

THE PROBLEM OF LE COURAGER, 1671-1776

A Study in Gallicanism and Reunion

PIERRE François Le Courager, Augustinian Canon and Librarian of Ste. G enevi e, was the forerunner of many Frenchmen of distinction who have shown a kindly interest in the Anglican position and who have regarded 'reunion' as a not impossible dream. The P ere Le Courager was a product of the Gallicanism of his day, the result of the long and uncertain contest between the Holy Father and the Kings of France, in which success seemed to incline first to one side and then to the other; but the odd trick, as Maitland would have said, fell to the Most Christian King. Louis XIV at his death left the crown virtually supreme in the Church and State. Apart from his Gallicanism, it is improbable that the Canon would ever have manifested much interest in the Anglican body.

Le Courager reproduced all the arguments of the Caroline Divines in favour of validity and of himself he added nothing fresh to the dispute. In fact, like all Frenchmen who have taken up 'reunion,' he knew little or nothing of England and her peculiarities. When he came here to reside and was given the Oxford D.D., a most unprecedented step, and one which aroused the wrath of at least one good Protestant, he no doubt learned more, but he was never really familiar with the psychology of the English.

The 'Validit  des Ordinations des Anglois,' published at Brussels but purporting to emanate from Paris, soon caused a mild excitement similar to that with which we at intervals are familiar. It was a somewhat disingenuous thing to have done, and a cer-

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tain lack of frankness has henceforth dogged the steps of all who dabble in ‘reunion.’

Many protests arose in answer and amongst them *une lettre d'un théologien* (Abbé Gervais), in which he said that were not the authorship a certainty he would have supposed that the writer held some post at Geneva and not at the Abbey of Ste. Gèneviève. Later on, the Archbishop of Paris received a letter from Le Courager in which the latter explained that he was in no way in revolt against his Archbishop and the Church, but was simply criticising, as he was entitled by the *Organic Laws*, some questionable Roman tenets and practices.¹ The Archbishop found no fault in Le Courager except the surreptitious printing. As a Religious he was bound to get an *imprimatur* and

¹He finds a sensible consolation in H.E.'s *Instruction*. *Car je pense comme j'ai toujours pensé sur les matières qui font l'objet de votre Instruction* (i.e. questions), *et si je ne suis point dans l'erreur comme le croit V.E. c'est que je n'y ai jamais été.* The points raised at Paris in an assembly of bishops were the Sacrifice of the Mass; the Priesthood; the Form and Character of the Sacraments; Ceremonies and Authority of the Church and the Primacy of the Pope. Perhaps Le Courager's reply as to the Pope is the most interesting, for to us it seems the place where the Père Le Courager was most inclined to get outside the line, but then and until 1870 it was not so. *Je la reconnois au sens de l'Eglise Gallicane et telle que la demandoit feu Mgr. Bossuet dans son exposition et je condamne ceux qui la nient en ce sens.* It must be remembered that the French hierarchy in rejecting any *jus divinum* went further than most Catholic countries would officially have done. He further says some hard words about the schoolmen in connection with the Sacraments: *Je ne me suis jamais écarté de la doctrine commune de l'Eglise*, but they are rash who pronounce on matters which they do not know, could not know, and which are of small profit to determine. If that is heresy the learned R. P. Morin is in the same condemnation: *il a taxé plus sévèrement que moy la témérité des Scholastiques de prononcer décisivement sur des choses desquelles ils étoient parfaitement ignorans.* The Schoolmen had few friends in the France of that date. (Pamph. Godw. 22. Bodleian).

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as a French subject the Royal permit to print. M. de Paris was a man of rank, culture and learning (the French hierarchy of those days has never been equalled in any country), and possessed of nearly every virtue; but he had a habit of getting into positions which proved to be untenable and from which he was forced to retreat with a corresponding loss of prestige. De Noailles, like many good and placable, though obstinate men, began by pleasing many, hoped to please all, and ended by displeasing most.

At this point, 1725, the Père Le Quien O.P.² appeared on the scene and wrote a book in two small volumes, 'Nullité des Ordinations des Anglois' and dedicated it to de Noailles. He was apologetic. He wished to do nothing to make 'reunion' harder and was ready to smooth over difficulties—*Je n'attaque pas l'épiscopat d'un grand royaume malheureusement séparé de l'église pour grossir les obstacles à sa réunion, mais pour conserver le dépôt de la foi voilé par les premiers Reformateurs de cette nation.* At the same time he recalled a few facts to the notice of His Eminence.

More than one hundred years earlier there was a disputation between Antony Champney, doctor of the Sorbonne, and F. Masson, Archdeacon of Norfolk, on this matter, and the disputants accepted the Bishop of Paris as arbitrator. Henri de Goudy decided on the evidence that the pretended Church of England was merely a sect amongst others. Furthermore, de Harlay, a learned man and Archbishop of Paris, only fifty years ago, disliked the word *église* for the Anglican body: *d'autant que n'ayant ni évêques ni prêtres véritables elle ne pouvoit former ni composer une église.* Le Quien recalled the fact that it was during

²About the same time another work on the facts of the case had been printed, less restrained than Le Quien's, by the R. P. Hardouin, S.J.

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the Champney-Masson disputation when the register of Lambeth with Parker's consecration first saw the light of day. The French Dominican in common with the earlier English Catholics regarded it as a forgery. It is indeed strange that the register was never mentioned until Anglicans began to bother about continuity in an ecclesiastical, apart from a legal, sense early in the reign of James I.

In addition, the Abbé Le Grand, when writing to refute a proposition of Burnet, asked Bossuet whether or no he should give his opponent the title of Bishop of Salisbury. M. de Meaux replied *qu' il devoit bien se garder de le faire parceque nous ne connoissons pas cet episcopat-là*. Earlier Bossuet had said that he decided nothing therein—*il semble qu' ils ayent raison; cela depend des faits*. Further facts subsequently came to the notice of the Eagle.

Le Courager never left the Church formally nor attached himself to any other body and he never ceased to call himself a Regular Canon of Ste. Gèneviève. At times he would attend Anglican sung services, which then clearly excluded the Communion. No one was clear as to his real beliefs, for French-like he was very secretive. He was certainly no Protestant and hardly a definite Catholic: of course, by to-day's standard he would not be regarded as a Catholic at all, but we are talking of the early XVIII century. There is a certain ingrained scepticism in his mind. Not the materialistic scepticism of modern science, but the intellectual scepticism of a Pascal, Descartes or Pope. Le Courager was always down on those of either side who wrangled over matters incapable of proof or disproof and without any very clear connection with the Christian life. Thus, many doctrines Le Courager accepted for himself because they were not only reasonable in themselves but all the probabilities

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of history and philosophy were in their favour; but not to make them into a dogma binding on all because of a proof of such a degree of certainty they were incapable. What he regarded as proof admits of a great doubt.³ He accepted the Scriptures only because the Church guaranteed them, a wide gap here between Protestantism and Le Courager. A few more characteristic examples of his mind may be given. Nothing, he wrote, is more certain from Revealed Truth and more conformable to reason than the immortality of the soul and a future life and nothing is more frivolous than the disputes which rage over the mode of that life, *i.e.* the nature of the pains of Purgatory, the nature of the supreme happiness of Heaven, and the nature of the sufferings of Hell. In fact on these points nothing has been revealed or defined. He is well inside the line of the Council of Trent. No one supposes that a person can be saved without good works, but such are admittedly only of merit supernaturally when performed in a state of grace: the rest is mere warfare of words. Few Protestants of that time would, however, have assented to that proposition. Finally, for all good he gives glory to God and for moral evil we have only to regard the free will of man. Strangely enough, Le Courager is much more exercised over the presence of physical evil, which is a much less grievous thing than moral evil, and when one accepts the explanation of the greater that of the lesser follows.

³Reason played a very large part amongst the French Churchmen when arguing about the Faith. See in Bossuet's 'Connaissance de Dieu et de soi-même.' Again, so dissimilar a person as Fénelon, who cannot be accused, as perhaps might Bossuet and others, of being somewhat unspiritual and inclined to Cartesianism, wrote: Assent is given to a truth when it is clear to a person's reason. There can be no reason above that reason to contradict it. That 'clarity,' not quite the same as Descartes', is not far removed from Newman's 'illative sense.'

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All this and much more can be gathered from Le Courager’s ‘ *Declaration de mes derniers sentiments sur les différens dogmes de la religion.*’⁴ The MS. of the date of 1767 was left, as it seems, to Princess Amelia, who gave it, apparently, to Dr. Bell, a Canon of Westminster, by whom it was published in 1787, eleven years after Le Courager’s death. Some doubt has been made over its authenticity and contröversialists then and always have been singularly unscrupulous; but if it were a question of a fake, the last sentiments would have been of a definitely Protestant hue. Dr. Bell professes that the declaration makes the late ecclesiastic’s views quite clear. It does not. He is severe on the rejection of prayers to the saints and veneration of relics, a custom as old as the Church itself. In the matter of vows of celibacy, *les Protestants se sont certainement éloignés de l’esprit de l’antiquité* and with reference to the common argument, common enough to-day as then, that by a vow of celibacy you abandon your *natural* freedom, Le Courager replies with some malice that a person’s *natural* freedom is no more abandoned by such a vow than by the marriage vow. Apparently he means that apart from the Church’s teaching there is nothing in the nature of things to limit a man to one woman. The Librarian is discussing a celibate clergy and is not thinking directly of religious women. Such vows, he continues, are most pious and estimable, for they remove an infinity of temptations to one who has a vocation to the priesthood. Nevertheless they ought to be taken with full realisation of their import and not at an unduly young age. Here Le Courager is at one with Erasmus; but the scandal of premature vows in the XVIII century was nothing like what it had been before the Council of Trent.

⁴ Pamph. Godw. 171. Bodleian.

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His views on persecution are good and very modern. There are but two ways of bringing men to the truth, *la persuasion ou la violence; mais pour ce qui regarde la voie de l' autorité j'ai assez marqué que j'en pense en parlant dessus de l' autorité de l'écriture et de celle de l'église.* His views would not be precisely those of Acton. He objects mainly on the ground that it brings no enlightenment; for a person can be forced to admit anything whether true or false and often ends in only making the persecuted libertines or hypocrites. This is not a universally true statement, but Le Courager had, I expect, the Huguenot problem in mind. *Une foi aveugle ne peut justifier* (he has no use for *la foi de charbonnier*) *personne et la violence ne peut procurer une éclairée. Il ne reste d' autre voie raisonnable que la persuasion qui opère de différentes manières selon la capacité des hommes à qui la doctrine du salut se propose, en convaincant les hommes capables de raisonner par des argumens évidens ou du moins très probables.* Always ready to qualify his statements, he goes on to explain that there are historical reasons for force, chiefly on the part of the Christian Emperors. At the back of his mind there is ever the thought that the truths of religion are intellectual, capable of proof in many cases and in others highly probable, and that any doctrine, if there be one, which cannot fall under those categories is not worth enforcing. Le Courager has something of Pascal's mind, not indeed his great genius, in his reliance on logic and probability; but the Port Royalistes were not wholly averse from persecution.

A far more hostile conclusion with regard to Le Courager's orthodoxy given by Colbert de Croissy, bishop of Montpellier, in a letter to the bishop of

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Auxerre,⁵ 1736, in connection with his translation of the Servite Paolo Sarpis’ ‘ History of the Council of Trent.’ *Je lis actuellement un livre dont les principes sur l’autorité de l’église sont affreux. Je vais continuer la lecture du R. P. Le C, et je suis bien résolu de censurer un livre si pernicieux. Je dois ce secours à l’église et en particulier aux V. Cs. de mon diocèse sur lesquels les discours artificieux d’ un homme qui a fait naufrage dans la foi pourroient faire impression.* M. de Montpellier had no doubt as to the definite heresy of Le Courager and such would be the opinion of anyone who has read that book. *Artificieux*, full of subtleties, is the *mot juste* for most of Le Courager’s writings, and the Bishop of Montpellier, a diocese in which the *Nouveaux Convertis* were in very large numbers, was afraid of the effect of this book. He was more able to realise the danger than the Archbishop of Paris, who had few, very few, ex-Protestants in his charge and those he addressed previously, 1699, as *Nouveaux Réunis*. This was a very unusual phrase; for *réunion* in XVII century French did mean what our Anglican friends call ‘ re-union,’ and had not yet the modern sense of any friendly meeting without any idea of reuniting what had been separated.

In spite of a growing hostility Le Courager was left in peace, whether from the fact that from the age of fifty he lived chiefly in England, or because de Noailles, who alone had the right to proceed against him, was entirely occupied in the *affaire* ‘ Unigenitus ’ which caused a storm on a scale unprecedented even for the stormy sea of French ecclesiastical policy. Clearly Le Courager was a type of lettered man not really learned who would not have been possible ex-

⁵ 3 §. 515. French Pamph. Bodleian.

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cept in the heyday of Gallicanism,⁶ and strange as it may seem now there is no doubt but that people did slip from Gallicanism to Anglicanism and vice versa and some were not wholly clear as to where they stood. There is not so much exaggeration in *John Inglesant*, and Mr. Belloc in his highly interesting *James II* shows how very unstable were matters of religion at the end of the century. The facts of history cannot be ignored, and just as the Anglican theory of continuity can be disproved on purely historical grounds, so it is a fact that a Frenchman of Le Courager's time was something very unlike a modern English Catholic. More, to-day he is the heir of different traditions and lives in a less rarified air. Father Geddes, S.J., said quite recently that a form of Gallicanism is ingrained in the French character. They are a very conservative race, and the souvenir of the glories of the country when the Church and Monarchy were intimately associated, as they were for over eight hundred years, has not been obliterated by the vicissitudes of Revolution, Empire, and fresh Revolutions.

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⁶ To placate the numerous Huguenots and render their conversion more easy, Gallicanism was stressed further than it otherwise would have been and this in turn reacted on Anglicanism. The natural antipathy of Frenchmen to anything Italian must not be overlooked. One *président* of the *parlement* of Paris agreed that a Huguenot could not find a 'sensible religion' south of the Alps, but thought that if he stuck to Bossuet and the *Gallican Liberties* all would be plain and reasonable. Viscount St. Cyres is good on this in 'François de Fénelon' and Vol. III C.M.H.