

Church and culture in seventeenth-century France

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Introduction

'Hors de l'Eglise, point de salut'. The Church is an institution with powers of exclusion and inclusion through baptism and excommunication. Excommunication can take two forms: the first excludes the individual from the sacraments, the second from the church building itself. This concept of exclusion and inclusion thus gives rise to a notion of boundaries, and boundaries suggest a space. The believer stays within those boundaries: or places himself or herself outside them, or is expelled beyond them. The threshold of the church building thus brings together what one might call the abstract space of belief and the physical consequences of believing, or going against belief in terms of a 'real' space. This book is very much about a number of such spaces.

If the Church is a space in the way I have suggested, its control over that space is in large part determined by its power to define the criteria for belonging to it. The power and authority of the Church thus rest on the enforcement of these criteria which in themselves form a space of orthodoxy where adherence to orthodoxy allows one's continuing inclusion and where challenging it leads to expulsion. Orthodoxy itself has limits to the extent that the space of belief cannot be limitless. Nor does orthodoxy brook any rivalry. Jurisdiction is indispensable in the space of the Church.

The relation of the abstract to the real is an important component of space. While Port-Royal can be construed as an abstract space in the sense that it represents a position both within the space of orthodoxy and in relation to it, it is also a real space in both its construction and destruction as buildings. The school represents at the same time the space of education as we can understand it through the content of the curriculum but also a physical confine dictating aspects of behaviour and surveillance. Similarly the church building is a symbol of the sacred and of the faith, but the symbolism is, in Catholicism at least, represented in tangible form in terms of its architectural disposition and the representations of the sacred found there. The wider space of the Church was of course a real space in the sense that it was divided into provinces, dioceses and parishes. This

concept of the Church as a space is reinforced by Tridentine considerations concerning residence of priests and bishops alike, those in other words who could enforce the Church's jurisdiction of its territory over the faithful who inhabited it.

What unites these spaces is that they are all related to issues of power and control. Foucault was among the first to conceive the degree to which spaces are a function of power. In his *Histoire de la folie* he remarks: 'L'Hôpital général n'est pas un établissement médical. Il est plutôt une structure semi-juridique, une sorte d'entité administrative qui, à côté des pouvoirs déjà constitués, et en dehors des tribunaux, décide, juge et exécute . . . Il est une instance de l'ordre, de l'ordre monarchique et bourgeois qui s'organise en France à cette même époque.'¹ This sort of power, the power to confine the mad or the sick, is directly connected with the power to impose definitions which are then used to legitimate the authority of certain actions. In *The Birth of the Clinic* Foucault refers to what he calls a 'political consciousness' in the discourse of disease:

Medicine must no longer be confined to a body of techniques for curing the ill and of the knowledge that they require; it will also embrace a knowledge of *healthy man*, that is, a study of *non-sick* man and a definition of the *model man*. In the ordering of human existence it assumes a normative posture, which authorizes it not only to distribute advice as to healthy life, but also to dictate the standards for physical and moral relations of the individual and of the society in which he lives.²

This is not dissimilar to the functioning of religious orthodoxy. The norm established by orthodoxy, an exposition of which is the eternal function of the Church, permits the identification of the heterodox and hence the definition of spiritual 'illnesses' which must be eradicated, although it turns out that the heterodox has a function too, this time in helping to define more clearly what is orthodox. All aspects of life in society have in some way a relation to the space of orthodoxy to the extent that they are judged according to its criteria. Personal adherence to that orthodoxy is required if one is to remain within the territory of the Church. But it is not a space whose boundaries are movable according to personal interpretation. Indeed the room for manoeuvre in such a space is very limited if the notion of orthodoxy is to have any sense at all. Orthodoxy militates in favour of a homogeneous space and the identity of the Church as a space rests on the universality of its beliefs, hence the very great importance placed by the Catholic Church on an unbroken tradition of biblical interpretation and religious practice from the time of Christ through the Apostles and the early Church to the present day.

¹ M. Foucault, *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Paris, 1989), pp. 60–1.

² M. Foucault (trans. A. M. Sheridan), *The Birth of the Clinic: an Archaeology of Medical Perception* (London, 1989), p. 34 (Foucault's emphasis).

The concept of power in relation to a spiritual territory is further illustrated both at the level of the kingdom and in the links between France and international Catholicism. In the first place it was the (frustrated) wish of the Council of Trent to restore the authority of the Roman Catholic Church in the territories lost to Protestantism, perhaps symbolised in François de Sales's title as bishop of Geneva. The Church in France certainly regarded some of its own territory as lost to the Huguenots, especially in cities like Nîmes and La Rochelle whose populations in the early part of the century were overwhelmingly Protestant. The Catholic hierarchy, many of whom never accepted the act of toleration constituted by the Edict of Nantes in 1598, were quite simply not prepared to share the territory of France, their own 'space', with a religious competitor. The ambition of the Church was naturally to bring Protestants back into the space of the mother Church, 'le giron de l'Eglise', which they had so heedlessly abandoned.

The desire of the Council to reassert papal over temporal authority was not generally welcome in France, and, beyond jurisdiction in matters of faith, the extension of papal authority over Churches outside Rome was not wholly acceptable to the French Church. The assertion that the pope's authority was absolute in all matters relating to the Church and superior in that regard to the temporal authority could not possibly command assent from those sovereigns who had acquired privileges in the jurisdiction of their own Churches in agreements drawn up prior to the Council. For example, the Concordat of Bologna of 1516 gave the French sovereign certain rights in ecclesiastical administration, including nomination of bishops to certain sees. The situation of the Church in France was complicated by the refusal of the temporal authorities to integrate the decrees of the Council of Trent within the system of French law. The Council was never even officially 'received', despite the unilateral declaration of reception in 1615 by the Assembly of the Clergy of France, never ratified by royal authority. Gallican liberties as, for example, inscribed in the Concordat set limits to the jurisdiction of papal authority in the kingdom which assumed great political importance, particularly in the 'affaire de la régale' and the Jansenist controversy. At one stage in the century Richelieu envisaged the possibility of a national Church separate from that of Rome with himself as its patriarch.³

The space of the Church, both politically and morally, was a *totalising* force as represented in the Council of Trent's intention to establish what Anthony Wright calls 'the identity of the true Catholic

³ See J. Orcibal, 'Le Patriarcat de Richelieu devant l'opinion', in *Les Origines du Jansénisme*, vol. III (Paris, 1948), 108-46.

teaching'.⁴ Such a concept was wide-ranging in its implications, and indeed the delegates who attended the Council which lasted from 1548 to 1563 saw no reason to exclude from their deliberations any issue relative to the Christian religion in action at the level of the collectivity or the individual. This involved no less than the regeneration of spirituality in all sections of the community and in all forms of activity which could be devoted to God. It also entailed the elimination of those actions and agencies contrary to the letter and spirit of the Christian religion as it came to be defined by the Council. Its ambition was that no realm of social or political life could exclude a moral or religious dimension, both of which were to be exclusively interpreted within the framework of a Christian orthodoxy.

It is clear that the cultural domain in its broadest sense was meant to come under the surveillance of the Church. In addition to the strictures imposed explicitly in the domain of art at the last session of the Council, the French Catholic Church in the seventeenth century saw it as its task to root out what it thought were the nefarious consequences of a wide range of cultural activities, especially those associated with books and the theatre. The development of ideas in the realm of the new science – which challenged a number of traditional assumptions about explanations of the physical universe – and, more generally, all formulations of belief came under the closest scrutiny. No institution or group of any sort could hope to escape the eagle eye of those determined to expel any form of deviance from what was regarded as orthodox doctrine and from what were thought of as proper standards of behaviour in a Christian society. In this light the post-Tridentine Church promoted a respect for things sacred to which a more severe definition was given than in any previous period.

At the same time as providing coherence for a subject of such wide-ranging dimensions, the idea of space or spaces offers the possibility of problematising certain crucial social, cultural and ideological relationships. The ideal of the Church imposing itself as a totalising force in the kingdom of France was not without its problems, especially in view of competing claims, or at least resistance to the claims of the Church emanating from other spaces. One of these is what we might call the space of the 'world'. Indifference to its space was not something easily tolerated by a Church eager to occupy the whole space of social and cultural activity, and it was consequently difficult to envisage a space of the world with its own logic and laws co-existing with the space of the Church in the wider sense. It might be held that some aspects of behaviour were no business of the Church, a position articulated in Molière's play, *Le Tartuffe*

⁴ A. D. Wright, *The Counter-Reformation: Catholic Europe and the Non-Christian World* (London, 1982), p. 15.

(1669). The business of the Church was on the other hand deepening the faith of those who already possessed it and converting those who did not. The Church could not envisage itself being excluded from any imaginable space and its aspiration could be nothing less than 'filling the space'. The Church therefore had to persuade its constituency that leading a religious life and living a life in the world were compatible, despite the assertions of some within the space of the Church that they were not.

The modalities of persuasion were to give rise to considerable tension. The space of orthodoxy and its relation to other spaces did not always comprise a simple imposition of authority but required a certain negotiation. Two terms are important to an understanding of what follows: accommodation and assimilation. Accommodation points to two things. First, it indicates the degree to which, let us say, an idea is taken account of in order to produce a reformulation within the space of orthodoxy and which does not affect any article of faith. It may be perceived as involving not a shift in the definition of faith but a deeper understanding of it. In this case the idea is assimilated into a more general religious concept. Second, a negative sense of accommodation is one which leads to a compromise unacceptable to the unconditional guardians of orthodoxy. Some saw the accommodation of certain ideas as precisely an attack on and deformation of the original understanding of the faith. A similar definition of accommodation was ascribed to the agencies of the Church who operated in 'the world', that is to say outside the space of ordination. The Society of Jesus in particular was constantly accused, not exclusively by supporters of Port-Royal, of accommodating itself with worldly or even pagan ways in order to bring converts into the space of the Church.

A further problem was, however, that the definition of the space of orthodoxy, on which the occupation of other spaces rested, was in no way 'given'. The Church turned out not to be the homogeneous space of its aspirations. It can be reasonably argued that the limits of orthodoxy are difficult to set in advance and emerge only when they are challenged. The seventeenth-century French Church had many occasions on which to reflect on the boundaries of the space of orthodoxy, from arguments over the exact nature of Tradition, through bitter disputes over penitential theory and practice, to the limits to be set on biblical exegesis. Many also dissented from the association of Catholic orthodoxy with specific philosophical positions underpinned by the authority of St Thomas Aquinas's synthesis of Aristotelian and Christian thought. At the same time, all who participated in these disputes did not perceive themselves to be outside the space of orthodoxy and hence the space of the Church.

Finally, the Church had to contend with another agency which had its own totalising ambitions, royal power. This was evident in the unfolding

of gallicanism from the time of Richelieu to the end of Louis XIV's reign, and in the desire of the monarchy to control sectors previously the domain of the Church, like charity and the book trade. Battle was joined at various stages of the century on the ethical content of foreign and domestic policy, and the degree to which the Church should influence it. Equally, royal and ecclesiastical power had a combined interest in the control of culture and control through culture. The power of the Church in these areas, especially in the face of conflicting interests between the Church and the king, proved to have its own limits.

Orthodoxy is not only a problem for the Church but also for those writing about it. If orthodoxy is not a 'given', defining the Church as the space of orthodoxy seems to be putting the cart before the horse. On the other hand, a book has to start somewhere, and it seemed appropriate to look first at the general direction in which the Church's renewal in seventeenth-century France was moving. The approach I have adopted attempts first to lay out that programme and the many levels of institutional response before introducing the heavy battalions of dissent and dissension. This is not to say that, even within broad agreement on a pastoral programme, differences did not emerge over the manner of its implementation. Indeed, the unifying theme of this study is the degree to which, even in the areas of what were in its own terms the strengths of the Church, the seeds were sown of its vulnerability to all sorts of resistances and challenges, from the response of the faithful to attempts to root out all forms of 'deviant' beliefs or representations, to the response of the Church to new ideas and individuals or groupings, within and outside the Church, considered, rightly or wrongly, as hostile.

Chapter 1, then, will set out many aspects of the Church's pastoral action in respect of what is now known as the Catholic Reform. Whatever the intentions of the Council of Trent, the Church could not effectively influence the spaces outside its immediate space unless the Church itself was reformed in a variety of ways. Promoting respect for the sacred among the faithful could be successful only if those responsible for instruction understood fully themselves the nature of the faith. If the space of the Church is ultimately defined as the space of orthodoxy as established by and subsequent to the Council of Trent, then forms of participation must conform to that orthodoxy. This applied as much to the clergy as to the laity, and the Catholic Reform in seventeenth-century France addressed both these constituencies. Indeed, the link between them was organic in the sense that one of the clergy's obligations was to produce the sound believers from among whom future members of the clergy would be recruited: hence the constant emphasis at Trent on the duties and responsibilities of the clergy, from the bottom to the top of the hierarchy.

An important aspect of this reform emphasised the specially sanctified status of the priest. While certainly the laity was made increasingly aware of its place in respect of the limits of its participation in the Church's ceremonies and organisation, the regeneration of the faithful took a variety of forms, from the promotion of a spiritual life in the 'world' by St François de Sales to the creation of lay religious societies.

A widespread religious renewal could be achieved only by a greater penetration of the mass of the faithful by the Church. Chapter 2 looks at issues raised by the promotion of religion using secular artistic forms, and also at the promotion of the Church's presence and visibility in its spiritual territory, for example through the construction of new churches and religious houses, and the reconstruction of the old, all of which was designed to 'fill the space'. The establishment of schools of all types and at all levels of society became an important medium for the communication and dissemination of orthodoxy. The school as the disseminator of a particular type of culture and comportment is the subject of chapter 3.

It is in chapter 4 that we meet dissension as a major player in this study, in the different attitudes towards the Church in France as an institution reflecting French traditions, in the various interpretations of the tradition of the Church's teaching and attitudes towards biblical exegesis. Chapters 5 and 6 take the discussion of dissension a stage further with a detailed consideration of changes in the world of ideas, particularly in the confrontation of the two great intellectual traditions of the period: Thomism/Aristotelianism and Augustinianism. The advance of Cartesianism in particular and the new science in general encouraged people to understand orthodoxy and its relation to ideas in different ways without damaging teaching concerning articles of faith. Opposition within the space of the Church to the new thinking not only detracted from the homogeneity sought by those attempting to establish post-Tridentine formulations of orthodox positions, but led to the creation of new spaces within which new ideas could be discussed and disseminated.

While Descartes and others firmly situated themselves within the Church, despite their opposition to some of its philosophical positions, others either situated themselves outside the space of orthodoxy or were constructed by the Church as existing beyond its boundaries. The Catholic Church was not without its enemies or its critics in France in the seventeenth century. Hostility towards the Church might be held to take a number of forms. Intellectual *libertin* circles adopted what I have called a critical form of belief in that, while they did not reject the place of the Church in society, they did not necessarily feel that they could or should accept as a matter of course what they were expected unconditionally to accept. On the other hand, the Church constructed others as hostile, and

many clerics adopted the convenient labels of 'libertin' and 'athée' with which to categorise them. Protestants too were identified as hostile in their attack on many Catholic practices and beliefs. In the course of the century, however, it became rapidly apparent that some groups or individuals within the immediate space of the Church did not feel comfortable with ways in which, for example, debate was conducted or authority exercised. The confrontational nature of Port-Royal's increasingly hardening stance, certainly on the issue of papal, and eventually royal, authority threatened to lead to its exclusion from the space of the Church. Dissension became hostility for both sides. All these groups are discussed in chapters 7 and 8. Finally, given the extent and importance of the spaces of dissension and hostility, the Church was anxious to attempt some control of the dissemination of what it considered to be heterodox opinion both in society at large and in its own domain. Chapter 9 looks at the problems involved in such an attempt and the ways in which the Church had, from time to time, to combine with civil authority to stem the tide of 'dangerous' opinions.

All through my study, the relation of the space of orthodoxy to other spaces inevitably raises issues of the sacred and the profane, particularly the limits that can be ascribed to each. The reason for the Church's programme of elimination and reclamation derived precisely from the confusion in certain minds of the precise nature of the boundaries between them. To what degree was this situation clarified? Was the Church successful in its ambition to occupy the whole of the social and political space? To what extent did the space of ideas function independently of theological concerns? What was the significance of the creation of the Académie royale des sciences which deliberately excluded those in orders and any form of theological debate? What consequences ensued from the removal of censorship powers from the Church? An answer to these questions is attempted in my conclusion.

The breadth of this study has its own problems. Clearly the number of spaces that can be identified in the cultural domain will vary according to the vantage-point adopted or even according to one's preferences. Boundaries are notoriously mobile and I am not unaware of the infinite nature of space. The spaces I have picked out in this study are meant to represent as best as possible the range of activity in cultural life which the Church felt it necessary to scrutinise. I do not pretend for a moment that the list is either exhaustive or complete. I have wished simply to focus attention on what one might call cultural products such as art, literature, ideas and beliefs, all of which, for the faithful or others, sustained a relationship, a way of living and coping, an interface with life in this world and, where relevant, the next.