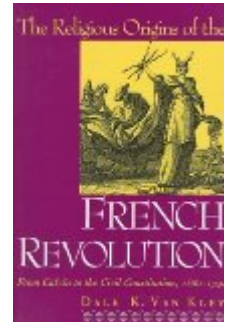


Dale K. Van Kley. *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution: From Calvin to the Civil Constitution, 1560-1791.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996. x + 390 pp. \$37.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-06478-0.



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Every undergraduate knows that religious issues were incidental to the French Revolution. As they read in the second chapter of Toqueville's *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, "the campaign against all forms of religion was merely incidental to the French Revolution, a spectacular but transient phenomenon, a brief reaction to the ideologies, emotions, and events which led up to it—but in no sense basic to its program." This nostrum that the revolution had no specifically religious content has been undermined by the work of scholars such as Timothy Tackett, Susan Desan, and Bernard Plongeron, who have picked up from the early research of Alphonse Aulard and Albert Mathiez on revolutionary religion. Dale Van Kley has been a central figure in this current of writing and in his new book argues that the revolution cannot be understood without attention to struggles over the nature of transcendence (i.e., the idea that ultimate values are expressed in a religious rather than a philosophical vein). Professor Van Kley's compelling thesis is that the armature of revolutionary ideological struggle was forged in the conflicts between Jansenist and orthodox Catholic throughout the eighteenth century. We

are invited to rediscover the conditions of secular ideology in religious debate, and to reflect on the religious content unwittingly carried into a politics which understood itself as irreligious and indeed at times anti-religious. Through a detailed narrative of public debate in the eighteenth century, this book establishes the ubiquity of the language of political theology in eighteenth-century French political life.

Van Kley moves us through a dialectic from the constitution of absolutist rule to the French Revolution. The thesis was Bourbon absolutism, a syncretic doctrine comprised of an imperial sovereignty welded to a defence of the privileges of the Gallican church. The antithesis was Jansenism, which began as a purified religious sensibility, but developed as the placeholder for every form of constitutional opposition. The synthesis, obviously, was the revolution, but the synthesis was a negative one in as much as the revolution was unable to resolve the religious energies which had inspired the conflicts of the preceding century. Unable, or unwilling, to recognize the theological roots of their views, revolutionary

agents sought to exclude religious expression altogether from the polity, with disastrous results. The argument can best be understood as a sophisticated and detailed version of Carl Becker's contention, in his *Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers*, that the categories of eighteenth-century thought were secularized versions of Christian, and specifically Augustinian theology. However, the dialectical mode of exposition provides us with a credible mechanism of secularization, where Becker's arguments did not.

The text is rich and the narrative detailed, and a reproduction of it falls outside the scope of this review. For instance, the description of the evolution across sixty years of the Unigenitus controversy, which saw the monarchy frustrated in its efforts to write a particular interpretation of orthodoxy into secular law while being a model of clarity in political narrative, resists summation. However, there are some features of the book which deserve to be emphasized as they offer particular insights into early modern French political culture. Van Kley's characterization of "sacral absolutism" is one of these features. That the French resolution of the seventeenth century crisis depended on a reinforcing doctrine of submission to royal power under the aegis of Catholic orthodoxy is well known; Van Kley's eye discerns the fractures built into this apparently flawless garment of absolute monarchy. Absolutist ideology sought to close off every avenue by which resistance might be approached and potential civil conflict initiated. Thus the political possibility of inferior magistrates contesting the royal will in the name of the constitution was denied, as was a religious duty superior to that of obedience to the monarch. Van Kley recognizes that the doctrine of submission, an ultramontane position, sat ill with the Gallican claim that the French church was self-governing. The Gallican declaration of 1682, with its pendant edict of 1695 reinforcing episcopal authority, sought to finesse this tension by

identifying the French church with the bishops and placing them firmly under royal control.

The match of temporal power to spiritual authority was never a clean fit, and sacral absolutism could be unpicked at the seam between the two. The Unigenitus controversy, and especially the refusal of sacraments debacle in the 1750s during which popular resistance to the imposition of religious authority escalated into a major constitutional crisis, provided just such an opportunity. What Van Kley clearly establishes is that the efficacy of the Jansenist and *parlementaire* critics of both episcopacy and crown depended on the incoherence within the alliance of throne and altar in the first place. He also, following American historian Jeffrey Merrick, succeeds in bringing back into focus the importance of the denial of confession to Louis XV by his Jesuit confessor in the 1740s, and his subsequent inability to touch for scrofula. Van Kley reminds us that the ritual of the King curing sickness with his sanctified hands retained its power even in the eighteenth century. Louis' irregular confessional state disallowed him from performing the most ancient of the rites of sacral kingship. Contradictory tendencies within sacral absolutism could only make themselves evident if the sacral aura of the crown itself was diminished.

Van Kley's account of the antithesis to sacral absolutism, *parlementaire* Jansenism, is rigorously coherent with his account of the monarchy. While he asserts that there was a theological specificity to Jansenism--and he gives due account of the roots of this pietist sensibility in reformed Christianity--he analyses political Jansenism as an invention of the monarchy itself. Jansenism was a tendency which organized all the elements left out of the absolutist structure, from parish priests expressing their grievance at the alienation of the tithe, to magistrates reduced to functionaries of the royal will. As the century progressed, the intellectual tendencies excluded from the monarchy also coalesced around Jansenism. Political

Jansenism was a protest movement, and thus Van Kley does not try to reconcile the various and divergent views of opposition writers to an essential Jansenist position. Rather, he argues that Jansenist political theology was characterized by its mode of expression: figurism. Figurism was fundamentally a biblical hermeneutic which saw persecuted minorities as justified witnesses, the saved and saving remnant on whom the rejection of Christ was again enacted and who in turn would enact his triumph of reformation of the Godly community.

Figurism provided the essential bridge between Port-Royal and the *Parlement de Paris*. Just as the scattered Jansenist prelates and priests were the vital witness to the truth of faith, so the magistrates and jurists of the courts were the witnesses to the truth of the constitution. Judicial Jansenism read profane history, especially the French sixteenth century, as spiritual Jansenism read sacred history, where the spiritual Jansenists saw the minority Jansenists as justified by their oppression by the church, so the proof of the magistrates' constitutional position was their steadfastness in the face of royal power. The act of retaining convictions against oppression was, to this way of thinking, proof of their truth. Even when the clerical basis of Jansenism was eradicated by Cardinal Andre-Hercule Fleury in the 1730s and 1740s, the Jansenist hermeneutic lived on in the magistrates. The fundamental sympathy of understanding between the two groups was the condition for the success of committed Jansenists, especially Adrien Le Paige, in rallying resistance to the King in the name of the Monarchy. Figurist rhetoric meant that conservative magistrates became unwitting historical cat's-paws for the Protestant resistance theorists of the late sixteenth century, and so, as Van Kley points out, the late eighteenth century replayed the late sixteenth. The emergence of a "reformed" tendency in French politics generated a "League", or orthodox Catholic party, and the very politico-religious

controversy which the absolute monarchy was designed to eliminate, instead eliminated it.

Van Kley reveals to us the extent to which political Jansenism was a constitutive element of the absolutist monarchy, a self-created but unwanted opposition. By this account, the constitution, for no better word, of the absolutist monarchy was shattered by the *antiparlementaire* Maupeou coup of the early 1770s. The structure of political contestation was transformed as was the meaning of opposition, by the threat to the social basis of the Jansenists, or patriots as they were newly styled. The novelty of the situation after the failed constitutional revolution, allied to the new forms of political thought generated by the Enlightenment, encouraged the old polarity of Jansenist and orthodox Catholic to transform itself into a variety of constitutional and eventually ideological positions. The erudition of this section of the book, which describes the legacy of Jansenist political mobilization to all parties in the conflicts of the reign of Louis XVI, is as impressive as one might hope it to be. However, the argument loses its structural cogency and instead becomes biographical as one moves toward 1789. The renewal of religious dissension in the 1750s drove the monarchy away from religious authority as its ultimate point of appeal, and so religion ceased to be the defining frame of public debate. Therefore, Jansenism lost its essential political role, but, importantly, no other language of politics replaced it. The very complexity of the political debate from 1771 to 1791 described in the text reveals the absence of a structuring language of politics rather than the ubiquity of secularized Jansenism. As Diderot noted in 1773, both monarchy and opposition were de-legitimized by the Maupeou coup. As he put it in his conversations with Catherine of Russia, the French body political imagined itself to be structured between constitutional guardians and monarchy, but there was no constitution and even the best of monarchs "is like a shepherd who reduces his people to the condition of animals." Diderot's view was hardly

dominant in 1773, but in rejecting the terms of political debate he was merely pointing in the direction abbe de Sieyes would take in his defining pamphlets of 1789. The new political value hammered out in the 1770s and 1780s—one contested between autonomy, happiness (the great discovery of the eighteenth century according to the theorist of the Revolutionary government, Louis de Saint-Just), and utility—did not continue in disguised terms the language of constitutional contestation in the idiom of political theology, but was a departure from it. Indeed, it could have been no other way. Given their mutual construction, the failure of sacral absolutism had to entail the collapse of judicial absolutism. The collapse of sacral absolutism robbed its opposition of its coherence.

As with any good historical monograph, then, this book throws light on its subject only to uncover the questions moving around it. Baldly put, if the religious content of the revolution was not dominated by Jansenism, then just what was its religious content? Was the creation of the counter-revolutionary right wing in alliance with ultramontane Catholicism a feature of the profound ideological sympathy between them? On the other hand, was some accommodation between Catholicism and the Revolution possible, as Susan Desan has recently argued? Was there, as the author puts it, a law of the conservation of religious energy in operation during the revolution, or, following the phrase of Hans Blumenberg, the German social theorist, did the revolution mark the advent of a modern age, legitimating itself without reference to ideas of transcendence? These are only some of the questions which arise from a reading of this book, and a reading of this book will be essential for anyone who wishes to engage with these questions.

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