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Jeremy D. Popkin, *A New World Begins. The History of the French Revolution*. New York: Basic Books, 2019. viii + 629 pp. Maps, notes, and index. \$35.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-465-09666-4.

Response by Jeremy Popkin, University of Kentucky.

I would like to thank William Doyle for his detailed review of my recently published *A New World Begins: The History of the French Revolution*. If I am fortunate enough to see the book go into a second edition, I will certainly take advantage of his comments on some omissions and minor errors of fact. I am, however, surprised by some of his criticisms; more importantly, I think he has really missed what I see as the most significant aspect of the French Revolution: the revolutionaries' effort to actually implement, in the real world, the principles of liberty and equality that are still fundamental to democracy today. In the short run, of course, their effort was only partially successful and understanding the reasons for their failure is as fundamental to a history of the Revolution as is the story of their attempt at changing the world. I tried to deal with both aspects of this dramatic story--the aspirations of the revolutionaries and the motives of those who opposed them--as fairly as I could, and in a way that would be comprehensible to general readers as well as to fellow scholars and students.

Doyle takes me to task for neglecting the impact of the Revolution outside of France and its colonies, and for underplaying the importance of the religious conflict created by the Revolution. To some extent, I would agree with him about the first point. I would have liked to say more about the colorful collection of foreigners--not just Thomas Paine, but also Anachrasis Cloots, Mary Wollstonecraft, Helen Maria Williams, Zalkind Hourwitz, Filippo Buonarroti, Francisco Miranda and many others--who were part of the revolutionary story. I would also have liked to say more about the Revolution's international impact. Even in a 600-page book, however, there is not enough room for everything, and I feared that readers would be confused if they were confronted with too many details about events in the archbishopric of Liège, the kingdom of Poland, and the Painite clubs in England. Nevertheless, I believe that my readers do get some feel for the excitement the Revolution caused among the foreigners in Paris and for the different ways it was received in Belgium in 1792, in the Batavian Republic in 1795, and in Egypt in 1798.

I will leave it to readers to judge whether Doyle is correct in claiming that I did not devote enough attention to the religious conflict in the Revolution. I agree completely with him that this is a central issue, and it is mentioned in virtually every chapter of the book. Where we differ, perhaps, is in how we understand the conflict. Neither the Revolution nor France's population was a solid bloc with respect to religious issues. As Timothy Tackett's fundamental

work, *Religion, Revolution, and Regional Culture in Eighteenth-Century France*, showed us a generation ago, both the Catholic clergy and the laity were deeply divided about whether the Revolution was a menace to the Church or an opportunity to bring about necessary reforms that would return the institution to its true spirit.[1]

The revolutionaries themselves were equally divided about religion. The radical de-Christianizers of 1793 and the dogmatic rationalists of the Directory-era *Idéologue* movement would have liked to root out “superstition” altogether; the proponents of the Cult of the Supreme Being and of the Directory era’s Theophilanthropy wanted a purified, natural religion that could help hold society together, and the constitutional priest Henri Grégoire, a key revolutionary figure, never abandoned his faith that the movement could be reconciled with Catholicism. Doyle is right that Catholic women were prominent in support for the refractory clergy during the Revolution. I referred to this fact in a number of places in the book, and if I had had the benefit of reading the recently completed dissertation of my own Ph.D. student Corinne Gressang on nuns who resisted the Revolution while I was writing my book, I could have said more on the subject.[2] Nevertheless, women of the period were not unanimous in support of intransigent Catholicism. After Napoleon’s coup, the anti-revolutionary priest François Molin, whom I quoted, remarked that women as well as men had learned to get along without traditional religious services and needed to be brought back to the faith.

Where Doyle and I differ the most, however, seems to be on the significance of the revolutionary movement’s fundamental ideas. Doyle’s claim that the *cahiers* of 1789 were more concerned “to stop change rather than promote it” seems to me a profound mischaracterization. As John Markoff’s *The Abolition of Feudalism* showed us, even if the *cahiers* did not anticipate the full breadth of the changes the Revolution would bring about, they reflected a consensus on the need for fundamental changes in France’s “constitution” and its social order.[3] Doyle’s own book on the abolition of nobility has reminded us what a rupture this action represented.[4] The principles of individual liberty and equality and of representative constitutional government spelled out so eloquently in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen were radically opposed to the practices of the monarchy. The often violent disagreements about what those principles meant and how they should be implemented are the substance of the story my book tries to tell, as well as of politics in much of the world today. That is why I thought it was worth the effort to give readers a new version of the history of the French Revolution, one which, as Doyle acknowledges, would integrate new scholarship on the issue of women’s rights and on the revolutionaries’ confrontations with the problems of race and slavery.

## NOTES

[1] Timothy Tackett, *Religion, Revolution, and Regional Culture in Eighteenth-Century France* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).

[2] Corinne Gressang, “Breaking Habits: Identity and the Dissolution of Convents in France, 1789-1808” (Ph.D. diss., University of Kentucky, 2020).  
[https://uknowledge.uky.edu/history\\_etds/58](https://uknowledge.uky.edu/history_etds/58).

[3] John Markoff, *The Abolition of Feudalism: Peasants, Lords, and Legislators in the French Revolution* (University Park PA: Penn State University Press, 1996).

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[4] William Doyle, *Aristocracy and its Enemies in the Age of Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

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