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[See table of contents](#)

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THE ASSEMBLY OF THE CLERGY AND THE ENLIGHTENMENT, 1755-1788

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With all its apparent strength, wealth and influence, the Gallican Church during the closing decades of the *ancien régime* was seriously troubled by internal strife and by the uncertainty of its jurisdiction. The Jansenist party within the Church made unity impossible; the *Parlement* of Paris, the senior judiciary institution, engaged in a continuous struggle to claim powers hitherto regarded as ecclesiastical. The Monarchy from time to time attempted to arbitrate and to define more clearly the lines separating the spiritual and the temporal, but it seemed a hopeless task. Meanwhile, the Church's hierarchy, insecure and rather on the defensive, was unable to provide needed leadership in society, and this at a time when an intellectual revolution was taking place in France. The *philosophes*, leaders of the intellectual revolution, further embarrassed the Church by insisting that the ecclesiastical and political strife fostered the cause of the free-thinkers. Voltaire, for instance, commenting to D'Alembert in 1756 on the disputes between Jansenists and magistrates and the hierarchy, remarked that now while Church officials and censors were distracted, it was possible to pack into the *Encyclopédie* doctrines that never could have been published twenty years earlier.¹ And the Marquis D'Argenson warned that if the devout were searching for the cause of the growth of radical thought, they could well point not to a small group of English philosophers but rather to social unrest in Paris, arising from needless ecclesiastical wranglings.²

Contemporaries differed in their opinions about the causes and the extent of the intellectual revolution. But both *philosophes* and the more alert and well-informed leaders in Church and State were aware by the 1750s that an intellectual ferment was at work in France, a ferment symbolized by the *Encyclopédie*. Already the terms "Enlightenment" and the "enlightened" were being used, though they would become more common later.³ Enlightenment for some meant a radical change in religious and philosophic thought; for a large group, it rather signified greater intellectual maturity and advancement in learning, particularly in

¹ Voltaire, *Oeuvres complètes*. Ed. M. Moland (52 vols.; Paris, 1877-1885), XXXIX, 131. Letter to D'Alembert, Nov. 13, 1756.

² Marquis d'Argenson, *Mémoires et Journal* (5 vols.; Paris, 1857-1858), IV, 117.

³ The words "éclaires" and "lumiére" are being used in the 1750s to describe the age. Turgot, Grimm, Helvétius, and the authors of the *Encyclopédie* make use of the terms. Cf. Paul Hazard, *La Pensée Européenne* (3 vols., Paris, 1946), 111, 26-28.

the sciences. Eventually it was to stimulate new social attitudes towards privilege, toleration, and man's welfare. "Progress" was to become the catchword of the Enlightenment. And "Progress" could be variously interpreted. For the *philosophes*, the spread of their radical ideas on religion and philosophy was an important part of progress; from the very beginning of their campaign for Enlightenment, they would find the Church sternly opposed on religious and philosophic grounds to all their major writings. Gradually the Church came to look upon radical thought as the distinguishing mark of the current intellectual revolution.

I

The purpose of this paper is to examine the reactions of members of the Assembly of the Clergy to some of the significant political, religious, and intellectual changes that occurred in France between 1755 and 1788, in other words, at the height of the Enlightenment. It perhaps seems strange that at this late date there is still room for further investigation of one of the most important organizations in the Gallican Church. In general, however, historians have been slow to delve into the intricate problems of eighteenth century French ecclesiastical history, though in relatively recent times the work of Latreille, Egret, McManners and Palmer would indicate that gradually the situation is changing.⁴ It is a glaring weakness, for instance, that historians have almost completely abandoned eighteenth century French bishops. And while the Jansenists have fared better, there is still no satisfactory history of the Jesuits in France from 1700 up to and including the Suppression. Similarly, the only definitive history of the Assembly of the Clergy ends in 1666.⁵

The Assembly of the Clergy originated in the sixteenth century as an elected body to vote the so-called "free-gift" to the King, in exchange for the Church's exemption from taxation. Since it was the only equivalent of a regular church synod, gradually during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it assumed new duties, one of them being the assessment of the Church's rights and duties and of the state of religious faith and practice in the country. The Assembly met in Paris every five years and consisted of two elected representatives from each of the sixteen ecclesiastical provinces of France. In alternate sessions the representation was doubled, making a total of sixty-four members, a reminder that originally the "free-gift" was presented only every ten

⁴ For the general history see Hazard and Daniel Mornet, *Les Origines Intellectuelles de la Révolution Française* (5th ed., Paris, 1954). A recent useful work is John McManners', *French Ecclesiastical Society Under the Ancien Régime* (Manchester, 1960).

⁵ For the history of the Assembly of the Clergy see G. Lapointe, *L'Organisation et la politique financière du Clergé de France sous le règne de Louis XV* (Paris, 1924). For an account of the last meeting see Jean Egret, *La Pré-Révolution Française, 1787-1788* (Paris, 1962), pp. 290-295; and his "La Dernière Assemblée du Clergé de France", *Revue Historique*, 1958, pp. 1-15.

years, on the occasion of the meeting of the larger assembly. In the eighteenth century the gift was voted not only every five years, but more frequently in times of emergency at special meetings. Between 1755 and 1788, the year of the last meeting, twelve sessions took place, including five special gatherings. In theory, upper and lower clergy were represented; in practice, the deputies elected by the lower clergy were invariably vicars-general, or bishops' substitutes. Usually the highest ranking prelate presided over the assembly. The resolutions, decisions, and special memoranda from the meetings are preserved in the *Collection des procès-verbaux*.⁶

II

As indicated earlier, the main function of the assembly was to decide on the size of the grant to be given to the King (in the eighteenth century they varied in size from 6 to 16 million francs), and in conjunction with these negotiations to study the temporal needs of the Church. Nevertheless, two other intimately connected subjects occupied the attention of the bishops, subjects described simply in the reports as "religion" and "jurisdiction," involving, first, the discussion of the condition of religious faith and practice, and second, of the authority of the Church over its clergy and faithful. The two areas, it will be seen, were of vital interest to the bishops in the closing decades of the old regime, and these sections of the reports are given increasing emphasis.

Considering the fact that the *philosophes* who flourished in the 1750s and 1760s drew so many of their ideas and so much of their inspiration from publications already in circulation in Paris in the 1720s and 1730s, it is at first surprising that none of the representatives attending the assemblies make any mention of the presence of this literature. Nor is there any reference to a deterioration in religious life, even during the Regency period. The absence of concern can be in part explained by the consuming interests of the bishops to find a solution to the disastrous Jansenist problem, and in part to the secrecy surrounding the spread of irreligious publications. Methods of communication among the free-thinkers was restricted still to club meetings and manuscript writings. Suddenly, in the Assembly of 1748, a severe warning is issued that a poisonous philosophy has been gradually spreading through Paris and the larger cities and towns, drying up the roots of faith and religion. Religion, it is said, has never been more vigorously attacked. Blasphemous writings become more numerous day by day. Unbelievers grow more daring as they attract more and more influential followers.⁷ And where did the poisonous philosophy

⁶ The collection is edited by A. Duranthon, 9 vols., Paris, 1767-1778. The work is particularly valuable for the documents presented along with the summary of the proceedings.

⁷ *Collection*, VIII, cols. 402-403.

come from? Apparently there was no attempt as yet to study its origins, though in an ill-defined way, the bishops thought that English publications, smuggled into France, were somehow responsible.⁸ For the next forty years, in every Assembly, the bishops will take stock of this new threat to Christianity.

What is ill-defined in the 1740s becomes more precise in the 1750s, and a decade later the Assembly is ready to begin an analysis of the new philosophy. In each meeting attention is directed particularly to objectionable books that have recently appeared. In 1755 the list is very small; only a summary of Bayle's writings and two works on biblical history are mentioned.⁹ But ten years later, in 1765, the titles are more famous: the *Encyclopédie*, the first volume of which was published in 1751; Helvétius' *De l'Esprit* (1758); Rousseau's *Emile* and *Contrat Social* (1762); Voltaire's *Dictionnaire philosophique* (1764) and Rousseau's *Lettres de la Montagne* (1764).¹⁰ In the mid-1770s these works are mentioned again and the following are added: Voltaire's *Sermon des Cinquante* (1762) and his *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie* (1770), d'Holbach's *Système de la Nature* (1770), and Raynal's *Histoire des deux Indes* (1772).¹¹ It is revealing that no new publications are singled out for condemnation in the 1780s, thus in a sense confirming the general opinion that almost all the major *philosophe* writings appeared before 1780. It might also be noted in passing how soon after publication the books are censured in the Assembly, indicating that circulation of the books was rapid among a reading public anxious to hear the message of the *philosophes*.

There is no indication in the assembly reports that the listing of the proscribed books is intended to be exhaustive; on the contrary, it is urged in almost every meeting that these have been chosen from a host of publications being sold by Paris book vendors.¹² There is no doubt, however, that the hierarchy is convinced that these are among the most illustrative and significant examples of the new literature. Helvétius' *De l'Esprit*, for example, is singled out in 1760 as a highly dangerous book, fostering such ideas as the denial of the spiritual soul, the questioning of free will, the rejection of the Providence of God. But we are reminded immediately that Helvétius is only one, though he is a leader, of a vast group of *beaux esprits* who are affecting old and young with an anti-religious philosophy of life which they describe in travel literature, in novels and plays, in studies of political systems, in treatises on moral and natural philosophy.¹³ The reference to Helvétius

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ M. Picot, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire ecclésiastique pendant le dix-huitième siècle* (3rd ed., 7 vols., Paris, 1853-1857), III, 298-300.

¹⁰ *Collection*, VIII, cols. 463-466.

¹¹ *Ibid.* VIII, cols. 2232-2233.

¹² Picot, V, 215; and *Collection*, VIII, cols. 1817-1820.

¹³ Picot, III, 385.

was, in fact, rather exceptional since the Assembly of the Clergy made little effort to discuss the doctrines propounded by any particular author. This helps to explain why for instance Voltaire and Rousseau do not figure more prominently in the reports. Apparently the bishops believed that it was the role of their group merely to sketch in a general way the nature of the threat to religion. Another special case was the Baron d'Holbach and his controversial work, *Le système de la nature*, the most explicit defense of materialism yet to appear. The book occasions a memo to the King, a cry of alarm that d'Holbach is an atheist, that his book is sold in Paris, that he is not only an enemy of the Church but also that his doctrine has within it the seeds of sedition which would eventually undermine all authority in the State.¹⁴

All of this literature was available mainly in Paris, though it soon circulated in the provincial cities and towns. Its rapid spread to the provinces was indeed a source of astonishment to the provincial bishops. Complaints from all the dioceses were eventually registered in the meetings in Paris by representatives who were given more complete information by such ardent *philosophe* opponents as Jean Le Franc de Pompignan, archbishop of Vienne, and Christophe de Beaumont, archbishop of Paris. This obviously was no fleeting danger to the Church, and sooner or later the Assembly must set down some directives and clarifications for all the dioceses of the country. With this in mind, the Assembly produced the *Actes du Clergé* in 1765, a document which analyzed the current perils of the Gallican Church. There were dangers within the Church, we are told, stemming from the still unsolved Jansenist problem; there were dangers involved in the uncertainty of the Church's authority, for instance even its power to censure irreligious writings. There was also a danger inherent in the condemnation of so many popular new books. The Church could be accused of being obscurantist and enemy of progress. It must be stated clearly, the documents continues, that the Church has always promoted the sciences and does not now wish to stand in the way of scientific progress. The Church does not intend to condemn its faithful to ignorance and superstition; it is not afraid of the light. What it fears is the new species of free thought which seems to reject all that is sacred in life and attempts to justify irresponsible freedom which in the end is a hindrance to the development of the human mind.¹⁵

The objections raised against the *philosophes* were in the main religious and philosophical. But in the *Actes du Clergé* and in later memoranda in 1770 and 1772 to Louis XV, who had little sympathy with the *philosophes*, the bishops centered upon the political evils that would follow from the acceptance of materialistic philosophy. To add

¹⁴ Picot, IV, 333; and *Collection*, VIII, col. 1820.

¹⁵ *Collection*, VIII, cols. 417-419; and 572-573; Picot, IV, 180-185.

solemnity to their warning, they declare that they now speak not as churchmen but as senior members of the State, passionately devoted to its well-being and to the well-being of the King. They argue that when the Church is attacked, the Monarchy is attacked, and eventually all authority and sovereignty is weakened. If the King wants proof of this thesis, he is told to look to the experiences of the English. Confusion and discord over religion led in time to confusion in political thinking, to be followed by civil war, the execution of the King, and finally by a revolution. The spread of free thought in France, the bishops continue, could bring even more serious dangers, somewhat perhaps in the following sequence: first, it will encourage a love for novelty and an attitude of inconstancy and irresponsibility; then will follow a desire for more sudden and extensive change, and finally the eventual acceptance of anarchy. Already, a deterioration may be detected; free-thought seems already to have influenced those qualities of their national character that have made the French devoted sons of Church and King. Now a new vocabulary, entirely unknown to their predecessors, is becoming fashionable, one which signifies that humble devotion to altar and throne is to be rejected.¹⁶

Appeals to the King, through memoranda, such as the one just described, became part of regular procedure in the Assembly meetings. There is a feeling of frustration among the bishops that seemingly nothing can be done to check the rising tide of irreligion; and they are aware that they share the responsibility with the monarch to take effective measures. Again and again they insist that they are primarily pastors of their flocks who must provide safeguards against error and corruption. They themselves in the Assembly compose directives for the bishops of the country. They frequently urge the hierarchy to expend all efforts in the revitalizing of faith and religious practice. They praise the writings of those who attempt to refute the *philosophes*. They call for the publication of more apologetical and religious works and commission new projects such as the translation of the writings of the early Fathers of the Church.¹⁷

The bishops express concern most frequently, however, over the breakdown of the censorship system which enabled the *philosophes* to publish with relative freedom. At first there is astonishment that the books could appear in France and then alarm that so many of the reading public were interested in buying them. They appeal to the King for more stringent censorship laws and these are granted in the late 1750s, being made even too rigorous. The King replies in 1758 to an Assembly demand by promising that he will stop the importing of unauthorized books from abroad. The same appeal is made in each

¹⁶ *Collection*, VIII, cols. 572-573.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* cols. 606; 1820-1823; 1913.

assembly up to 1788; and the same reply is given in each case by the King.¹⁸

III

The embarrassment of the hierarchy at its inability to control the press and the book trade is reflected in all of the Assembly reports during the last twenty years of its activities. They were aware that the censors themselves were already influenced by the new thought and would not stand in the way of its dissemination. They gradually became convinced, however, that the chief obstacle to the efficient implementation of the laws was the *Parlement* of Paris which claimed to be the sole agency responsible for the regulation of the press. Not that the magistrates were less opposed to the *philosophes* than were the bishops; in fact many of the *parlementaires* were strenuous opponents of free thought. The problem was rather that the magistrates championed the cause of the Jansenists against the bishops who by the 1760s had closed ranks on the dissident group in the Gallican church. If the *parlement* held control of all publications they could prevent all anti-Jansenist tracts and even bishops' pastoral letters from appearing. When the Assembly appealed to the King for sterner legislation, the *parlement* countered that the hierarchy had no right even to raise the question of censorship, for they thus implied that the magistrates were delinquent in their duties. And they further complained that since the Assembly of the Clergy had been originally formed merely to vote the free-gift to the King it was acting beyond its jurisdiction when it discussed the nature of its spiritual and temporal powers, and when it charged that the *parlementaires* protected the Jansenists from ecclesiastical censure and in turn banished bishops and priests who refused to administer sacraments to Jansenists.¹⁹

We can now merely touch upon these disputes between Jansenists and bishops and between the Assembly of the Clergy and the *Parlement*. As we said earlier, the disputes provided a considerable amount of the background for the anti-clerical tone of the French Enlightenment. It is not difficult to trace their influence in Voltaire's *Dictionnaire philosophique*, written in the 1760s when the agitation was most acute. Voltaire found it amusing, a typical incident in the history of the Church, to find good Christians fighting among themselves about Christian doctrines and practices. The Assembly of the Clergy looked at the scene from another point of view, from the point of view of bishops who believed that it was their role to preserve unity within the Gallican Church and to protect the faith and morals of their people. So concerned were they to stop interference from the magistrates that they were slow to see the growing separation between the Church and the intelligentsia and elements of the middle classes. We have seen that the Assembly made war

¹⁸ Picot, III, 385; *Collection*, VIII, 687.

¹⁹ Picot, III, 307-308; *Collection*, VIII, cols., 200-202; 435-441.

on pernicious books, yet in the long run it was much more alarmed at the inability of the hierarchy to preserve the Church's traditional lofty role in the State.

The first indication that the hierarchy's influence was waning occurred in the 1750s when they discovered that the secular authorities would not cooperate with them to destroy Jansenism. The second shock was felt in the 1760s when the secular authorities abolished the Jesuits, despite the urgent pleas of a special meeting of the Assembly of the Clergy to save the Order. The King, once again, was asked to intervene, but he could not afford to antagonize the magistrates who, as Jean Egret has recently pointed out, took the initiative in the suppression of the Jesuits in France. The Assembly was dismayed to see the Jesuits go, but in the end were more appalled at the violent and sudden blow to the autonomy of the hierarchy.²⁰

Not until 1770 and 1772 did the Assembly fully realize the implications of the upheaval in the educational system of France brought on by the removal of the Jesuits from more than one hundred colleges and schools. As complaints from all the ecclesiastical provinces were brought to Paris by the Assembly representatives, gradually a picture emerged of discord and inefficiency in the colleges. Seemingly for the first time did the hierarchy appreciate the fact that they suffered still a third weakening of their influence by the loss of control over the education of the youth of the nation. The education plan of 1763, they argued, was now showing its effects. Once more the Assembly turns to the King to list the defects in the schools, the too frequent experimentation with new curriculum, the inability to find capable staff, the lack of discipline. The solution they suggest is to reduce the power of the *parlements* over education and to reinstate the bishops to their age-old position as directors and inspectors of the schools in their dioceses. The King received their memorandum and assured them that he would give the matter most serious consideration, but eventually it became one more problem left to Louis XV's successor to solve.²¹

As the last Assembly of the Clergy gathered in 1788 the deputies brought with them from the provincial assemblies that elected them many of the same grievances that have been discussed here: the spread of free thought and irreligion, the popularity of the *philosophes*, the deterioration in education, the decline of the bishops' authority. They were all examined again in the session, but with limited attention.²² There was more important business at hand, the voting of emergency

²⁰ Picot, IV, 71-72; 88-90. On the Suppression of the Jesuits see Jean Egret, "Le Procès des Jésuites devant les Parlements de France", *Revue Historique*, 1950, pp. 1-27.

²¹ *Collection*, VIII, cols. 687-690; 2029-2030.

²² See Egret, "La Dernière Assemblée du Clergé de France," pp. 10-12.

funds to Louis XVI and the study of a project to reduce ecclesiastical immunity from taxation, one more sign of the dawn of a new era for the Gallican Church. It was indeed a most complicated task for an old institution to adjust to a new age.²³

²³ The author wishes to thank the Nuffield Foundation for a grant in aid of research.