do not agree with Scott's epistemological premise that the "personal lives" of biographical subjects are insignificant compared to the "complex determinations of language,"⁵⁶ in this book I am primarily concerned with the interplay between the experiences of Philippine Duchesne, Emilie de Vialar, and Anne-Marie Javouhey and the larger political, social, and cultural world in which they acted out their lives. To borrow from the vocabulary if not all of the theory of postmodernists, if we conceive of their lives as "texts," then it is the relationship between "text" and "context" that I seek to establish. Placing three similar, yet not identical, lives in the same book, in fact, suggests that there are bigger themes and forces to explore beyond a narration of their activities or an examination of their personal motives, virtues, and vices. Structurally, this book most resembles Natalie Zemon Davis's *Women on the Margins* in juxtaposing the lives of three women who were neither ordinary nor representative but whose life stories can illuminate both each other and the larger culture. Methodologically, I have been inspired as much by microhistory as by biography, two genres that now often overlap but are not identical. Microhistorians take an individual event or life and use it to examine broader issues, whereas biographers are most interested in the singularity of the person under study—what indeed makes that person unique.⁵⁷ Often microhistorians study lives for which source material is lacking, resulting in substantial gaps in the life story. Understanding the larger context provides one way of hazarding guesses as to what might have filled in those gaps. This methodology transcends the problem of inadequate sources, which is not the case in this book. Biography cum microhistory ties

the individual with the global, the intimate with the impersonal. Just as the context can explain the individual life, so the lives of individuals can illuminate the larger historical forces. Duchesne, Vialar, and Javouhey participated in the reshaping of both the French church and the French empire; their stories can in turn reshape our understanding of those processes.

That premise also distinguishes this book from previous biographies of these women.⁵⁸ Mostly written by clerics or members of the religious orders that they founded, their biographers, unsurprisingly, were interested first and foremost in understanding the unique qualities of their founders—those that might explain their success and their sanctity. Although they did not shy away from discussing the faults, lapses, and contradictions of these women, previous biographers focused first on personality and works and only secondarily on context. Furthermore, sharing the religious beliefs of their subjects, some were willing to consider “providence” or the hand of God as a motivating force in history, a perspective that secular historians reject. Their biographies were meant to explain but also to inspire. Anne-Marie Javouhey is even the subject of a French comic book whose target audience is children.⁵⁹ All three women, in fact, have had their lives vetted by Catholic theologians as exemplary in view of their beatification or canonization. Vialar was made a saint in 1951 (beatified 1939), Duchesne in 1988 (beatified 1940), and Javouhey was beatified in 1950. Several of the extant biographies were written specifically as a part of this process. This does not make them hagiographic (except in the literal sense) or uncritical by any means—several of the more recent biographers had advanced historical training—but they brought a particular point of view and purpose to their writing. Only Anne-Marie Javouhey has been the subject of a lay biography, an excellent recent work by historian Geneviève Lecuir-Nemo. Although Lecuir-Nemo is sensitive to the religious and imperial context of Javouhey’s life and work, her goal and method remain that of the traditional biographer, who accounts for Javouhey’s activities and actions from birth to death in chronological fashion.⁶⁰

Besides my position as a professional historian and an outsider (American and non-Catholic to boot—all of which presuppose certain biases of my own), my purpose in this book is quite different. I am interested in these women’s lives for their own sakes—indeed, I cannot imagine taking on a project of this magnitude without a basic sympathy for my subjects—but I am more drawn by what we can learn about the interplay of their experiences with the larger changes in opportunities for women, the nineteenth-century French church, and the role of missionaries in French expansion. Although the stories of these women are told in a more or less chronological fashion, my narrative relies more on themes than on chronology, and I do not feel obliged to account for every year in their lives or every movement in their journeys. Instead, I feel free to pick and chose the themes that I find most revealing of the time and context in which they lived. Writing about three

women rather than a single one also allows me to look for commonalities indicative of broader trends and issues. Since these three women chose different destinations, however, I am able to take a more comprehensive (if not complete) view of empire.

Because these three women have been objects of veneration and study from the time of their deaths, I have benefited from abundant source material. As traveling women, often distant from their families—both birth and religious—they left behind literally thousands of letters that have been carefully preserved, catalogued, transcribed, and even published.⁶¹ Indeed, one of the most valuable characteristics of the insider biographies is their unparalleled access to archival sources and an oral tradition within the congregations themselves. Fortunately, these sources are now largely available to outside researchers. The letters written by Duchesne, Vialar, and Javouhey, however, do not always answer the questions that twenty-first-century historians, at least, would most like answered. The sights and sounds of foreign lands and cultures are not consistently described. Although these women's life work was the evangelization of non-Christians, it is striking how few of those individuals made it into their correspondence, almost none of them by name. Instead, these women wrote most often about administrative concerns and issues: the recruitment and placement of nuns, the raising of funds, relations with bishops and other clerics, plans for expansion, and so forth. They also retained a lively interest in the welfare of their birth families and, of course, their spiritual sisters. Only by finding and reading other available sources, especially in the archives of the French colonial and foreign affairs ministries and those of the church, can a more balanced "big picture" be assembled. Silent still, however, are indigenous voices, who seldom made it into the written record, especially the records of the colonizers.

This book remains, for better or worse, a story told from the point of view of the three women who embarked on their own personal journeys to convert souls and "civilize" peoples that they only dimly understood. Their worldview, however, is well worth exploring for what it teaches us about the global reach—and the limitations—of French Catholic evangelization in the nineteenth century. At a moment when we are reminded daily of the power of religion in world events, understanding its historical relationship with imperialism and globalization is both important and timely.