
H-France Review Vol. 11 (February 2011), No. 60

Jeffrey D. Burson, *The Rise and Fall of Theological Enlightenment: Jean-Martin de Prades and Ideological Polarization in Eighteenth-Century France*. Foreword by Dale Van Kley. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010. xxiv + 494. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$55.00 US (cl). ISBN 978-0-268-02220-4.

Review by Alan Charles Kors, University of Pennsylvania.

Jeffrey Burson's rigorous study of the intellectual, institutional, and, in the end, cultural and political history of "the Prades affair" (1751-1752, with long-lasting effects) is an important contribution to the history of the French Catholic Church, of the Enlightenment of the *philosophes*, and of the ancien régime. In 1751, the Faculty of Theology at the University of Paris unanimously passed the doctoral thesis of the abbé Jean-Martin de Prades, which focused primarily though not exclusively on how and with what evidence one proved the truth of the Christian Revelation. The approval of the thesis occurred at the worst possible moment for Prades (who had contributed articles to Diderot's *Encyclopédie*). It intersected fierce Jesuit-Jansenist rivalries, mounting Jesuit hostility toward Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, tension between the *parlement de Paris* and the university, and a phase of crisis in royal-ecclesiastical relations. Prades's thesis became a pawn in a complex set of struggles, and its initial approval by Prades's examining committee occasioned crises at the Sorbonne (the Faculty of Theology in Paris), throughout the hierarchies of the Church and state, dramatically altering, in Burson's view, the course of Catholic apologetics and of Catholic intellectual relationships to the Enlightenment. Within a short time, the *Encyclopédie* would be (temporarily) suppressed; the Sorbonne, the *parlement de Paris*, and the archbishop of Paris would be anathematizing works at a striking rate; and hostility between *philosophes* and Catholic apologists would be blazing. In Burson's bold thesis, it marked the end of a fruitful Catholic Enlightenment and left the Church to be defended by clerics whom the *philosophes*, ever more radicalized, increasingly marginalized.

Despite a consensus on the importance, diversely conceived, of the Prades affair, historians have not given it careful attention. Few, for example, have read the thesis itself. Burson has read the thesis closely in its original Latin and later French versions, has plumbed the archives of the Sorbonne and of the institutions that acted in this affair, and has taken nothing about it on the word of others. In that alone, he has offered a vital gift to scholars of eighteenth-century France, and his deep scrutiny of the work and of the machinations that ensued in its wake is of itself more than worth his effort and our price of admission.

Burson's analysis of the Prades affair is part of a larger narrative, however, in part because he rightly sees Prades's thesis as the culmination of, not as a rupture with, the apologetics and intellectual developments of a Catholic Enlightenment. He calls that phenomenon a Jesuit synthesis of Locke and Malebranche, which emerged by the early eighteenth century. Further, the rout of this Catholic Enlightenment that followed both the Prades affair and subsequent developments (the expulsion of the Jesuits, the crisis over Damiens's attempt on the king's life, the scandal over Helvétius' *De L'Esprit*, and the growing influence of the Jansenizing *parlements*), eliminated, in his view, the potential French equivalent of those influential Scottish

moderate clerics who coexisted in interesting dialogue with the secularists of the Scottish Enlightenment.

This larger narrative, which is the heart of the book, has much to recommend it. The reality of a Catholic Enlightenment never should have been in doubt, and Burson makes his case compellingly. The vital philosophical work of the Jesuits Claude Buffier, René-Joseph Tournemine, and, in general, of the savants of the Society gathered around the *Journal de Trévoux* attests abundantly to that, as does the important scientific work of Jesuits such as Louis Bertrand Castel, all of whom flourished in the period before Prades. Indeed, as others have seen, Claude Buffier, beloved and influential in the Society of Jesus, was one of the most innovative and creative metaphysical and epistemological philosophers of the early eighteenth century.[1] Further, Burson persuasively demonstrates the high place of this Catholic Enlightenment in Jesuit curriculum, in other important seminaries, and, above all, for purposes of his larger argument, at the University of Paris (pp. 79-135).

It is problematic, however, to term this, as he does repeatedly, “a Jesuit synthesis” of Locke and Malebranche. The characterization of this “synthesis” is ambiguous, moving too often from metaphysics, to epistemology, to debates about the status of mind and soul, to notions of the consequences of the Fall, to issues of grace, to the proper means of defending Christian Revelation. He gives no truly clear and consistent sense of what the Jesuits were synthesizing from Locke’s and Malebranche’s philosophy and apologetics, which varied greatly from those of the Jesuits as one moved from issue to issue on precisely these crucial matters. There were deep tensions and ambivalences toward Locke in the Jesuits at the *Journal de Trévoux*, and much of what drew some of them toward him was merely his agreement with Aristotle’s defense of the priority of sensory experience in the formation of ideas (not Malebranche’s view, to say the very least), and they worried greatly about his possible materialism.[2]

Burson’s sense of the Jesuits and Malebranche, however, creates the greatest problem. For the Jesuits of the early eighteenth century, Malebranche was the most odious incarnation of a Cartesianism they detested in both epistemology and metaphysics. Tournemine and other leading Jesuit theologians denounced Malebranche in the pages of the *Journal de Trévoux* as someone who “annihilates the Divinity.”[3] Almost unanimously, Jesuits saw Malebranche as the ultimate dark consequence of Cartesian philosophy, and they had no difficulty in labeling the Oratorian theologian an inadvertent or, indeed, explicit “atheist.”[4] Actual Malebranchists in the Jesuit order were forced either into disgraceful demotions (Yves-Marie André), flight (François de La Pillionière), or, in the case of the opportunistic Rodolphe Du Tertre, whose later apologetics Burson sees as central to the “Jesuit synthesis,” to denounce Malebranche in a long philosophical work that depicted his former idol’s philosophy as leading directly (though unintentionally) to atheism. Indeed, Jean Hardouin, *the director of Jesuit education in Paris from 1684-1714*, taught his students at the collège de Louis-le-Grand that Malebranche was an intentional and deceitful atheist and materialist, views available in the widely circulated papers he kept of his courses, which were published in his posthumous *Opera varia* in 1733.[5] Burson would be much closer to the historical truth if he addressed these Jesuit divisions, incompatible tendencies, and real differences directly. The divisions in the intellectual Catholic world often overflow Burson’s categories.

The “Jesuit synthesis” is the first part of Burson’s narrative, and the use of Prades and other contingencies to derail it the second. The consequences of the Church’s own defeat of the Catholic Enlightenment form the third historically important theme. There are, I fear, two deep problems here. First, it is simply unclear that the 1750s in general, and the Prades affair in particular, occasioned a split more profound than would have occurred regardless from the deep divisions between the Catholic and secular Enlightenments. Second, it is by no means clear that defenders of the Church against the *philosophes*, including the most “radical” of *philosophes*, abandoned an apologetics based on sensory evidence and reason.

It did not require a clash between a radicalized or materialist Enlightenment, on the one hand, and apologists who abandoned “the Jesuit synthesis,” on the other, to make the conflict between *philosophes* and Church increasingly bitter as the century progressed. Deism itself, which could be extremely antimaterialist, sufficed to make peace impossible. If Christianity, as the deists believed, were not true, if Christ were not the messiah, and if the Church were not the guardian of God’s truth and grace and the means by which to avoid damnation and achieve salvation, then the entire edifice of ecclesiastical authority should crumble. If the deists were correct, then cathedrals, benefices, faculties of theology, a First Estate, preaching, sacraments, monasteries, in short, the French Catholic Church were part of an absurd delusion. If the deists were correct, Christianity was an error and tragedy beyond measure. As the secular Enlightenment’s deism won the attention of more and more of the reading public, the gauntlet was thrown down as much to the most “modernizing” Jesuits as to the most uncompromising Jansenists of the *Nouvelles Ecclésiastiques*. Deism created an unbridgeable chasm between *philosophes* and Catholic thinkers. The recognition of that chasm did not require a confrontation between anti-modernizers in the Church and materialists such as La Mettrie, Holbach, or Diderot. Further, the issue of civil toleration alone sufficed. *La France toute Catholique* and the secular Enlightenment’s call for civil tolerance and indifference to religious differences were mutually incompatible, and only one side ultimately could win. That defining struggle was in place by mid-century. With or without the Prades affair, it would have been actualized in the second half of the French eighteenth century.

The Prades affair might well be seen as one of the recurring crises of the ancien régime, temporarily making it difficult for certain voices to be heard, but not disrupting categorically or long-term the continuities of the century. Thus, as the century progressed, whatever the tone of the denunciations of the *philosophes* by the *parlements*, the archbishop of Paris, and the Sorbonne, the Assemblée du Clergé chose as its official defender of the faith Nicolas-Sylvestre Bergier, who had studied with the Jesuits and who spoke with a voice wholly consonant with what Burson has identified as the Catholic Enlightenment. Bergier was a man who had been given the presidency of the collège de Besançon after the expulsion of the Jesuits, and he was favored by the archbishop of Paris. He was chosen not only to confront Rousseau’s deism, but to confront, more dramatically, Holbach’s atheism in the *Système de la nature* (1770). His *Le déisme réfuté par lui-même* and his *Examen du matérialisme* spoke the same epistemological language as the *philosophes*.

Burson finds this central fact anomalous (pp. 302-4), but the choice of Bergier was not some casual decision. As Burson himself notes, Bergier was made rich and famous by the Church precisely to undertake these tasks. What was Bergier’s language? Against the atheists themselves, he explicitly defined the terms of the debate: the atheist’s fatal error was to assume that matter was active and that it had within itself the cause of its own spontaneous motion. This was an error “of Physics,” because it was demonstrated by physical science that matter was inert. The issue was not one of faith, but of empirical evidence: “As soon as it is evidently proven that motion is not essential to matter, that the latter is purely passive by its nature..., we are forced to believe that there is in the universe a substance of a different nature, an active being to which movement must be attributed as it is the first cause, a Motor that is not itself matter.” The crucial Catholic-atheist division, in short, was resolvable in terms of whose perspective made the most sense of observed phenomena. If the materialist perspectives, Bergier concluded, were “less unclear than our own,” and presented “fewer difficulties,” then “we must not hesitate to prefer it.”^[6] The Catholic Enlightenment, to say the least, was alive, well, and officially favored in 1771.

Nor was Bergier alone. In 1775, the Benedictine Louis-Mayeul Chaudon asserted that it was impossible to explain “order, organization, and thought...without a God.” The best antidote to materialistic atheism, the

Benedictine averred, was knowledge of matter and its motions: “The study of physics is quite properly the cure of the two extremes, Atheism and Superstition....It proves that there is an intelligent first cause, and it makes known the particular mechanical causes of this and that effect. Physics augments admiration and diminishes astonishment.”[7] Chaudon referred his readers to Bergier’s work, and to that of Jean de Castillon, who had written that the study of matter and motion led by inductive logic to recognition of God. Atheists followed their emotions, but true religion “teaches...that man must repress the movements of his heart when they are not in accord with the precepts of reason.”[8] Again, Burson needs more nuance and recognition of intellectual pluralism in his pre-Prades and post-Prades distinction.

None of this, however, diminishes the extraordinary value of *The Rise and Fall of Theological Enlightenment* either as an account of the period from 1700 to 1750 or as a truly singular achievement in bringing the Prades affair, intellectually and institutionally, in its precise details, into the light of historical understanding. The eighteenth-century Catholic and secular worlds moved, with many an ebb and flow, as waves upon a deeper tidal current of the unfolding of the new philosophy of the seventeenth century. They both reflected the influence of Descartes, Locke, Newton, the new sciences, and a diversity of Cartesians. They both participated in the same learned societies and academies, read the same learned journals, and debated internally and externally about how to reconcile belief, method, the limits of knowledge, and the sources of ideas. Indeed, virtually every thinker of the French Enlightenment was formed in the schools, universities, debates, and intellectual currents of Catholic France. Burson’s compelling scrutiny of those institutions and intellectual currents, and the light he sheds on their intersection with the tensions and divisions of the Church and the ancien régime, make this a work of essential value.

NOTES

[1] See, in particular, Marcel Grandière, *L’idéal pédagogique en France au dix-huitième siècle* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation [Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century], 1998; chapter four of Ross Hutchison, *Locke in France 1688-1734* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation [Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century], 1991); Louise Marcil-Lacoste, *Claude Buffier and Thomas Reid: Two Common-Sense Philosophers* (Kingston and Montréal, Canada, 1982); Sheila Mason, “Buffier and the Impossibility of Science,” in A. Mason et al., eds., *Voltaire and His World: Studies Presented to W.H. Barber* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 201-24; and Kathleen Wilkins, *A Study of the Works of Claude Buffier* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation [Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century], 1969).

[2] See Burson’s own excellent article on the complexity of Jesuit appropriation and criticism of Locke: Jeffrey D. Burson, “Abdication of legitimate heirs: the use and abuse of Locke in the Jesuit “Journal de Trévoux” and the origins of Counter-Enlightenment, 1737-1767,” in *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2005), pp. 297-325. (Sometimes publications in the series Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century are a single volume by a single author; sometimes, they are collections of articles.)

[3] *Journal de Trévoux*, juillet 1708, pp. 1134-43; see also *ibid.* décembre 1798, pp. 1985-2004.

[4] Alan Charles Kors, *Atheism in France, 1650-1729: The Orthodox Sources of Disbelief* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 357-79 (“Malebranche; The Firestorm; The Toll”).

[5] *Ibid.*, pp. 277-79, 366-69.

[6] Nicolas-Sylvestre Bergier, *Examen du matérialisme, ou Réfutation du Système de la nature* 2 vols. (Paris, 1771), I, pp. 127-41, 154-5, 159-63; II, p.135.

[7] Louis-Mayeul Chaudon, OSB, *Anti-Dictionnaire philosophique* 2 vols. (Paris, 1775), I, pp. 66-70.

[8] Jean de Castillon, *Observations sur le livre intitulé Système de la nature* (Berlin, 1771), pp.70-2, 500-1, 529-36,

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Alan Charles Kors
University of Pennsylvania
akors@sas.upenn.edu

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ISSN 1553-9172

