

RELIGIOUS ISSUES IN THE 18th CENTURY

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Part 1 – Protestants and the “new Catholics” in the 18th century

CD: A full range of religious tensions marks 18th century in France. We asked Monique Cottret, professor at Paris Nanterre University and specialist in 18th century history, to help us take stock on this aspect of the Age of Enlightenment. Good morning Monique Cottret. First, let's remember that the abolition of the Edict of Nantes by Louis XIV in 1685 asserted the French Kingdom's Catholic unity by removing every official acknowledged existence of Protestants. Does this mean that the Protestant issue was settled in the 18th century?

MC: No, there is only “new Catholics”, but everyone knows that they generally are really bad Catholics. They do everything to flee sacraments, and that's a problem because without the sacrament of baptism, there's no official existence, without the sacrament of marriage, weddings aren't legal, the spouses are only cohabitants and their children are bastards. When it comes to death, Protestants usually manage to die brutally and so avoid confession, viaticum and everything surrounding death from a Catholic perspective.

Fairly soon, however, political authorities sought a solution. Using the opportunity of Protestants' fragility, because they live almost clandestinely, Catholics relatives try to steal their property. As the century goes by, more and more magistrates hesitate to give them a satisfactory outcome. Remarriage affairs are causing even more problems. In a Protestant couple, if one of the spouses converts in a sincere conversion to Catholicism, they are theoretically perfectly free to marry once more in their new religion, the first union having no legal existence.

Yet again, as of 1750, in many cases, magistrates require compensations for the spouse whom they regard as abandoned. Magistrates are, nonetheless, profoundly good Catholics, but they consider that family and property are values that should also be defended. The idea of a necessary civil tolerance is arising. It is not a question of returning to an Edict of Nantes, which organised the coexistence of two religions and authorised the liberty of Protestant worship, even if it was in more limited conditions than Catholic worship, but to confer a legal existence to the Protestant minority.

This movement precedes the large Calas and Sirven cases, mobilising the opinion in favour of Protestants. But Church authorities criticise this spirit of tolerance. And if persecutions stopped, one has to wait until the end of the century and the 1787's Edict of Toleration for civil tolerance to impose itself, sometimes arduously.

Part 2 – Jansenists and Enlightenment

CD: On the other hand, the Catholic Church itself is marked by an internal dispute that impacts the entire society. Monique Cottret, you are the author of a *Jansenism's History*. What is Jansenism?

MC: The 18th century brings out religious conflicts that have been underestimated for a long time. Jansenism appears in the 18th century, it is a stringent sensibility within Catholicism. While Humanism asserted a certain kind of self-confidence in mankind, a new theology supported especially by Jesuits minimises the weight of the original sin and leaves a certain liberty to mankind to participate in its salvation.

It's against this theology that Jansenism reacts. Man, for the Jansenists, is so corrupted by the original sin that he is incapable of distinguishing good from evil. He can only be saved by divine grace. The word "Jansenist" comes from Jansenius, bishop of Ypres who wrote *Augustinus*, a treatise defending St Augustine's teaching. Jansenists reject the name that designates them. They consider themselves true Catholics, friends of St Augustin, defenders of the truth. In the 18th, these influences run through French society, join Gallicanism and are in charge of political demands.

CD: You have published, a few years ago, a book entitled *Jansenism and Enlightenment*. What is the relationship between those two terms? How does Jansenism mark the 18th century French society?

MC: Jansenists willingly throw the anathema against those who they call the "new philosophers", that is to say anti-Christians philosophers. They are the first to denounce *The Spirit of the Laws*, and they play a significant role in the order for arrest emitted by the Parliament of Paris against Rousseau. They especially despise *Emile*, a treatise on the nature of education that ignores the original sin. But as they defend rights of conscience and enliven the resistance to a monarchy that has become absolute, they necessarily come across other dissenting movements of the century, joining them or preceding them depending on the circumstances. Fighting against the Jesuits, they showcase the political criticism of the Society of Jesus, suspected of favourable opinion towards tyrannicide and demanding a blind and total submission from its members to its general and supreme pontiff.

Philosophers come and join them in this battle. Against Maupeou and his coup d'état, they promote with the philosophers (except Voltaire), a more paternal vision of the monarchy providing a place for the Parliament. They were themselves victims of sacrament refusals and threatened to be buried outside of consecrated ground, thus they are among the first to advocate for civil tolerance towards Protestants.

Perhaps more fundamentally, they are located in the vast Historicism movement that seeks legitimation in the past. While, as Sieyès would say, the nobility is lost in francophone forests to find warrior ancestors to justify these privileges, Jansenists are building a primitive, poor, fraternal, heroic and democratic church model. Apostles and martyrs join the good savages to denounce luxury excesses and opulence misdeeds. A good number of Jansenists will join the Revolution fairly quickly.

Part 3 – A decline in faith?

CD: Adversaries of the Enlightenment, Jesuits and Jansenists alike never stop warning the public and the authorities against faith decline. Could we say that there is indeed a movement of dechristianisation over the course of the 18th century?

MC: Confrontations within the Catholic Church are brutal in the 18th century. Jansenists, or those accused of being Jansenists, are very numerous in the prison's State. The public does not understand this repression. Many Catholics who aren't necessarily Jansenists want to pull back from the Church but not necessarily from Christianity. Sacraments refusals were crucial because the Catholic Church maintains a privileged relationship with the dead. The idea of clerics threatening the dying is perfectly unbearable to the living.

However, is there really a decline in Christian faith? I would say that there rather is a form of dechristianisation and a transition to private manifestations of faith. Year two's violent dechristianisation generates an important resistance. The religious issue has a significant impact during Revolution. All this prompts to caution on the matter of the Enlightenment dechristianisation.

CD: Monique Cottret, thank you very much.