

Article

From Port-Royal to the “Philosophical Society”: Revisiting the Religious Origins of the French Revolution

Benoît Vermander 

School of Philosophy, Fudan University, Shanghai 200433, China; mdwei@fudan.edu.cn

Abstract

From an early stage of research on the subject, the question of the religious origins of the French Revolution has been focused on the influence exerted by Jansenism on the transformation that political doctrines, social practices, and popular emotions underwent, particularly between 1710 and 1770. This influence is even said to have extended till the time of the adoption of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy (1790), although this timeframe remains greatly controverted. Within this explanatory outline, one of the points still to be clarified is that of continuity between 18th-century Jansenism and that of the preceding century, a question which in turn relates to the nature and channels of the movement's impact in pre-revolutionary France. After reviewing the theoretical and methodological issues related to the question addressed here, this contribution attempts to reinterpret the role played by the Port-Royal circle, which, it suggests, was a matrix of the type of sociability manifested much later in the “philosophical society” whose importance was emphasized by Augustin Cochin and then François Furet. The demonstration is based on a threefold analysis: that of the epistemic changes that took shape around Port-Royal; that of the discursive positioning operated by this circle; and that of the type of sociability that its thought and practices helped to establish.

Keywords: Jacobinism; Jansenism; French Revolution; Pascal (Blaise); Port-Royal; Protestantism

1. Introduction

In *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, Alexis de Tocqueville ([1856] 1998) attempted to account for two contradictory dimensions of the French Revolution: on the one hand, it was the result of a long-term process of centralization; on the other hand, it was triggered by a series of short-term, brutal and unexpected events. Tocqueville partly bridges the gap by stressing the triumph of abstract reasoning over experience and customs, which resulted from the fact that men of letters had been cut from the exercise of political and administrative power. By doing so, Tocqueville did not exactly provide his readers with an account of the “origins” of the French Revolution. In fact, the word “origins” needs to be put into brackets for the following reasons: (1) its hermeneutical status is ill defined (to what extent does the notion of “cause” apply to historical events?); (2) Michel Foucault and others have severely criticized the teleological reading of history that the concept of origins may bring with it (see Chartier 1991, pp. 4–7). However, its use remains warranted if we simply refer to the process of change that fostered the surge of a landmark event. I give to the word “origins” the large, evocative meaning it generally receives in ordinary parlance, even if I will use the word “genealogy” in some sections of this article when the latter expression seems more appropriate.



Academic Editor: Glenn Morrison

Received: 29 January 2026

Revised: 13 February 2026

Accepted: 14 February 2026

Published: 17 February 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the author.

Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland.

This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the [Creative Commons Attribution \(CC BY\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) license.

Since Tocqueville's seminal work, the study of the way the French Revolution originated and unfolded has constituted a central locus for historical sociology. The radical and multidimensional nature of this historical sequence makes it a standard for examining other junctures (the Russian and Chinese revolutions for instance). A comparative analysis of such disjunctive events raises fundamental theoretical questions, one of which can be formulated as follows: how can we understand and represent the interplay of economic, political, and mental factors as well as their eventual integration into a unifying dynamic when dealing with the emergence of large-scale sociopolitical ruptures of momentous consequences? (Notable works on the French Revolution approached in its globality: [Campbell 2006](#); [Furet 1981](#); [Skocpol 1979](#). Studies focusing on the intellectual, cultural and religious aspects of the phenomenon are listed throughout the course of this article).

The "mental" causes I have just alluded to can be understood as "intellectual" and/or "cultural," that is, as referring to *thought content* (changes in a system of beliefs and convictions resulting in political upheaval) and/or *everyday practices* (here, the focus is on the challenges brought to the social order by emerging codes of behavior). It is within this broad field of research that the question of the "religious origins" of the French Revolution arises. The first part of this contribution will clarify the issues associated with emphasizing the "intellectual," "cultural," and/or "religious" nature of the mental processes that led to the outbreak of the Revolution.

Based on these preliminary clarifications, the second part will examine some research works that have identified the Jansenist movement and its evolution over two centuries as one of the triggering factors of revolutionary ideology. I will highlight both the strengths and limitations of the emphasis put on the form of "protest Catholicism" that this movement conveyed. Inspired by this critical examination, the two following sections will develop an approach that focuses far less on Jansenist ideology (or on its links with Parlements and lawyers, often emphasized—see [Goldmann 1959](#); [A. Adam 1968](#); [Taveneaux 1965](#); [Baker 1982](#); [Van Kley 1984, 1996](#); [Maire 1998](#)) than on the role played by a model of sociability and by its archetypal expression: I will first highlight the nature of the innovations that Port-Royal (the emblematic site of French Jansenism) brought about, and I will emphasize the strength with which they captured public imagination over a long period. I will then argue that Port-Royal provided the matrix of republican sociability, as Jacobinism codified it later. Put differently, one is entitled to locate the cultural origins—distant and yet direct—of the French Revolution within a form of socialization shaped by the setting of the theological and philosophical debates that developed throughout the 17th century.

2. The Intellectual, Religious, and/or Cultural Origins of the French Revolution

2.1. Reading Practices, Channels of Debates, and the Civilizing Process

For a long time, the intellectual sedimentation that prepared the French Revolution was attributed to a small number of celebrated works and authors (Voltaire, Rousseau, d'Alembert) that would have decisively influenced the public mind. [Daniel Mornet \(\[1933\] 1967\)](#) contributed to change the perspective through an inventory of private libraries which showed that several of these classics were read only sparsely at the time, whereas a mass of now forgotten essays and pamphlets were filling up private bookshelves. Even if the methodology used by Mornet was criticized ([Darnton 1991](#)), the statistical and practical importance of this quasi-anonymous literature was confirmed by further research ([Darnton 1991](#); [Starling 2022](#)). The question of the intellectual origins of the Revolution could not be separated from an investigation into reading practices, and the way ideas were circulated, debated and appropriated. Furthermore, the focus on cultural practices led to challenge the thesis that ideas per se were the "cause" of revolutionary upheavals. The latter may have rather been prepared by the progressive creation of a public sphere

that cafés, academies and newspapers, among other institutions, were framing (Habermas 1989). Or else, cultural practices coalesced into a form of sociability that was privileging egalitarianism, consensus-building and abstract reasoning (Furet 1981, furthering Cochin [1921] 1979). As we will see, this contribution follows this second direction of analysis while going back further in the genealogy through which the formation of this specific form of sociability originated.

The analysis of the genealogical process that led to the French Revolution also pays close attention to the temporary breakdown (and yet ultimate completion once the upheavals became history) of the “civilizing process” occurring in post-medieval Europe (Elias [1939] 1982); local communities resisted for long the state monopoly on violence, a monopoly strongly challenged by revolutionary crowds before the outcome of the Revolution confirmed it (Chartier 1991, pp. 141–54, 193–96). As a matter of fact, analyzing the violent upheavals of the Revolution as a form of reaction against the “civilizing” of conducts enforced by the state apparatus contributes to draw our attention towards their religious undertones: as we will see below with the case of the *Convulsionnaires of Saint-Médard*, 18th century popular movements that were marked by messianic discourse or arising from religious controversies were unveiling a collective unconscious loaded with aspirations towards a form of symbolic liberation achieved through extremes in speech and deeds. In other words, assessing the quasi-religious nature of revolutionary events leads one to consider anew their religious prefiguration.

2.2. Religion and Protest

When studying the “religious origins” of the Revolution, the line of analysis suggested immediately above does not immediately come to mind. For a long time, the link between “religion” and “Revolution” has been equated with the trend towards dechristianization that France underwent throughout the 18th century. (Note that this question is to be clearly distinguished from the one of the dechristianization movement engineered by the Revolution itself. In this research area, one can still refer with profit to the detailed bibliographical survey by Plongeron (1968)). This trend is well documented, supported as it is by numerous regional surveys (Vovelle 1973; Collectif 1986; Dinot 1991). Still, dechristianization does not necessarily entail a shift towards a revolutionary mindset. It may contribute (and has effectively contributed) to the weakening of the aura and authority of the Crown without prejudicing how the political consequences of the new ethos will be negotiated.

A more fruitful line of research starts from the following observation: challenges to the royal authority were often brought by controversies that were of an explicitly religious nature. In this regard, the history of French religiosity and religious institutions is an integral part of this nation’s global history. “That the Revolution owed nothing to Catholicism is as plausible as that it owed nothing to France.” (Van Kley 1996, p. 3). From very early on (see the short exposition in Gauchet 1990), the attention of observers has turned towards one religious current: Jansenism is said to have influenced, directly and indirectly, the march towards the revolutionary upheaval. As is well known, in its origins Jansenism is a theological current marked by a demanding and pessimistic interpretation of the thought of Saint Augustine. The thought of Cornelius Jansenius (1585–1638) himself is not easy to summarize and, till today, remains elusive. The intricacy of the book of his life, the *Augustinus* (published posthumously in 1640), partly explains for the controversies that evolved around whether the propositions that were condemned in the papal bull *Cum Occasione* (1653) were or not to be found in the book. Jacques Le Brun (2021) has drawn attention to the following: through his portrayal of fallen nature as well as through that of the state of grace of Jesus Christ, Jansenius, unveils a play of forces, weights, entanglements,

and fluid currents at work in the exercise of human will and he makes this play of forces analogous to those of water and air, describing one and the other as being “imperceptible.” This anthropology, focused on “spirits” who enter the innermost of the subject, is closer to the one found in the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola than to the view of human nature that prevails in the 17th century, that of a moral subject who, within the four walls of his inner self, arbitrates between reason and passions. (On the extent of the shifts affecting spirituality and anthropology that occurred around the first half of the 17th century, see [Salin 2021](#)).

This characterization of Jansenism as a theological current does not suffice to understand the nature and impact of the movement. Some aspects of its historical expressions and alterations will be recalled in what follows. [Van Kley \(1996\)](#) has approached French Jansenism as having substituted for the role played by Protestantism in other countries: a modernizing factor, popularizing the notions of religious and political liberty: “In playing this role, Jansenism, while remaining discernibly Catholic, transmitted a part of the Protestant monarchomach heritage to the eighteenth century as well as becoming a little more Protestant itself.” ([Van Kley 1996](#), p. 373). Active around the end of the 16th century, the Monarchomachs (among them, Théodore de Bèze and Simon Goulart) were French Huguenots who opposed monarchy and sometimes justified tyrannicide while defending a form of popular sovereignty. They influenced latter-day political theorists (see [Mellet 2006](#)).

This line of reasoning was anticipated by Louis Blanc (1811–1882), the Socialist historian and politician, who in his *History of the French Revolution*, wrote the following:

Jansenism, therefore, was merely a bastardized form of Protestantism, a kind of compromise between the principle of individualism and the principle of authority. But this is precisely where its importance shines through in history. Thanks to its mixed nature, Jansenism suited the upper middle class, that parliamentary bourgeoisie which, positioned between the monarchy and the people, wanted neither monarchical absolutism nor popular equality. Thus, the sect recruited primarily from among lawyers in Parliament, the sons of accountants, and other legal professionals. ([Blanc 1869](#), p. 206)

Even if one does not endorse the severe criticisms addressed by [Catherine Maire \(2004\)](#) to Van Kley (see an account of the debate in [Kselman 2006](#)), there are indeed limits to Van Kley’s approach. Firstly, it disconnects the original teachings of Jansenism from its political effect, which risks making the analysis of its impact merely functionalist. Secondly, as noted by Mazauric, “without the retrospective light shed by the Revolution in the years 1789–1791, could we make sense of the developments and conflicts that have marked the Church and the world of the faithful since 1560? In other words, doesn’t Dale Van Kley’s teleological approach [...] establish a kind of finalism that is essentially ahistorical?” ([Mazauric 2003](#), p. 189). Thirdly, several objections arising from historical data can be raised: (a) Under the term “Jansenism” are conflated different historical stages and strata of actors. (b) Contrary to Van Kley, several authors concur in discerning a waning of the Jansenist impact on public opinion around 1760–1770: “Jansenism died along with the monarchy of the double victory to which it had so long contributed: the victory of state over church and the victory of liberties in the nation.” ([Maire 1991](#), p. 1200); this waning of influence may have been caused by the expulsion of the Jesuits ([Maire 1991, 1998](#)), by the growing importance taken by fiscal and economic debates ([Kwass 2000](#), pp. 168–72), or by the weakening of their social base ([Lyon-Caen 2010](#), pp. 508–9). (c) The thesis overlooks the strong oppositions between Jansenism and Calvinism on miracles, the Eucharist, and on crucial ecclesiological tenets. (d) It is also at pains to provide an explanation for the divisions of the “Jansenist

party” once the Revolution was triggered, notably during the debates around the Civil Constitution of the Clergy.

What remains true is that political and ecclesial vicissitudes combined led to the creation of a form of “Protest Catholicism.” The sequence of events that starts with the promulgation of the *Unigenitus* Bull by Pope Clement XI in 1713 shows remarkably well how the form of “Protest Catholicism” fostered by Jansenism undermined the royal authority. The apostolic constitution *Unigenitus* directed against the Jansenist and Richerist propositions penned by Pasquier Quesnel (1634–1719) (Edmond Richer [1560–1631] went beyond Gallicanism, devising an ecclesiology according to which all those who hold a share of ecclesiastical power are ultimately submitted to a synodal authority—the pope to the bishops, the bishops to the curates, the curates to their parish assembly (see [Denis 2019](#)). The reception of the apostolic constitution met with the fierce resistance of many prelates, priests and laymen (the party of the *Appellants*). The debates surrounding the Bull during the extraordinary assembly held by French bishops in 1713–1714 practically signaled the death of royal Gallicanism in the fashion in which Absolutism had enshrined it ([Andurand 2017](#), pp. 57ff). Gallicanism, which in Bossuet’s time rested on the alliance between the king and the bishops against Roman encroachments, gradually became based on a desire for broader deliberation; in fact, calls for a Council were a constant refrain among those opposed to the Bull. At the same time, the bishops had to contend with a growing number of actors: their opposition to the Bull gradually weakened and then disappeared at the same time as the struggle was taken up by the lower clergy, lawyers, and many ordinary people, who expressed their views with far more fervor than the prelates. From 1727 till approximately 1732, the *Convulsionnaires of Saint-Médard*, rallying around the tomb of a venerated Jansenist deacon, testified to a mixture of religious fervor, political rancor and (borderline) collective exaltation that was anticipating the convulsions of the Revolution ([Maire 2005](#); [Strayer 2008](#)): “police observers [...] estimated Jansenist effectives at three-fourths of the population of some of the same Parisian quarters that would abound in revolutionary sans culottes sixty-five years later.” ([Maire 2005](#), p. 6). The *Convulsionnaires* movement continued after the closure of the cemetery in 1732 but was progressively marginalized as it became more extreme in its practices.

3. Jansenism, Between Conservatism, and Subversion

3.1. Reassessing the Link Between Jansenism and Revolution

Let me summarize the conclusions to be drawn from the preceding analysis: when writing a genealogical account of the French Revolution, the religious factors should in no way be underestimated; as one tries to account for these same factors, the protean manifestations of the Jansenist movement from their initial stage till the last days of the Ancien Régime provide us with an indispensable thread of analysis; however, the same thread needs to be followed with caution, this notably because the accounts of the way Jansenism played a role in the pre-revolutionary process are not truly satisfactory. One is drawn back to the series of questions raised by Marcel Gauchet in 1990:

It is generally accepted that Jansenism played a role in the upheaval of the Ancien Régime. But how, and through what channels, did this upheaval spread? From the resistance of the 17th century to the open struggles of the 18th century, from religious battles to the genesis of the Patriot party, what were the pathways? Through which channels did the influence flow? Plausible models remain lacking. Some of the key figures in the Civil Constitution of the Clergy appear to have Jansenist roots. But through what connections, and according to what degrees? What exactly do these loyalties signify, and through what mechanisms do they operate, including their contradictions? On all these points, we are still only

at the stage of assertion. There is a relationship between Jansenism and the Revolution, a relationship forged over the long term, and an effective one in the short term. This was felt by contemporaries. We are tempted to more or less endorse their assertions. But we desperately do not have the key to these relationships, which are whispered to us by a rumor that has become history. (Gauchet 1990, pp. 22–23)

In what follows, I will try to specify the role played by at least one of the channels through which Jansenism can be correlated with the genealogy of the French Revolution. I will do so by locating myself at the reference point—the circle of Port-Royal—from which all posterior incarnations of Jansenism would refer, trying to determine the nature and importance of the impact that Port-Royal exercised not only on Jansenism but on social and political practices throughout progressively wider circles. I will do so by looking at both the “intellectual” and “cultural” factors of change (as defined at the beginning of my contribution) emerging from this place of origin.

Let me first recall some well-known facts. During the 17th century, French Jansenism was relayed and propagated by a spiritual movement organized around the women’s abbey of Port-Royal, which comprised a convent in Paris and another, Port-Royal des Champs, near Versailles. After the sisters regrouped at the Paris convent, a group of pious scholars, commonly known as the “Messieurs [Gentlemen]” or the “Solitaires” of Port-Royal, gathered at the original site in the countryside. This movement would experience immense intellectual and moral influence in France and would indirectly oppose the absolutism of Louis XIV, who would eventually have Port-Royal des Champs razed, and the movement dispersed. Blaise Pascal was a staunch supporter of the movement, and the dramatist Jean Racine was a student at the Port-Royal schools where as he requested in his will, he was buried.

3.2. *The Emergence of a Social Model*

It is often said that the polemics in which Port-Royal found itself engaged would have triggered a gradual transition of the Jansenist movement and of larger intellectual and social circles, “from mysticism to revolt” (A. Adam 1968). However, if the nature of the political ideas of the “Messieurs de Port-Royal” were “modern” in the sense that they present affinities with the ones propounded by Hobbes or Grotius for instance they certainly could not be labeled “democratic” (Tans 1956; Taveneaux 1973—see also below). Still, we can gradually approach and specify the political impact that Port-Royal may have indirectly exercised even after its demise by starting from a perspective different from the one offered by the reading of explicitly political writings. Our departure point can be stated as follows: within the Port-Royal community, three phenomena developed, which triggered a framework of intellectual sociability that prepared and fostered revolutionary transformations. Accounts written from within the port-Royal circle testify to the progressive, organic shaping of said phenomena: (1) the emergence of a model of thought focused on the value attached to *certainty*; (2) the shaping of a social role, the one latter attributed to “the intellectual”; and (3) the emergence of a model of sociability, the *circle*, the collective, the “organic intellectual.” One of the most interesting testimonies for analyzing how Port-Royal constituted itself as a community and became aware of living an unprecedented social, spiritual and intellectual experience is provided by the *Memoirs* written by Nicolas Fontaine, published in Utrecht in 1736 (composed between 1689 and 1700 and published in a critical edition in 2001 (Fontaine 2001)).

First, marked by the Cartesian upheaval (all the Port-Royalists—except Pascal, always singular in his thought—accept as a self-evident fact that Descartes overturned the old philosophy), Jansenist thought constantly grapples with the question of the conditions

of certainty, whether that of salvation, psychology, or logic: if the thinking subject is the starting point of its own thought, how can certainty be established? Authored mainly by Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole, the *Logic* and *Grammar* of Port-Royal tackle this question by establishing a theory of the “sign” and of the way it relates to an external truth: the individual assesses the signs produced by the motions of his own consciousness or else linguistic activity so as to pass a critical judgment on their veracity (Marin 1975). The community’s agreement on the judgment being passed is an additional (and ultimately indispensable) testimonial: the agreement of the group members is a way of rediscovering the certainties of natural light, at least if the discussion takes place “rationally”, i.e., in a context and atmosphere that discards particularities of rank and mundane authority, which mislead the heart and the mind (for an analysis on this synthesis between the Cartesian and Augustinian traditions, see Gouhier 1978).

This epistemological model underpins the role of those who are expert in assessing the motions occurring in the conscience and their progressive integration into a social model, the one of the “collective intellectual”, if not of the Gramscian “organic intellectual.” This role and this model are rooted in a shared reference to the value of *truth* and that of *community*. The moral authority exercised by this nascent intellectual stratum, the Gentlemen of Port-Royal, is that of professionals in matters of conscience. (In this role they were competing with their favorite enemies, the Jesuits. However, whereas the Jesuits were leading the people who place themselves under their spiritual guidance towards personal discernment, Jansenists were focused on establishing universal norms that individuals should follow regardless of context and circumstances). It is ultimately in Pascal’s “honnête homme” that we best discern its nascent expression: people who master one or several domains of expertise without being prisoner of their field, people being able to universalize what they have learnt from one particular science “are not called poets, nor geometers, etc. . . but they are all of these, and judges of all of them.” (S.486 in Pascal 2000, p. 340—I quote and translate the text of the *Pensées* from the edition established by Philippe Sellier). Undoubtedly, the intellectuals will only become aware of their identity during the Enlightenment period, but it is in Port-Royal that they will find the outlines of their role.

Thirdly, this relationship to truth-value is incarnated into a new type of community whose functioning deepens and confirms the intellectual configuration sketched above. Thus, intellectual innovation and social crystallization reinforce each other. To fully appreciate the importance of this last thesis we need to come back to the classical and much disputed analysis by Lucien Goldmann (1913–1970) and to reinterpret some of its intuitions. L. Goldmann extended the analyses of G. Lukács into the field of sociological literary criticism, popularizing the thesis that a literary work is the expression of a worldview shared and expressed by a group of individuals. Only certain prominent members of the group have the capacity to give a fully coherent form and structure to this worldview through their literary work: “Every great literary or artistic work is the expression of a worldview. This is a phenomenon of collective consciousness that reaches its maximum of conceptual or sensory clarity in the consciousness of the thinker or poet.” (Goldmann 1959, p. 28). These individuals, in turn, express this in the works studied by the historian, using the conceptual tool of worldview; he adds that “a worldview is precisely this set of aspirations, feelings, and ideas that unites the members of a group (most often, a social class) and sets them apart from other groups.” (Goldmann 1959, p. 28). Lucien Goldmann illustrated this approach in his study of Pascal’s *Pensées* and Racine’s tragedies. He sees in these two writers the most perfect representatives of a “tragic vision” typical of a social group undergoing marginalization, which at that time found its inspiration in the Jansenist movement, characterized by the vision of a “hidden” God, whose actions remain impenetrable to humankind.

Lucien Goldmann's discussion of the "hidden God" takes on significance when related to the innovations recalled above: at Port-Royal, the more hidden God is, the more visible must be the unity of the true faithful. The visibility of the community, which compensates for the absence of God, is also manifested in the collective production of discourse: Pascal's *Provincial Letters* were written based on various memoirs submitted to Pascal; many essential works of Port-Royal were composed collaboratively (*Grammar, Logic, Perpetuity of the Faith*); moreover, correspondence and occasional works ("Responses," "Explanations," etc.) occupy a prominent place in Port-Royal literature, providing further evidence of this quest for internal unanimity.

At the same time, the vital nature of this endeavor demands it be constantly deepened, clarified, and established—and therefore, in the (infinite) interval—contested. The various protagonists send each other lengthy, reasoned memoranda, to which a scrupulously detailed response is given. The emergence of the intellectual model thus goes hand in hand with that of the model of the collective intellectual perpetually debating within the frontiers of the plural Self that it constitutes.

3.3. A Sociological Approach to Port-Royal's Worldview

Goldmann grounds his analysis in a sociological observation: the strengthening of the monarchy weakened the Parliaments and the judicial officers. The irritation, then the hostility, of the legal profession became increasingly evident from 1635 to 1670. The temporal coincidence is complete, our author observes, between the birth and development of early Jansenism and the establishment of the absolute monarchy of Louis XIV. The rise of absolutism benefited a growing merchant class. The judicial officers, most of whom had purchased their offices, saw their position considerably diminished. They could not wish for the withering away of the monarchy on which they depended, but they could no longer live satisfactorily in the world whose rules it defined. Jansenist doctrine would allow them to give expression to their political and social contradictions. It reflects, to a certain extent, the contradictions of the rapidly forming and evolving bourgeois class.

Intellectually fertile and diverse, the first Jansenist movement can be subdivided into several currents, which Goldmann categorizes as follows: (1) Some of its members agree that the world is evil and that no human action can make it better, but they nonetheless continue to live in compromise with the world, accommodating themselves to the falsehood that life in society necessarily entails. (2) Others observe within the world as it is a struggle between good and evil, between truth and error, piety and sin, and conceive of the Christian's task as active participation in this struggle. Truth and goodness can have a (limited) place in the world, and one must fight to secure it for them. This is the militant, "centrist" Christianity of Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole, the two best-known and most productive intellectuals of Port-Royal. (Here, I follow Goldmann, but Nicole's *Essais de morale* seems to me to oscillate between Positions 1 and 2). (3) There are those who abandon the world and oppose it, without neither compromise nor hope of victory, inspired by a radical demand for truth and piety (like the nuns of Port-Royal, notably the brilliant intellectual Jacqueline Pascal, sister of Blaise Pascal). Their struggle consists of maintaining their communal ideal. (4) Finally, there are those who refuse not only all compromise, but also any struggle for truth and good in the world, and even any affirmation of truth in the face of a world that can neither understand nor listen to it. This is the extremist and solitary Jansenism of Martin de Barcos, a little-known author whom Lucien Goldmann helped to revive. It is necessary, says Martin de Barcos, "not only to dislike the Court and high society, but to love nothing in this life, not even what seems most innocent and ordinary." (Quoted in Goldmann 1956, p. 479).

In the tragic vision that permeates these four currents to varying degrees, God is always present, and yet he never appears: God is both present and absent. Pascal, says Goldmann, wants to ground the relationship between God and his creature in all its force, but he encounters an impossibility: God is unattainable; he has been banished from the world. Aware of the tension in which he lives (the total absence of God, and complete faith in this God), the “tragic man” possesses an acute awareness of his limitations. At the same time, this awareness allows him to attain an extraordinary lucidity. Pascal’s *Pensées* highlight the paradoxes that define the human condition and refuse to resolve them.

I will question Goldmann’s theses on two points: (1) Is Pascal’s thought truly the expression of a “tragic vision”? (2) At the time when the Port-Royal circle is active, does the Jansenist movement fully reflect the social changes that Goldmann foresees?

3.4. *The Limits of Goldmann’s Approach: Is Pascal Truly “Tragic”?*

For Goldmann, Pascal—the author who, in his view, best expresses the spirit of Jansenism—is a dialectician who embodies the tragedy of a century shaken both by the rise of modern thought and the political contradictions linked to the rise of absolutism. However, one must ask whether this “tragic reading” of Pascal truly does justice to the logic and sources of his thought. In fact, the purpose of the *Pensées* can only be understood by placing it within a broader intellectual context. In the first half of the seventeenth century, two theories of knowledge crystallized in stages, from which two ways of understanding Christianity and situating it in the world stemmed. The first current can be called “Christian rationalism”; it should not be confused with the “scientific rationalism” of the eighteenth century. The most solid philosophical foundation given to him is that provided by Descartes: the latter states that he “rejects all knowledge that is merely probable” (Descartes 2003, p. 119) and concludes that the search for truth must be conducted according to the model of demonstrations carried out in arithmetic and geometry, which admit nothing uncertain. Descartes even decides to methodologically consider false what is merely probable. (For Descartes, this concerns only the domain of knowledge, not practical morality, which, as long as we live without being assured of a certain truth, must be based on probability in order to allow us to continue living). Through detours that we need not analyze here, the mathematical model and the argument of the cogito allow Descartes to ground his complete confidence in human reason, capable of knowing the eternal truths created by God. The deductive model is therefore the one used by “Christian rationalists” in science, philosophy, theology, and apologetics.

The second current is called “Christian Pyrrhonism” (cf. Popkin [1960] 2003—the word “Pyrrhonism” originally refers to the doctrine of the Greek philosopher Pyrrho of Elis, 360–275 BC). It is, in fact, a form of skepticism, but a skepticism directed towards what humankind can know through reason, and not towards the ultimate truth of religion. In fact, the authority of religion must be based on means other than those provided by reason, since the latter proves fallible in all our daily operations. Pierre Gassendi (1592–1655), mathematician, astronomer, philosopher, and priest, is a brilliant representative of this tendency: knowledge stems from sensory experience, not from innate ideas or substantial categories. Pierre Charron (1541–1603), a disciple of Montaigne, reconciled the idea of tolerance with his defense of the Christian religion (see M. Adam 1991). The line of argument of Christian Pyrrhonism can be summarized as follows: In daily life, our actions are based on a judgment of probability; for historical events, we weigh testimonies, and in the realm of professional competence or politics, for example, we rely on the authority of others. We must do the same in the realm of religion, which thus acquires the same degree of certainty as the opinions that determine our habitual actions. Faith is therefore not founded on metaphysical or geometric certainty, but on moral certainty.

Pascal situates himself within the tradition of Christian Pyrrhonism, much to the embarrassment of some of his friends at Port-Royal, who soon adopted Cartesian philosophy (Dijksterhuis 1951). (However, it should be noted that the Abbot of Saint-Cyran, the inspiration behind the first Port-Royal, was on the contrary very much influenced by Christian Pyrrhonism, which he ardently defended in his writings). Pascal rejects the geometric and natural proofs of God's existence proposed by Descartes. For him, humankind cannot have a geometric type of knowledge of God's existence. All knowledge is limited, and therefore illusory, in the face of the two infinities of the universe (infinite immensity and infinite smallness), and a fortiori in the face of God's infinity, "infinitely more infinite" than the infinity of the sensible universe. He also refuses to separate the foundation of morality from that of faith, as Descartes does (cf. Gouhier 1986, pp. 167–93). But at the same time, he conducts an epistemological reflection that draws on the contributions of all his predecessors: if man has no geometric proofs of God's existence, he is led to reason on the level of probability and plausibility (Thirolin 1991). This shift from the geometric model to the model of probability (which Pascal calls "the geometry of chance") is necessitated and reinforced by a merciless critique of the limits of human knowledge: humankind, diverse, ever-changing, without a stable "nature" to define it ("True nature being lost, everything becomes its nature; as true good is being lost, everything becomes its true good." S.16 in Pascal 2000, p. 46). Man cannot even know himself. A mixture of animality and reason, he truly participates neither in the world of bodies nor in that of minds, or rather, he knows both only from a distance. He can *think* about the universe, but he cannot *understand* it. Pascal's Wager, therefore, does not concern the existence of God, but rather the necessity of practically wagering on his existence.

This operation does not truly partake of the "tragic vision" in which Lucien Goldmann seeks to encompass it. The contemporary reinterpretation of Pascal therefore distances itself from the still somewhat "romantic" vision of Pascal that Lucien Goldmann illustrates. Studies posterior to Goldmann's time agree in seeing Pascal rather as a nuanced and inventive thinker, who forges an original path between different philosophical traditions with which he is well acquainted and whose epistemological limitations he critiques with great relevance (McKenna 1993; Thirolin 1991; Descotes 2001; Vermader 2023).

3.5. *The Limits (And Fecundity) of Goldmann's Approach: From Port-Royal to Political Jansenism*

Now comes the second question: does the Jansenist movement in the time of Port-Royal fully reflect the social changes that Goldmann foresees? Authors who accepted Goldmann's central thesis were able to explain the failure of Jansenism by arguing that if court lawyers were indeed representatives of the emerging bourgeoisie, then the failure of Jansenism was inevitable, since it preceded the true bourgeois revolution. However, historians specializing in social economics have raised serious doubts about Goldmann's thesis, showing that the supposed economic decline experienced by members of Parlements and lawyers was far from being a certain phenomenon, and that most of them enjoyed considerable prosperity at the time (Newton 1999). And yet, although Port-Royal was destroyed and its members dispersed at the very beginning of the eighteenth century, a Jansenist movement re-emerged around 1720. But, in contrast to the situation analyzed by Goldmann, this time the movement relied primarily on the Parisian merchant class. To explain this curious drift from Jansenism to the merchant class, several authors have pointed out how Jansenism affirmed a form of "freedom of conscience" that would become the foundation of bourgeois liberty. Jansenism became the religious expression of a bourgeois society that refused to pledge allegiance to either the absolutist state or the Catholic Counter-Reformation decreed by Rome (Taveneaux 1965; Michel 2000). More broadly, French Jansenism is the ideology that paved the way for the separation of religion and

politics, and that made this separation the foundation of a new legitimacy for the state (Maire 1998). It should be noted, moreover, that historians offer divergent interpretations of the evolution of Jansenism as recalled here, with some authors presenting it as the religious expression of dynamic social strata, and others, on the contrary, as a refuge, a reaction against the growing hold of the State. One could quote and comment here the now classic studies of Bernard Groethuysen ([1927] 1977) or Edmond Préclin (1928) among others but this discussion would go beyond the scope of our subject.

Nicolas Lyon-Caen's in-depth study of Parisian Jansenism in the 18th century allows us to bridge the gap between Goldmann's analyses and those of more recent authors (Lyon-Caen 2010). It first notes the complete renewal of actors that occurred between the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century: the solidarities formed around Port-Royal began to fade as early as 1680. The demand for withdrawal from the world manifested by the first Port-Royal explains its lack of success with the merchant bourgeoisie, which turned instead to the mendicant orders and the Jesuit networks. The royal persecution proved to be effective, and by the beginning of the following century, very little of the Port-Royalist network of relationships remained. However, it was around the same time that a new militant nucleus was formed around the Oratorian seminary of Saint-Magloire. Figurism gave a particular coloring to this recreation. (By "Figurist movement" or "Figurism", I mean the allegorical interpretations of Scripture, often imbued with an apocalyptic undertone, which developed around the Parisian seminary of Saint-Magloire, interpretations that made it possible to give meaning to the vicissitudes encountered by the Jansenist movement). In addition, the laity took on their autonomy in relation to the parish clergy, assembling in an associative manner around members of the clergy opposing the promulgation of the *Unigenitus* Bull. New configurations emerged with the resistance to Rome's injunctions concerning morality and theology in the 1720s. At the same time, the original Port-Royal gradually became a unifying political and religious myth. Port-Royal was then the object of a "memorial monopolization" (Lyon-Caen 2010, p. 67).

It was the entry of lay people into ecclesiastical disputes that gave the memory of Port-Royal its scope and effectiveness. A kind of symbiosis was achieved between the corporatist sociability of the merchants and the Jansenist culture. If Jansenism contributed to shaping the evolutions of the bourgeoisie, it was itself transformed by the cultural and social evolutions in which it was immersed. Among the Jansenists, religious language was used to articulate the relationships between members of an evolving social group: it was flexible and evolving because it was the best expression of the intellectual and social dynamics of a group with imprecise boundaries in search of its status (Lyon-Caen 2010, pp. 532–33). While Jansenism contributed to shaping the evolution of the bourgeoisie, it was itself transformed by the cultural and social changes in which it was immersed. It is therefore difficult to identify Jansenism with a "worldview," tragic or otherwise: it is an object in perpetual evolution. On the eve of the French Revolution, religion was shaped by society as much as it was shaped by it. Among the Jansenists, religious language was used to articulate the relationships between members of an evolving social group: it was flexible and adaptable because it was the best expression of the intellectual and social dynamics of a group with imprecise boundaries, searching for its status (Lyon-Caen 2010, pp. 532–33).

Whatever their limitations may be, the paths opened by Lucien Goldmann were fruitful and allowed for the emergence of new scholarship. At the same time, the picture has become considerably more complex: (a) Jansenism cannot be simply reduced to the "tragic vision," neither in its origins, nor especially in the developments following the fall of Port-Royal; (b) the legal class experienced a more complex and diverse economic situation than that described by Lucien Goldmann; and finally (c) the relationship between religious convictions and class consciousness follows a model of reciprocal influences and

transformations, rather than unilateral causality. But the combined reading of literary texts and socio-economic facts remains a fruitful and fascinating undertaking.

4. Port-Royal, “Realm of Memory”

I have tried to offer a consistent vision of the historical trajectory that leads from Port-Royal to the eve of the Revolution. The task that remains is to elucidate *how* Port-Royal proved to be politically disruptive, both in the way it provided the collective memory with symbolic resources (this is what the present section attempts to do) and in the new societal model it fostered (see Part 5).

4.1. The Court and the Monastery

Port-Royal and the circle of Solitaires in the Chevreuse Valley are located only a few kilometers from the Château de Versailles. This circle coincided with its location into the place from which it took its name during a short period only (1640 till 1680 approximately), but its memory marked the century (besides, among the most influential members of the Port-Royal circle, Arnauld disappears as late as 1694, Lancelot and Nicole in 1695, and du Breuil and Roannez in 1696) and even the entire pre-revolutionary period. Port-Royal sometimes seems to assert itself consciously as a counter-model to the monarchical place: the Court, Nicole tells us, is the inverted image of the Monastery: “As the life of the monastery is a life formed by saints to go more easily to heaven, the life that Nobles usually lead at court is a life formed to go very easily to hell. And one has only to extend the comparison to recognize that it is perfectly just.” (Nicole [1670] 2016, p. 258).

Even if (as already noted) the political philosophy of Port-Royal remains cautious and traditional in its general outlook (see, for example, the whole first part of the essay “On Greatness” by Nicole, of which I just quoted an excerpt.), the anti-Jansenist clerics discover early on a pressing political danger in the model it presents to the public. As early as 1654, Léonard de Marandé (on this polemist see Misono 2012; Nadeau 1997) published a work entitled *Inconveniences of State resulting from Jansenism*:

All novelty in matters of State and Religion proceeding from the particular head or caprice of a particular man, must be rejected, not only as contrary to the order of God, but also as perilous to the State, which is a moral body which we can compare to the human body. For just as a change in the way of living is dangerous to the human body, because of the alteration of the humors which are formed by this novelty and this change, so in the body politic it happens that a change in the customs and maxims received and approved interests most of the members and orders of this great body (if the prudence and authority of the chief who governs it does not first repress this audacity): from which tumult, division and schism are formed in consequence, which are the most dangerous diseases of the State. But the principal reason which obliges the Prince to keep away and proscribe from his State any novelty in matters of religion is that any new doctrine creates a party in a State, and a party all the more dangerous because the spiritual interest which concerns eternal salvation makes many other impressions in the hearts of the subjects, than does the temporal interest. (Marandé 1654, pp. 4–5)

Saint-Simon reports that Louis XIV discerned in the people gathered around port-Royal “a republican party in the Church as in the State” (quoted in Maire 1997, p. 2610). At a later stage, Port-Royal becomes a “realm of memory.” As is well known, the notion of “realm of memory” (“*lieu de mémoire*”) has been coined and popularized by (Pierre Nora 1996–1998; original French contribution: Nora 1984). A *Lieu de mémoire*, Port-Royal becomes symbolically established opposite the royal palace:

At the gates of Versailles, in the depths of a marshy valley surrounded by woods, the land of the “Porrois”, the ruins of the abbey of Port-Royal des Champs offer a strange contrast with the sovereign magnificence of the neighboring palace and park. Only the dovecote, the barn, and part of the surrounding wall dating from the Fronde period escaped the destruction ordered by Louis XIV in 1711. (Maire 1997, p. 2605)

4.2. A “Republican Transfiguration”

The “republican transfiguration” (Maire 1997, p. 2630) of Port-Royal really began with Abbé Grégoire (1750–1831). A parish priest (and later a constitutional bishop), Grégoire became a deputy in the Estates-General gathered in 1789. Member of the Gallican/Jansenist faction, he spoke notably for universal suffrage, abolition of slavery, the emancipation of Jews, and the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. He remained active after the revolutionary period. His funeral cortege was followed by more than 20,000 people: “Grégoire immortalized [Port-Royal], thus laying the foundations of a new republican and lay filiation.” (Maire 1997, p. 2634) This filiation was based upon the grand narrative of the rise and fall of the place, and said narrative goes roughly as follows: though the foundation of the abbey dates to the 13th century, the place had to be deserted for Paris in 1625 because of the unhealthy conditions of the valley in which it was situated; after its reclamation by the “Messieurs” from 1638, some of the nuns from Paris joined the Abbey of the Champs in 1648. The debate over the distinction between law and fact in the interpretation of the condemnation of Jansenius’ *Augustinus* began in 1661; the nuns and their supporters were severely persecuted in 1664; in 1668, the Peace of the Church was proclaimed and Port-Royal des Champs regained its autonomy with an elective abbess, in contrast to the house in Paris. But the next forty years would see Louis XIV proceed in stages to eradicate the Port-Royalist movement. The bull of extinction of the abbey of Port-Royal des Champs was issued in 1708. The dispersion of the last nuns, the exhumation of the cemeteries, and the systematic demolition of the original buildings of the abbey took place between 1709 and 1713. The Figurist movement likened this destruction to that of the Temple of Jerusalem, and the comparison shows how decisive was the event in the mythification of the abbey and its circle.

If Port-Royal is thus the Other of Versailles, it is therefore inseparable from it geographically, first “Because of its proximity to Versailles, the abbey of Port-Royal bore, like many owners, the constraints inherent in the development of this royal residence” (Bru-Malgras 2005, pp. 63–64), but above all, by the effect of contrast created by two diametrically opposed styles of sociability. No one has been able to stage both the proximity and contrast with more rhetorical skill than Jules Michelet (1798–1874):

The illustrious Gregoire [...] when the Empire had so cruelly erased the Revolution its mother, often went near Versailles to see the ruins of Port-Royal; one day (while returning, no doubt), he entered the Jeu de Paume. . . One ruined, the other abandoned. . . Tears flowed from these eyes which had never softened. . . Two religions to cry, it was too much for a man’s heart. (Michelet [1847] 1957, p. 110)

“Two Religions” . . . It is in indeed in this register that Michelet describes the oath of the Jeu de Paume (the place in Versailles where an oath was taken on 20 June 1789 by the members of the French Third Estate “not to separate and to reassemble wherever necessary until the constitution of the kingdom [was] established.”): “The assembly was poor there and represented that day all the more the people. It remained standing all day, having hardly a wooden bench. . . It was like the crib for the new religion, its stable of Bethlehem.” (Michelet [1847] 1957, p. 110).

Abbé Grégoire himself devoted a meditation to Port-Royal, published in 1809, a text more often mentioned than read. The work introduces a sharp contrast between the institution of Saint Cyr, governed by Madame de Maintenon, and Port-Royal, where “all distinction of birth was trampled underfoot” (Grégoire [1809] 1995, p. 35). As a result, “the adherents of Port-Royal constantly formed a dispersed family, but whose invisible bonds were strengthened by the persecution directed against them” (Grégoire [1809] 1995, p. 81). Port-Royal, writes Grégoire, is a *school*: “From the political point of view, we can cite them as precursors of the Revolution, not in those excesses which made all honest souls groan, but in those principles of patriotism which, in 1789, burst forth with so much energy” (Grégoire [1809] 1995, p. 103). Finally, Grégoire attacks those works and authors which together scourge “anyone who dares to find merit in Port-Royal and anyone who has taken the oath of 1791” (Grégoire [1809] 1995, p. 127—the final mention refers to the oath of fidelity to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy required from clerics and from the electors of the bishops). In this work, Grégoire thus definitively established Port-Royal as a model of intellectual friendship that broke and remodeled all forms of hierarchies and precedence, be they familial, religious, social (Guittienne-Mürger and Lesaulnier 2010)—see also Cagnat-Debœuf 2002 on the topic of the ‘union of hearts’ and intellectual friendship in Port-Royal).

5. Port-Royal as a Place of Social Innovation

From the beginning, Port-Royal was a place and a sign of contradiction. Contradiction within its own borders (Pierre Nicole, Nicolas Fontaine and other actors speak freely of unceasing debates and frequent disagreements within the circle) contradiction with respect to the society around it. It is even the fact of being a sign of contradiction that *constitutes* Port-Royal: its adversaries as well as the adversity it meets with define its contours, bring about regroupings, and allow for mutual recognition. It has often been rightly noted that the unity of the movement did not cover intellectual coherence. The best proof of this is that Port-Royal can claim to be, in various ways, Augustinian, Thomistic or Cartesian: if it endures the multiple grafts that it undergoes on itself, it is because its vocation was not to create a unified body of thought but rather to carry the contradictions of the time, and beyond the time.

5.1. The Destruction of the Analogical Worldview and the Surge of a New Discursive Position

“The sight of the absolute will of God does not change our ordinary way of judging things and it does not take away the application of human means and the use of ordinary lights. [...] What must moderate our joy and temper our terror is that it is often impossible to distinguish what is the effect of mercy or of justice in human events.” (Nicole [1670] 1755, vol. I, pp. 137–41). This line of reasoning leads the Port-Royal authors to the (generally implicit or cautiously expressed) conclusion that ultimate meaning cannot be discovered through the panoply of symbols supposed to convey it. “Meaning” as expressed in the world is necessarily an artifact. It can be created, destroyed, and instrumentalized. This is especially true of political power when power is considered not from the viewpoint of its social efficacy but from the one of the symbols attached to its legitimization. Power is merely “the instrument of socialization, of a continuous socialization since society is not natural” (Manent [1977] 2007, p. 65). Port-Royal thus participates in a more general movement of disintegration of the analogical–symbolic vision of the world, which till then had been authorizing the possibility of an immediate interpretation of divine and political symbolism. Among its thinkers, such a movement manifests itself by a marked refusal of the use of metaphors and analogical reasoning. Antoine Arnauld thus mocks one of his opponents:

It must be admitted that you make the weakness of your cause appear by employing so many small proofs, which would not make a good one. For what else do you claim to conclude, for example, from what you say in the second Position about the analogy of the Hierarchy of the earth with that of heaven? I add this because I have learned that analogies are very familiar to you and very frequent. And so, if you were only trying to distinguish yourself from your colleagues and to be given, in imitation of these ancient doctors, some title, you could be given the vacant title of *Doctor Analogicus*. No one, as far as I know, will oppose this. As far as I am concerned, I wholeheartedly subscribe to it. (Arnauld 1778, p. 355)

By proceeding to the destruction of any type of analogical-symbolic discourse, by instituting a certain type of relationship between its members, and by creating a new type of sociability in the production of knowledge, Port-Royal created a *position of discourse*, that of the intellectual: Port-Royal, in the eyes of its contemporaries, is a “body without a head” (the formula is from M. de Harlay. Cf. Sainte-Beuve [1867] 1953–1955, t.2, pp. 244–45, and t.3, pp. 169–70. See also Marandé 1654, pp. 4–5 and pp. 516ff. A late synthesis of the anti-Jansenist criticisms is found in Maistre [1821] 2006, t.3, pp. 53ff). It did not function according to the usual types of solidarity and authority. The regrouping by intellectual and spiritual affinities, without legally constituted bonds, without relation to the ordinary mode of formation of factions, is finally more prejudicial to the authority than the constitution of a true party, recognizable as such. Each of the Solitaries represents only himself, has sworn loyalty only to his God and his conscience, will occasionally take a different path from that of his companions. . . and, at the same time, feels indefectibly attached to them, not by any interest or even any instinctive affinity, but by their common status as *Friends of the Truth*. (“Amis de la Vérité”). No valid union except in truth and justice, says Le Roy, “and when it seems that our brothers want to distance themselves from it, we are in absolute necessity not to accommodate ourselves to their thoughts and their designs.” (Quoted in Namer 1964, p. 88).

5.2. Intellectuals and Clerics

What then constitutes the cement and limits of the “société des Solitaires”? Nothing else than the defense of the truth, if we follow Antoine Arnauld. An oft-reported anecdote is significant: when his mother was dying, Arnauld, Lancelot tells us, asked her what she wanted to say to him as a last word, so that he would consider it throughout his life as a last will and testament and as expressing God’s order for him. The answer was as follows: “I beg you to tell my last son that, God having committed him to the defense of the Truth, I exhort and beseech him on his behalf never to slacken in it, and to support it without any fear, when it would mean the loss of a thousand lives” (Sainte-Beuve [1867] 1953–1955, t.1, p. 517). Antoine Arnauld never confined himself to his role of *specialist*. Theology, one would say, is for him merely a lever to bring a view on a given matter, and to highlight a gap between professed values and practical behavior. In the same way, Nicole often reproaches the men of law for reasoning so much as judges and lawyers that they forget to reason as human beings (for a general analysis of Nicole’s ethical thought, see Guion 2002). A contagious attitude: when, alone against all, some nuns refuse to sign a paper with the authority of the pope, the king, the bishop, the theologians, affirming that their conscience and the truth forbid it, one will wonder if it is up to these “poor girls” (as said repeatedly in anti-Jansenist writings) to judge for themselves what has already been decided for all the faithful. If 17th century France became passionate about questions such as the distinction between law and fact in the condemnation of Jansenius, it is because a new magisterium was taking shape throughout these exactingly fastidious debates: who were these people who were judging everything, not according to the rules of a given

profession, but according to disconcerting and yet simple criteria? One will find a name for them, but later: they are *intellectuals*.

A paradoxical class, the class of intellectuals cannot be assimilated to that of the clerics. It was largely nourished by them, as Port-Royal abundantly proved, but the intellectuals had to make a break with their original milieu. The cleric was a specialist in salvation and morality. As an emanation and instrument of power, he was linked to it by nature, he exercised a portion of it. In contrast, the intellectual will not be an expert: his action will not be limited, either by his competence, or by the ground that society concedes to a particular domain of expertise. From a certain point of view, from an “indivisible point which [is] the true place” (S.55, in [Pascal 2000](#), p. 60), nothing is entitled to escape his gaze. The intellectual is not organically bound to a group, and, at the same time, the defense of a *cause* associates him with his companions more than would the defense of an *interest*; in one and the same movement, he presents himself as free and invested with a mission. As noted already, this attitude extends to a collective production of discourse. And in the fact that the literature of circumstance (“*Réponse*”, “*Explication*”, etc.) and the correspondence occupy such a large part in the works of Port-Royal, we find another proof of the collective character of the search for and the exposition of the truth. Port-Royal is constantly in search of internal unanimity. It is indeed its reason for being. And it is this very reason that destroys unanimity: the very necessity of producing unanimity demands that it be constantly deepened and clarified—established and, in the (infinite) meantime, contested. The various protagonists send each other heavy argumentative memoirs, which are scrupulously answered, sometimes *more geometrico*. Thus, Port-Royal offers us not only the model of the intellectual, but also that of the intellectual collective. . . In the matrix of Port-Royal, we find both the type of the intellectual and, already, his breaking point, his limit position.

The intellectual will undoubtedly become truly aware of his identity only at the time of the Enlightenment, but it is in Port-Royal that he will find his first model, his first reflexes; it is in Port-Royal that he will find the outline of his role. The *Provinciales* will know how to create their continuators: “We were entirely mistaken [*nous étions bien abusés*]. It was only yesterday that I was undeceived. . .” ([Pascal 1866](#), p. 141). And from the effect of disillusionment thus created, continuators will learn the lesson, playing with a style which knows how to establish the reign of suspicion as well as the force of evidence. In the analysis of documents and declarations, in the reiterated assertions of independence, in the proclamation that “violence and verity can make no impression on each other” ([Pascal 1866](#), p. 455), we find the premises of the archetype of intellectual intervention in society, namely: the Dreyfus affair.

5.3. An Ideal Type

The community of “Friends of the Truth” thus transports the Cartesian quest for the foundations of certainty into the social search for a shared truth, a consensus to be established. It prefigures the stripping away of social particularities (analogous to the abandonment of established beliefs) that François Furet and Augustin Cochin tell us is characteristic of the ideal type of Jacobin democracy ([Furet 1981](#); [Cochin \[1921\] 1979](#)). The latter is provided by the institution called the “philosophical society” or the *société de pensée* in the original. In fact, the usual English translation is slightly problematic. First, *société* can indeed be rendered as “circle.” But after all, “society” in English means, among other things, “an organization to which people who share similar interests can belong” (Cambridge Dictionary). More importantly, *de pensée* refers to the fact that the rationale for the existence of said society or circle is that its members methodically debate together any

question that they face, any issue they are engaged into. The term “philosophical” fails to fully convey this meaning.

[For Augustin Cochin], Jacobinism was the fully developed form of a type of political and social organization that had become widespread in France in the second half of the eighteenth century and that he called the ‘philosophical society’ [*société de pensée*]. Literary circles and societies, masonic lodges, academies, and patriotic and cultural clubs were different manifestations of this phenomenon. It was a form of social life based on the principle that its members, in order to participate in it, must divest themselves of all concrete distinctions and of their real social existence. It was the opposite of what the Ancien Régime called a corporate entity {corps}, defined by a community of occupational and social interests. Membership in a philosophical society was strictly a matter of ideas. [...] For the purpose of the philosophical society was not to act, to delegate or to ‘represent’: it was to deliberate and to cull from its members and from discussion a common opinion, a consensus to be subsequently expressed, propounded and championed. A philosophical society had no authority to delegate nor any representatives to elect on the basis of shared ideas or as a voting block; it served as a tool designed to produce unanimous opinion, regardless of the content of that unanimity—whether it be that of the *Compagnie du Saint Sacrement* in the seventeenth century or that of the Grand Orient a hundred years later. The novel feature in the second half of the eighteenth century was that the consensus of the philosophical societies, commonly referred to- as ‘enlightened philosophy’, tended to permeate the fabric of society as a whole. (Furet 1981, p. 174)

To an ideal type (the Truth, product of a consensus that is manufactured by the unceasing debate among the members of the group) corresponds a societal type (the Jacobin democracy, exemplified in the *société de pensée*, and prefigured by Port-Royal).

In the paragraph quoted above, Furet mentions the *Compagnie du Saint Sacrement* as a possible prefiguration of the *société de pensée*. The rapprochement is too hasty: The Company of Holy Sacrament (active 1630–1660) was mostly a charitable organization that developed also practices of penitence and contemplation, making the latter the ultimate vector of sanctification. It distinguished among the duties to be fulfilled by laity and clerics and avoided any kind of public intervention (Tallon 1991). In no way can its ethos be compared to the one that characterizes the Port-Royal circle, and the representations of these two networks in the collective memory and imagination have been totally dissimilar.

The main point is the following: when speaking of a “a form of social life based on the principle that its members, in order to participate in it, must divest themselves of all concrete distinctions”, Cochin and Furet were already pointing towards the intellectual and societal matrix of the innovation in which they were rightly discerning the core of the revolutionary fermentation: the Port-Royal circle.

6. Conclusions

The search for the “religious origins” of the French Revolution is only one aspect of the historiographical undertaking that seeks to account for the genesis of a central phenomenon of the modern period and the comparative perspectives opened by the attempt to elucidate it. The results obtained by this long-term investigation are far from negligible. They allow us, in any case, to affirm that the religious factor does not operate solely through its suppression; in other words, it cannot be reduced to the dynamic of dechristianization that indeed marked a significant part of French society during the 18th century.

The formation of a protest Catholicism throughout the 17th and 18th centuries—a Catholicism that challenged the decision-making processes at work in both the Church

and the State, especially when these two powers combined their dictates—is linked to the vicissitudes experienced by the Jansenist movement, even if the two phenomena cannot be precisely equated with one another. This protest movement shares common traits with that which would define the role played by movements stemming from the Reformation in other countries, without, however, being entirely synonymous with it.

There is one characteristic specific to “Protest Catholicism” that the study of its mold—Port-Royal—allows us to identify with greater precision than is usually the case. This characteristic lies in the continuity between the style of thought developed by the classicism of the Grand Siècle and revolutionary sociability. As Roger Chartier aptly pointed out (Chartier 1991, pp. 8–10), Hippolyte Taine (1828–1893) made this lineage one of his main theses: “[I want to show] that Boileau, Descartes, Lemaître de Sacy, Corneille, Racine, Fléchier, etc. are the ancestors of Saint-Just and Robespierre. [...] The classical spirit inevitably produced the theory of abstract, natural man and the social contract.” (Letter of Taine to Boutmy, 31 July 1874, quoted in the introduction to Taine [1876] 1986, p. xxxi).

Taine’s list contains two emblematic names of the Port-Royal spirit: Louis-Isaac Lemaître de Sacy (1613–1684), the initiator and principal translator of the Port-Royal Bible, and Jean Racine. Still, clearly, Taine conflates authors and doctrines in a way that severely weakens the explanatory power of his assertion, primarily because he seeks to define classicism and its impact through doctrinal content that is, moreover, too crudely defined. The undertaking outlined in this contribution has consisted of linking three phenomena: a body of thought connected to a shift in epistemological and anthropological perspective; a discursive position linked to the marginalization of the actors who articulate this transformation; and the creation of a style of sociability that is the consequence of the two preceding phenomena. This threefold perspective allows us to see Port-Royal as the direct ancestor of the “philosophical circle,” the cast in which Jacobin practices would take shape. While remaining faithful to the long-held intuition of a certain grounding of the revolutionary phenomenon into the Jansenist movement, this perspective shifts the focus from a purely sociological perspective towards another, one that stresses the intertwining between societal and epistemological transformations; it relativizes the legal activism of 18th-century Jansenism without denying its importance, and it makes the intellectual and societal genealogy outlined here a curve that traverses the revolutionary event without making it an endpoint. Ultimately, the question of the “religious origins” of the French Revolution is thus subsumed within that of a long-term study of the episteme shifts that have shaped and continue to shape the intellectual and religious history of France.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

References

- Adam, Antoine. 1968. *Du Mysticisme à la Révolte, les Jansénistes du XVIII^e s.* Paris: Fayard.
- Adam, Michel. 1991. *Études sur Pierre Charron.* Bordeaux: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux.
- Andurand, Olivier. 2017. *La Grande Affaire. Les Evêques de France Face à l’Unigenitus.* Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes.
- Arnould, Antoine. 1778. *Œuvres Complètes, t. XI.* Lausanne: Sigismond d’Arnay & Cie.
- Baker, Keith Michael. 1982. On the Problem of the Ideological Origins of the French Revolution. In *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives.* Edited by Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. 197–219.

- Blanc, Louis. 1869. *Histoire de la Révolution, Française t. I*. Paris: Furne et Cie—Pagnerre.
- Bru-Malgras, Christine. 2005. Les Bois de Port-Royal, écrin durable pour un lieu de mémoire? *Chroniques de Port-Royal* 55: 55–78.
- Cagnat-Debœuf, Constance. 2002. Une “union d’amour”: L’amitié entre les Solitaires. *Chroniques de Port-Royal* 51: 361–81.
- Campbell, Peter R., ed. 2006. *The Origins of the French Revolution*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave.
- Chartier, Roger. 1991. *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Cochin, Augustin. 1979. *L’Esprit du Jacobinisme. Une Interprétation Sociologique de la Révolution Française*. Paris: PUF. First published 1921.
- Collectif. 1986. *Christianisation et Déchristianisation (Actes de la Neuvième Rencontre d’Histoire Religieuse tenue à Fontevraud les 3, 4 et 5 Octobre 1985)*. Angers: Presses de l’Université d’Angers.
- Darnton, Robert. 1991. *Édition et Sédition: L’univers de la Littérature Clandestine au XVIIIe Siècle*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Denis, Philippe. 2019. *Edmond Richer and the Renewal of Conciliarism in the 17th Century*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Descartes, René. 2003. *Discourse on Method and Related Writings*. Translated by Desmond M. Clarke. London: Penguin.
- Descotes, Dominique. 2001. *Blaise Pascal. Littérature et Géométrie*. Clermont-Ferrand: Presses Universitaires Blaise Pascal.
- Dijksterhuis, Eduard Jan. 1951. *Descartes et le Cartésianisme Hollandais*. Paris: PUF.
- Dinet, Dominique. 1991. Une déchristianisation provinciale au XVIIIe siècle: Le diocèse d’Auxerre. *Histoire, Economie & Société* 10: 467–89. Available online: https://www.persee.fr/doc/hes_0752-5702_1991_num_10_4_1579 (accessed on 1 February 2026).
- Elias, Norbert. 1982. *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. New York: Pantheon Books. First published 1939.
- Fontaine, Nicolas. 2001. *Mémoires ou Histoire des Solitaires de Port-Royal. Édition critique par Pascale Thouvenin*. Paris: Champion.
- Furet, François. 1981. *Interpreting the French Revolution*. Translated by Elborg Forster. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gauchet, Marcel. 1990. La question du jansénisme dans l’historiographie de la Révolution. *Chroniques de Port-Royal* 39: 15–23.
- Goldmann, Lucien, ed. 1956. *Correspondance de Martin de Barcos, Abbé de Saint-Cyran, avec les Abbesses de Port-Royal et les Principaux Personnages du Groupe Janséniste*. Paris: Presses Universitaires.
- Goldmann, Lucien. 1959. *Le dieu Caché. Étude sur la Vision Tragique dans les Pensées de Pascal et dans le théâtre de Racine*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Gouhier, Henri. 1978. *Cartésianisme et Augustinisme au XVIIe Siècle*. Paris: Vrin.
- Gouhier, Henri. 1986. *Blaise Pascal: Conversion et Apologétique*. Paris: Vrin.
- Grégoire, Henri. 1995. *Les Ruines de Port-Royal des Champ en 1809, Année Séculaire de la Destruction de ce Monastère*. Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux. First published 1809.
- Groethuysen, Bernard. 1977. *Origines de L’esprit Bourgeois en France*. Paris: Gallimard. First published 1927.
- Guion, Béatrice. 2002. *Pierre Nicole Moraliste*. Paris: Champion.
- Guittienne-Mürger, Valérie, and Jean Lesaulnier. 2010. *L’abbé Grégoire et Port-Royal*. Paris: Nolin.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1989. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Enquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Kselman, Thomas. 2006. Challenging Dechristianization: The Historiography of Religion in Modern France. *Church History* 75: 130–39. [CrossRef]
- Kwass, Michael. 2000. *Privilege and the Politics of Taxation in Eighteenth-Century France*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Le Brun, Jacques. 2021. L’Augustinus de Jansenius, théologie positive, spiritualité, anthropologie. *Revue de l’histoire des Religions* 238: 71–86. [CrossRef]
- Lyon-Caen, Nicolas. 2010. *La boîte à Perrette, le Jansénisme Parisien au XVIIIème Siècle*. Paris: Albin Michel.
- Maire, Catherine. 1991. L’Église et la nation. Du dépôt de la vérité au dépôt des lois: La trajectoire janséniste au XVIIIe siècle. *Annales ESC* 46: 1177–205. [CrossRef]
- Maire, Catherine. 1997. Port-Royal. La fracture janséniste. In *Les Lieux de Mémoire, t. II: La Nation*. Edited by Pierre Nora. Paris: Gallimard, pp. 2605–52.
- Maire, Catherine. 1998. *De la Cause de Dieu à la Cause de la Nation. Le jansénisme au XVIIIe Siècle*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Maire, Catherine. 2004. Aux sources politiques et religieuses de la Révolution française: Deux modèles en discussion. *Le Débat* 130: 133–53. [CrossRef]
- Maire, Catherine. 2005. *Les Convulsionnaires de Saint-Médard. Miracles, Convulsions et Prophéties à Paris au XVIIIe Siècle*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Maistre, Joseph de. 2006. *De l’Église Gallicane dans son Rapport avec le Saint-Siège. Du Jansénisme et du Gallicanisme à l’ère Révolutionnaire*. Sainte-Croix-du-Mont: Éditions Saint-Remi. First published 1821.
- Manent, Pierre. 2007. *Naissances de la Politique Moderne: Machiavel, Hobbes, Rousseau*. Paris: Gallimard. First published 1977.
- Marandé, Léonard de. 1654. *Inconvénients [sic] d’État Procédant du Jansénisme*. Paris: Cramoisy.
- Marin, Louis. 1975. *La Critique du Discours, sur la « Logique de Port-Royal » et les « Pensées » de Pascal*. Paris: Minuit.
- Mazauric, Claude. 2003. Book review: Dale K. Van Kley, Les origines religieuses de la Révolution française. *Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française* 331: 186–89. [CrossRef]
- McKenna, Antony. 1993. *Entre Descartes et Gassendi, La première Edition des Pensées de Pascal*. Paris: Universitas. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation.

- Mellet, Paul-Alexis Mellet, ed. 2006. *Et de sa Bouche Sortait un Glaive. Les Monarchomaques au XVIème Siècle*. Genève: Droz.
- Michel, Marie-José. 2000. *Jansénisme et Paris (1640–1730)*. Paris: Klincksieck.
- Michelet, Jules. 1957. *Histoire de la Révolution Française*. 2 vols. Paris: Gallimard. First published 1847–1853.
- Misono, Keisuke. 2012. *Écrire Contre le Jansénisme. Léonard de Marandé Polémiste Vulgarisateur*. Paris: Honoré Champion.
- Mornet, Daniel. 1967. *Les Origines Intellectuelles de la Révolution Française 1715–1787*. Paris: Armand Colin. First published 1933.
- Nadeau, Christian. 1997. Conscience nationale et raison d'État. *Le Mars gallicus de Jansenius et la critique de Léonard de Marandé. Chroniques de Port Royal* 46: 185–96.
- Namer, Gérard. 1964. *L'abbé Le Roy et ses amis. Essai sur le Jansénisme Extrémiste Intramondain*. Paris: SEVPEN.
- Newton, William Ritchey. 1999. *Sociologie de la Communauté de Port-Royal. Histoire, Économie*. Paris: Klincksieck.
- Nicole, Pierre. 1755. *Essais de Morale*. Paris: G. Desprez. First published 1670.
- Nicole, Pierre. 2016. *Essais de Morale, Choix D'essais Introduits et Annotés par Laurent Thirouin*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres. First published 1670.
- Nora, Pierre. 1984. Entre mémoire et Histoire. La problématique des lieux. In *Les Lieux de Mémoire, t. I*. Edited by Pierre Nora. Paris: Gallimard, pp. 25–43.
- Nora, Pierre, ed. 1996–1998. *Realms of Memory*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Pascal, Blaise. 1866. *Letters to a Provincial*. Translated by Thomas M'Crie. New York: Hurd and Houghton.
- Pascal, Blaise. 2000. *Pensées*. Edited by Philippe Sellier. Paris: LGF.
- Plonger, Bernard. 1968. Regards sur l'historiographie religieuse de la révolution. II. La déchristianisation. *Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française* 192: 145–205. Available online: https://www.persee.fr/doc/ahrf_0003-4436_1968_num_192_1_3977 (accessed on 1 February 2026). [CrossRef]
- Popkin, Richard. 2003. *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. First published 1960.
- Préclin, Edmond. 1928. *Les Jansénistes du XVIII^e Siècle et la Constitution Civile du Clergé*. Paris: Gamber.
- Sainte-Beuve, Charles-Augustin. 1953–1955. *Port-Royal*. 3 vols. Paris: Gallimard. First published 1867.
- Salin, Dominique. 2021. *Le Discernement des Esprits Selon Ignace de Loyola. Les Aléas d'un Héritage (XVIe-XXIe Siècles)*. Paris: Namur: Éditions Jésuites.
- Skocpol, Theda. 1979. *States and Social Revolutions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Starling, Andrew Elliot. 2022. From Meditation to Information: Reading After Unigenitus. Ph.D. thesis, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, USA. Available online: <https://repository.upenn.edu/handle/20.500.14332/32160> (accessed on 1 February 2026).
- Strayer, Brian E. 2008. *Suffering Saints: Jansensists and Convulsionnaires in France, 1640–1799*. Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press.
- Taine, Hippolyte. 1886. *Les Origines de la France Contemporaine, vol. 1, L'Ancien Régime*. Paris: Robert Laffont. First published 1876.
- Tallon, Alain. 1991. Prière et charité dans la Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement (1629–1667). *Histoire, Économie et Société* 1: 331–43. [CrossRef]
- Tans, Joseph Anna Guillaume. 1956. Les Idées Politiques des Jansénistes. *Néophilologus* 40: 1–18. [CrossRef]
- Taveneaux, René, ed. 1965. *Jansénisme et Politique*. Paris: A. Colin.
- Taveneaux, René. 1973. *La vie Quotidienne des Jansénistes*. Paris: Hachette.
- Thirolin, Laurent. 1991. *Le Hasard et les Règles. Le Modèle du jeu dans la Pensée de Pascal*. Paris: Vrin.
- Tocqueville, Alexis de. 1998. *The Old Regime and the Revolution*. Translated by Alan S. Kahan. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. First published 1856.
- Van Kley, Dale K. 1984. *The Damians Affair and the Unraveling of the Ancien Régime, 1750–1770*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Van Kley, Dale K. 1996. *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution: From Calvin to the Civil Constitution, 1560–1791*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Vermander, Benoît. 2023. Lecture de l'Écriture et Écriture Des Pensées. *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 79: 1345–66. [CrossRef]
- Vovelle, Michel. 1973. *Piété Baroque et Déchristianisation en Provence au XVIIIe Siècle*. Paris: Plon.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.