Objective: To explore questions of religion and morality in the Confessions in the context of the French Enlightenment.

Preparatory Reading:
- Rousseau, “Creed of a Savoyard Vicar,” from Émile (1762)

Additional Reading Suggestions:

Quick Lecture Points
- Religious Toleration in 18th c France
  France is Roman Catholic, with a long history of persecution of religious others, from the Protestant Huguenots in the seventeenth century to the Jansenists in the eighteenth. Following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, “only Catholics could legally hold services of worship, be married and baptized, enter
French universities, obtain masterships in guilds, or serve in any public capacity,” except in the region of Alsace (Ossenga 56). A sizeable community of Protestants remained, nonetheless, in the south of France. Jews were expelled from France in 1394, but by the seventeenth and eighteenth century small communities of Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews have returned. Ossenga notes that “no Jew was allowed to own land or hold office.” The French revolution will change the status of all religious minorities in France: freedom of religion is enshrined as a principle of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, and Protestants and Muslims, and by 1791 also Jews, are admitted to the full rights of citizenship.

• *Religious Toleration in 18thc Geneva*
To be a citizen of Geneva you had to be a Protestant. When Rousseau converts to Catholicism in Book II, he is renouncing his birthright as a citizen. To reclaim it (as he will also proceed to do), he has to reconvert to Protestantism.

• *The Wealth and Power of the Catholic Church*
David Bell notes, in the chapter included here, that “it is hard to overstate the extent to which Roman Catholicism permeated early modern French life,” its influence underwritten by the church’s “enormous economic and political power.” It owned at least 6 percent of the land outright (and in some regions more); possessed its own system of justice; recruited its members from the “surplus children of the wealthy and well-connected,” and until the middle of the eighteenth century, was the largest “source of charitable aid given to France’s armies of destitute and travelling poor” (80). In shock after the schism of the Reformation, it was also a militant church, determined to wrest popular “pagan” festivals from the peasantry and resist Protestant incursion.

• *Jansenist*
The Jansenists were a Catholic movement, particularly popular among parish clergy in the north of France, that advocated for a “gloomy and demanding strain of Catholicism” (Bell 87). They stressed the “utter depravity and sinfulness of humanity” and a life of self-denial and constant prayer (Bell 87). The effect of the movement, and their importance to the history of the eighteenth century, was to exacerbate the split between the clergy and ordinary believers, and further schisms within the church itself, which feared that Jansenism was merely Calvinism in disguise. As a consequence Jansenists were persecuted by the Church. Both Jansenism itself and the Church’s reaction harmed the Church’s reputation and its hold over the Catholic faithful.

**Discussion Question:**

• Read the first page and a half of Bell’s essay on “Culture and Religion” in *Old Regime France* with your students, where Bell suggests eighteenth century intellectuals perceived themselves as engaged in an “epic conflict” between faith and reason, fanaticism and freedom, science and tradition, darkness and light.
He goes on to suggest this is misleading, but notes that it is also a “compelling” story. Ask students what they make of this “epic conflict,” as translated to their own 21st century realities. Is such an “epic conflict” going on today, whether in the US or in the world? Must faith and logic be always at loggerheads? Religion, after all, is not always fanaticism; reason (as the French Revolution would go on to prove) can be equally fanatical, equally cult-like.

The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the disenchanted world. Precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life either into the transcendental realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal human relations. It is not accidental that our greatest art is intimate and not monumental.

— Max Weber, Sociology of Religion, 1918

Suggestions for Close Reading

• It is in Book II that Rousseau, adrift and unemployed, begins his journey toward conversion. On p. 46, he observes of M. de Pontverre, who sends him on to Mme. de Warens, that “although M. de Pontverre was a good man, he was certainly not a virtuous one. He was, on the contrary, a pious man, with no notion of virtue beyond worshipping images and telling his beads…” What distinction is Rousseau making here, between “goodness,” “virtue” and “piety?” Why is M. de Pontverre “good” without being virtuous? What does Rousseau seem to despise about de Pontverre’s version of religion?

• On p. 48-52, we meet Mme. de Warens for the first time. What is her role as a convert to the Church? In Rousseau’s eventual conversion? What does this suggest about the intersection of politics, power and religion in the period?

• On p. 54, Rousseau makes another observation about morality and duty, “which is that we should avoid situations that bring our duty into conflict with our interests and represent our own advantage as dependent on the misfortune of others, since I am certain that in such situations, however sincere our love of virtue has previously been, we will sooner or later weaken, without noticing it, and become unjust and wicked in deed without having ceased to be just and good in spirit.” What does Rousseau mean by “duty?” What is the “love of virtue” here? Is it possible to be “unjust and wicked in deed” while still remaining “just and good in spirit?” Ask students to write down their own definitions of these terms, and their implication; then discuss: do they agree with Rousseau? What is the significance of Rousseau suggesting this transformation occurs without us being even aware of it, and why might our belief that our own advantage depends on the misfortune of others hasten that transformation into moral obliviousness?

• Rousseau arrives in Turin on p. 58; he describes his religious experiences and education up until that point on p. 60-61. What are Genevan attitudes toward
Catholicism, according to Rousseau? And yet why has he himself become “confused about the whole thing?” What kind of portrait of religion is he painting here?

- Reflecting on his coming conversion, Rousseau declares, “I could not avoid the conclusion that the holy work I was about to perform was, when it came down to it, an act of mere banditry. Although I was still very young, I felt that, irrespective of what was the true religion, I was about to sell my own…” (61) Read this passage carefully with students. What precisely is Rousseau suggesting that he’s horrified by here? That he’s about to convert to Catholicism? Or is it the reason for why he’s doing it? Why is he, in fact, about to convert to Catholicism?

- How might Rousseau’s actions here compare with his description of M. de Pontverre’s piety in the earlier passage? Ultimately, what is Rousseau suggesting religion is and should be for? Does that differ from what we’ve seen of the uses to which religion is put in Rousseau’s world?

If virtue costs us dear, we have only ourselves to blame, for if we resolved always to be prudent, we would rarely need to be virtuous. But inclinations, which in themselves could easily be overcome, engage us without the least resistance on our part: we yield to small temptations whose perils we despise. And so, imperceptibly, we slide into dangerous situations which we could easily have avoided...

- Rousseau, Confessions, Book II, p. 62-63

- Read the above passage carefully with your students. What does the morality, or virtue that Rousseau is describing here resemble? Is it a question of good and evil, of stark opposites? Compare his notion of “yield[ing] to small temptations” gradually with the fate he suffers in the broken comb incident (Book I), or the accusation of Marion (later in Book II). Consider also the processual nature of the morality or virtue Rousseau is describing in light of his autobiographical project – both as narrative and as revelation. How might a narrative of the self help yield insights such as the gradual “yielding to small temptations?” What work is the rhetoric of “strength” and “weakness” in this passage doing?

- It is in Book III that Rousseau meets M. Gaime, who will become his model for the “Savoyard vicar” in Émile (p. 88-90). How does Rousseau describe him? What is appealing to Rousseau about this man’s person, his representation of religion and how he approaches Rousseau himself? On the bottom of p. 89, for instance, Rousseau notes that by the time he meets M. Gaime, “my conversion was not at that time very solidly based,” but that he was nevertheless “moved” by his conversations with Gaime. “Far from finding his talks tiresome, I enjoyed them for their lucidity, their simplicity, and above all, for a certain tender solicitude with which I felt them to be full” (90).

- Read the “Creed of the Savoyard Vicar” from Rousseau’s Émile. What kind of religion is Rousseau propounding here? What are the key tenets of religion, as
Rousseau explains it here? That Catholicism is the one true Church? What does his attitude seem to be toward clerical establishments, toward the institutionalization of religion? What might have threatened clerical establishments in both Calvinist Geneva and Catholic Paris about Rousseau’s “Creed?” (It was this “creed” that got Émile banned, burned and Rousseau exiled).

• In Book VI, Rousseau retreats with his “Maman” to the rural idyll of Les Charmettes, where he declares “This is where my life’s brief happiness begins” (220). On p. 230, he describes his morning prayers:

> I rose each morning before the sun. I set off uphill through a neighbouring orchard to join a pretty path that followed the hillside above the vineyards all the way to Chambéry. There, as I walked, I said my prayers, which consisted not of an empty moving of the lips but of a sincere lifting of the heart towards the author of that lovely nature whose beauties were everywhere before my eyes. I have never liked praying indoors; I feel as though the walls of the room and all the other little works of men interpose themselves between my God and me. I love to contemplate Him in His works, while my heart is raised on high. My prayers were always pure, for that I can vouch, and for that reason deserved to be heard.

> - *Confessions*, Book VI, p. 230-231

• Read this passage with students. Where is Rousseau praying and why? What kind of religion is he advocating for? Why does he believe his prayers should be heard? Compare with what we know already about Rousseau’s readers’ fiercely emotional reaction to his work (Darnton’s “Readers Respond”), and to his earlier reference to being above all “moved” by M. Gaime’s conversations with him about religion. What does religion offer in these passages? Clerics, buildings, tradition and institutions are done away with, or in other words, Rousseau is dividing religion from religious experience.

• Where does this passage locate virtue? What is potentially problematic about that? Where else do we see Rousseau arguing that virtue is determined by intent, by an “innocent heart,” rather than deed? Are these convincing arguments?

• Ask students to read Voltaire’s definition of “Religion” in his 1764 Philosophical Dictionary, and compare it both with the descriptions of religion and of religious experience they’ve encountered thus far in the *Confessions*, and with the “Creed of a Savoyard Vicar” that Rousseau expounds in Émile. What similarities and differences are there in these two texts? How does their language and tone differ? What does each philosopher seem to think religion is for or should be? Discuss with students which definition (Voltaire v. Rousseau) they find the most convincing or compelling and why.
Note: It might be interesting to add some personal biography to the discussion: these men had very different class backgrounds (the one wealthy, urbane, at home in precisely those salons that made Rousseau so nervous; the other—well, the other was Rousseau), ideas and styles of writing, the latter definitely evident even in translation. There was a considerable degree of enmity between them as well: Rousseau distrusted Voltaire and believed he despaired him for a lowborn plebe—which, in fact, he did. Posterity, meanwhile, has revealed that it was Voltaire who wrote and circulated the infamous Sentiments of the Citizens, which revealed Rousseau’s poor paternal skills to the world.

• The illumination on the road to Vincennes. In a famous moment on p. 341-2, Rousseau describes how he “saw another universe and became another man” while on a walk to visit his friend Diderot, who’d been imprisoned by edict of the king for publishing two religiously controversial pieces, the Letters on the Blind and The Promenade of a Skeptic; as he walks, according to his own account, he reads a question posed by the Academy of Dijon for one of its essay prize competitions in the Mercure de France: “Has the progress of the sciences and the arts contributed to the corruption or purification of morals?” (342) As Damrosch notes, “it was a trite enough question, practically guaranteed an answer in the affirmative, but Rousseau...saw a new way of arguing in the negative” (212). In a 1762 letter to Malesherbes (press and printing censor for France, but a liberal and supporter of the philosophes), he would describe the moment as follows:

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Suddenly I felt my spirit dazzled by a thousand brilliant insights. A host of ideas crowded in upon me all at once, troubling my mind with a force and confusion impossible to express. I felt my head spinning with a giddiness like intoxication. A violent palpitation oppressed and expanded my breath. Finding it no longer possible to breathe while walking, I let myself collapse beneath one of the trees which line the avenue; there I spent half an hour in such a state of agitation that on rising I discovered the front of my vest to be wet with tears I never knew I had shed. Oh Sir! If I had ever been able to write one quarter of what I saw and felt beneath that tree, how clearly I would have revealed all the contradictions of the social system; how forcefully I would have exposed all the abuses of our institutions; how simply I would have demonstrated that man is naturally good, and that it is only through these institutions that he becomes evil! All that I was able to retain from the flood of great truths which, for the space of a quarter of an hour, engulfed me in light as I lay beneath that tree...That is how, when I least expected it, I became an author almost in spite of myself.

- Rousseau, Second Letter to Malesherbes, 1762
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What kind of experience is Rousseau describing here? One arrived at by careful reasoning and dispassionate logic? It is this moment that will launch his career as a writer and philosopher. Is it what we would expect from someone often carelessly labeled merely another “Enlightenment philosopher?”
Read the excerpts from the Discourse on the Arts and Sciences, or the text in its entirety (it’s short), with your students. What is Rousseau arguing here about the sciences and the arts? What do they do? What is their role in society? Rousseau became an “instant celebrity” with the piece. Given the context of the time, why might that have been? What is he arguing against?

Suspicions, offenses, fears, coldness, reserve, hatred, and betrayal will constantly lurk beneath this uniform and treacherous veil of politeness, this vaunted urbanity that we owe to the enlightenment of our century.

Even while government and laws give security and well-being to assemblages of men, the sciences, letters and arts, which are less despotic but perhaps more powerful, spreads garlands of flowers over the iron chains that bind them, stifle in them the sense of that original liberty for which they seemed to have been born, make them love their enslavement, and transform them into what are called civilized peoples

- Rousseau, Discourse on the Arts and Sciences, 1750

[The Discourse on the Sciences and Arts] was a very brief piece...and readers today may well wonder what all the fuss was about. Attacks on modern corruption were boringly familiar, but Rousseau’s approach was remarkable because he attacked the assumptions of the Enlightenment from within...In his paradoxical but powerful argument, he agreed with the philosophes that civilization had brought much that is good, but he argued that at the same time it is destructive; its defects are not occasional exceptions to its virtues but a direct consequence of them.

– Damrosch, Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Restless Genius, 216

Assignments, Activities and Project Ideas

- Assign students the task of writing a narrative describing and determining their own religious convictions and experiences, using Rousseau’s thoughts in the Confessions and in the “Creed” to situate their own feelings and ideas. What does religion mean to them? What do they believe? Why? Is belief possible without tradition? What does tradition add?
- Assign students the task of writing an essay analyzing the interaction of faith and reason in the 21st century US. On the one hand, we’ve got pundit-satirists like Bill Maher blasting the devout as irrational and calling the religion a myth only the credulous – that is, those who do not reason – would believe. On the other, we’ve got religious right-wingers calling the science of climate change a creed “straight from the pit of hell.” Where does truth in this debate lie?
- Assign students the perhaps anachronistic task of writing an essay in response to precisely the same Dijon Academy question that inspired Rousseau to write his first Discourse: “Have the sciences and the arts corrupted or purified morals?”
(Perhaps to avoid confusion, suggest students focus on either the sciences or the arts). Share the following analysis of Rousseau’s *Discourse* by Darnton:

> [In *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*], Rousseau saw that morality was a cultural code, the unwritten rules of conduct, knowledge and taste that held society together. Man could not do without it, for man stripped of culture was a Hobbes-ian brute, lacking an ethical existence. But supercivilized man, the *homme du monde* who divided his time between the opera and the Cabaret La Selle, was still worse...the arts and sciences were at bottom political institutions. The sophistication of the salons reinforced the despotism of Versailles...Culture corrupts, and absolutist culture corrupts absolutely.
> – Robert Darnton, “Rousseau on the Route to Vincennes,” p. 113-4

Before students write their essays, discuss Rousseau’s observation that morality works in society as a cultural code, rather than an innate virtue. What might this suggest? What are its implications for how people behave? What do students make of the intersection between culture and politics? What does the idea, “culture corrupts, and absolutist culture corrupts absolutely” suggest? How are Rousseau’s observations about morality and culture applicable to our own culture, society and political institutions today?

- Rousseau, unlike Voltaire (who was a deist) or Rousseau’s acquaintance and salon host the Baron d’Holbach (who was an atheist), and many other of his philosophe contemporaries, *did* believe in God – just not in the way the Catholic or Calvinist churches wanted him to. Suggest to a group of students they write a play imagined as a conversation about religion, religious toleration and the role of the Church in people’s lives between Rousseau, Voltaire, d’Holbach, a Jansenist clergyman and a conservative Catholic bishop (or some variation thereof). Each student would be assigned one person (ex., Voltaire), research that person and his ideas about religion, and then reconvene with the group to draft the script for the play.