

## How far had the thought of the French Enlightenment undermined the authority of the 'Church and King' by the eve of the Revolution?

To call what has become known as the Enlightenment a general movement, would have seemed very strange to many of the participants themselves: men such as Diderot and Voltaire considered themselves as among a very small number fighting against the prejudices and anachronisms of their times. They certainly did not consider themselves as representing the mainstream of eighteenth century thought. This feeling should be borne in mind, and we should not assume that all the thinkers of the eighteenth century held the same views or effectiveness. When the most prominent generation of *philosophes* were ageing in the 1770s and 1780s, Voltaire for example looked in vain for true successors - his like was succeeded by non-entities who lacked their thunder and passion.

Nor should we consider that the enlightened thinkers, or *philosophes* as they thought of themselves, were necessarily antithetical to the existing social edifice. Indeed they formed part of it, even becoming censors themselves: Beaumarchais's *Le Mariage de Figaro* was banned by Suard, for example. This deep ambiguity is demonstrated by the fact that thinkers held advanced opinions, yet had to survive by means of *pensions* from the government and membership of socially elite academies. The proceeds of booksales, though the trade was booming in France, went to the printers and not the authors. In such a climate it is hardly surprising that the number of thinkers who could afford to be genuinely radical was small.

Yet their effect on the population in general was astonishingly great, considering the numbers of literate people who could read their works. Tocqueville attributes this to the fact that for the majority of the public, the *philosophes* provided the only political thought there was in with the backdrop of a secretive and authoritarian government circle. And with almost every Frenchman coming across privilege blocking their path, Tocqueville claims that it was not hard to convince the reader that reforms were necessary. What he omits from this is the crucial role played by the government censors from the death of Louis XIV. The relaxation of censorship allowed new forms of thought from entering the country: the toughening of it later after the death of Malesherbes increased its popularity. Books publicly burned by the *Parlement de Paris* always sold better than those not. Indeed, Malesherbes himself said his failure to curb the dissemination of illicit print was 'because people are set on obtaining them at any price. And who? The very people who, given their birth, their faith and their learning and their zeal for religion, ought to be the first to condemn them.'<sup>1</sup>

One must not assume that it was only works by the known philosophers that were required. Cod philosophy was equally as popular as the works of Rousseau, for example. Parisians, also, were desperate for gossip and news of all kinds, especially if it related to the social spheres above them, regardless of its veracity. However, as Tocqueville points out, this was often due to the fact that people did feel deliberately excluded from affairs: to compensate they were susceptible to any kind of rumour or half-truth. Gossip did not therefore wholly support government views that public opinion was fickle and untrustworthy: beneath it all was the growing feeling that they had the right to know more about what was going on in government. The more this was denied, the more popular subversive literature became.

On the flip-side, whenever governments themselves published works, such as Necker's *Compte Rendu*, they too were widely read and digested. Writing was growing as a whole and being seen as

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Merrick :*the Desacralisation of the French Monarchy in the Eighteenth Century*

more useful in the sphere of politics. Whether this was thanks to the influence of the *philosophes* or not is debatable, but the reading public expected to have a role.

Consequently for ministers it was no longer adequate merely to have the backing of the king to carry out a policy. As the storm of 1774 showed, if the public reacted strongly enough, it was possible to have the parlements reinstated in the teeth of the policy of the *conseil du roi*. The credit for this must ultimately be given to Enlightenment thought which first occupied itself with the fight against 'despotism'. Again, as Tocqueville points out, it was only mildly despotic but 'the slightest arbitrary act of Louis XVI seemed more difficult to bear than all of Louis XIV's despotism.' What makes this episode all the more ironic is the support that Voltaire himself gave to the abolition of the *parlements* on the grounds that it would produce fairer and better justice.

Tocqueville claims that this was but the tip of the iceberg as to how Enlightened ideas had permeated into society as a whole. He contrasted the stodgy world of real politics, with diverse and contradictory laws reflecting the entrenched positions of society with the fantasy world created by the *philosophes* showing how the world ought to be. The American Revolution appeared even to confirm this as a reality: Voltaire's *ingénu* had inherited his own land. Yet it is highly dubious to go on from this to suggest that Frenchmen genuinely believed that governance could be altered in France itself: even Candide decides to cultivate his own garden abroad. The evidence of the *cahiers* of 1789 indeed suggests that the literate population was very confused about what they wanted to see in France: Enlightened ideas had clearly only penetrated to a very shallow extent.

This could be due to the very fact that the literate population was in itself highly entwined in the continuance of the *ancien régime*, being rich and overwhelmingly noble. A similar revolution seemed inconceivable, and for many *philosophes* themselves, perched in their lucrative academy posts, was highly undesirable. Instead, the effect of the *philosophes* on secular society was to create a sense of progress and reform. In many respects far from undermining the government, it was actually harnessed by it in order to facilitate the passage of reforming legislation. Tocqueville himself quotes the fact that many of Louis XVI's decrees before 1789 already spoke of natural law and of the rights of Man. We must not assume that Enlightened thought automatically undermined royal government, and as he says, the economists unanimously welcomed the continuance of the monarchy, so long as it was constitutionally based on the English model.

Yet there was no avoiding the fact that 'the king continued to speak like a master, but in reality he himself obeyed a public opinion which restrained him or urged him on every day, which he consulted, feared and courted ceaselessly; an absolute monarch *de jure*, limited *de facto*'. Here truly lay the decisive fashion by which the Enlightenment had succeeded in challenging the government: it had succeeded in politically educating a much greater proportion of the population than ever before. This on its own did not reduce the authority of the King at all. Other events caused the loss of confidence in royal government, but the new force of public opinion provided a means for expressing grievance, that did not exist previously.

If the reading public continued to hold the institution of the monarchy in high favour, could the same be said of the Church as an institution? It is possibly quite unfair to judge the relative effects of enlightened attacks on the church and state since the former was so much easier to pass through the censors. For while Louis XVI could order a clamp-down on satires of himself for the last years of his reign, there were no especial decrees regarding the defence of the church. Tocqueville comments on this situation by saying that the church was the choice for the barbs of the satirists since '*of the whole established structure it was the weakest and least protected; its power had declined as that of temporal princes increased. . . a dangerous state of affairs in revolutionary times, and always*

*disadvantageous to a power based not on force but on faith.* His interpretation was correct in that the church was incapable of adequately defending itself directly from the charges that were laid at its door. Yet this was not due to its precarious position as client to the king, but rather because of a lack of sufficient intellectual capital in its arguments. In the last resort, it did have protectors as well from the state: it was not a coincidence that censors such as Malesherbes were clerics.

On the face of it, support for the church amongst the general public was indeed adversely affected from the second half of the century onwards. To believe the clergy themselves was to assume that that a tide of irreligion was sweeping the country. Every meeting of the General Assembly would complain against *'this swarm of evil books'* and *'this crowd of impious writers who become more audacious with every passing day.'* Certainly in the only measure we can genuinely contrast the popularity of Enlightenment ideas over traditional religious ones - the consumption of books - there was a noticeable shift towards secular topics throughout the second half of the century. The explosion of curiosity in the fields of history, science, geography, philosophy etc. certainly did combine to steadily replace religion as the central preoccupation in reading matter. Yet we can in no way attribute this success to the new forms of thinking, since throughout the 1780s, religious books still counted for 60% of all titles, many of which were defences of Catholic Church against attacks of the *philosophes*. The *cahiers* of 1789 also show that many literate Frenchmen were confused about what they wanted to see as regards the Church's position - certainly there was no pattern of following Enlightened ideas.

It cannot be said that there was any great decline in belief generally in what the church ordained. Abbé Beucher of Brulon wrote in his parish register that *'all the people en place have absolutely no religion. It is only among the humble in the countryside that religious belief remains intact.'* But while this opinion held true for the general rates of churchgoing, there were nevertheless definite signs of a flourishing spiritual life in towns. Parisians certainly could not be condemned to a man, since the cults of saints such as Sainte Geneviève were still exceptionally thriving, and could be relied on to produce miracles whenever the church needed them. Is this a sign of *'absolute disbelief in matters of religion?'* That even the Vicomte de Valmont attended mass voluntarily towards the end of the *Liaisons Dangereuses* is another indication of the fact that religion still played a very important part in the life of the capital.

Yet here we see a contradiction in what Tocqueville is saying. How can he reconcile saying that *'Irreligion had become a general and dominant passion among Frenchmen'*, while simultaneously saying that *'irreligion spread among the princes and free-thinkers; it had not penetrated yet into the hearts of the middle classes and the people.'* Was there this great anticlerical feeling which could give vent to its desires at the time of Revolution? Unfortunately, as he partially admits above, this feeling simply did not exist until later on in the Revolutionary period itself. For although Tocqueville claims that *'the church was itself the greatest of the political powers, and the most detested of all, even though it was not the most oppressive'*, there did not seem to be any particular anticlerical backlash before the Revolution. In the countryside - the only place where the church's temporal power could hold sufficient domination to make anticlericalism viable - 90% of people attended church regularly. Indeed, the Vendée was the source of counter-revolution, not revolution. In the towns, provincial academies continued to hold *Te Deums*, for example. Since the Marquise de Merteuil can still accuse women of *'continually confusing love and the loved one, and giving to the priest faith and love which is only due to the Divinity'* - how far can anticlericalism be said to have penetrated even the very class of people who thanks to their wealth did indeed read *'how people think from the philosophers and how they believe from the Moralists.'* The very mixed patterns of requests which come in from the *cahiers* also firmly suggest that there was no firm anticlerical basis in the French public of 1789. Its appearance came later, and certainly cannot be claimed by the Enlightened *philosophes* themselves.

However, if not specifically anti-clerical at this point, there was a great interest in reforming the structure of the church so that it would form a better role in public life. The impetus for this mood could not primarily come from the attacks of a few philosophers, not least because of the small reading public. Instead, it came from within, and the fall-out of the Church's own turbulent recent history. On looking at the figures for book purchasing, we can see that the high-point in consumption of religious texts came at the same moment as the great religious controversies between the Jesuit and Jansenist parties up to the mid 1700s. How could it be otherwise when local curés, who had the ear of the masses, could involve them in their own struggle with the church hierarchy? If one could secure the abolition of an institution as venerated as the Society of Jesus through political machinations, how could this do anything other than reduce confidence in the church as a whole? The furore over the execution of Jean Calas for a religiously-motivated crime which he may or may not have committed again cast doubt on the credibility of the upper church hierarchy when it came to temporal affairs. Their growing ultramontanism clashed with ordinary people and the lower clergy. All of these things more than the Enlightenment, undermined the juridical fictions that bound the *ancien régime* together: the identification of the corporate kingdom with the divinely ordained kingship and the conjunction of citizenship with Catholicity. The small band of free thinkers who wrote in this time were merely telling what was already a damaged set of institutions. Damaged maybe, but not yet defeated.