

JANSENISM



Jansenism is the religious principles laid down by Cornelius Jansen in his book, *Augustinus*. This was simply a digest of the teaching of St Augustine, drawn up with a special eye to the needs of the 17th century.

In Jansen's opinion the church was suffering from three evils. The official scholastic theology was anything but evangelical (that which is of the Gospel of Christ). Having set out to embody the mysteries of faith in human language, it had fallen a victim to the excellence of its own methods; language proved too strong for mystery. Theology sank into a branch of dialectic; whatever would not fit in with a logical formula was cast aside as useless. But average human nature does not take kindly to a syllogism, and theology had ceased to have any appreciable influence on popular religion. Simple souls found their spiritual pasture in little mincing "devotions"; while more robust minds built up for themselves a natural moralistic religion, quite as close to Epictetus as to Christianity.

All these three evils were attacked by Jansen. As against the theologians, he urged that a spiritual religious experience, not reason, must be our guide. As against the stoical self-sufficiency of the moralists, he dwelt on the helplessness of man and his dependence on his maker. As against the ceremonialists, he maintained that no amount of church-going will save a man, unless the love of God is in him. But this capacity for love no one can give himself. If he is born without the religious instinct, he can only receive it by going through a process of "conversion." And whether God converts this man or that depends on his good pleasure. Thus Jansen's theories of conversion melt into predestination; although, in doing so, they somewhat modify its grimness. Even for the worst miscreant there is hope - for who can say but that God may yet think fit to convert him? Jansen's thoughts went back every moment to his two spiritual heroes, St Augustine and St Paul, each of whom had been "the chief of sinners."



Such doctrines have a marked analogy to those of Calvin; but in many ways Jansen differed widely from the Protestants. He vehemently rejected their doctrine of justification by faith alone; conversion might be instantaneous, but it was only the beginning of a long and gradual process of justification. Secondly, although the one thing necessary in religion was a personal relation of the human soul to its maker, Jansen held that that relation was only possible in and through the Roman Church. Herein he was following Augustine, who had managed to couple together a

high theory of church authority and sacramental grace with a strongly personal religion.

But the circumstances of the 17th century were not those of the 5th; and Jansen landed his followers in an inextricable confusion. What were they to do, when the outward church said one thing, and the inward voice said another? Some time went by, however, before the two authorities came into open conflict.

Jansen's ideas were popularized in France by his friend Du Vergier, abbot of St Cyran; and he dwelt mainly on the practical side of the matter - on the necessity of conversion and love of God, as the basis of the religious life. This brought him into conflict with the Jesuits, whom he accused of giving absolution much too easily, without any serious inquiry into the dispositions of their penitent. His views are expounded at length by his disciple, Antoine Arnauld, in a book on *Frequent Communion* (1643). This book was the first manifestation of Jansenism to the general public in France, and raised a violent storm. But many divines supported Arnauld; and no official action was taken against his party till 1649. In that year the Paris University condemned five propositions from Jansen's *Augustinus*, all relative to predestination. This censure, backed by the signatures of eighty-five bishops, was sent up to Rome for endorsement; and in 1653 Pope Innocent X. declared all five propositions heretical.



This decree placed the Jansenists between two fires; for although the five propositions only represented one side of Jansen's teaching, it was recognized by both parties that the whole question was to be fought out on this issue. Under the leadership of Arnauld, who came of a great family of lawyers, the Jansenists accordingly took refuge in a series of legal tactics. Firstly, they denied that Jansen had meant the propositions in the sense condemned. Alexander VII replied (1656) that his predecessor had condemned them in the sense intended by their author. Arnauld retorted that the church might be infallible in abstract questions of theology; but as to what was passing through an author's mind it knew no more than any one else. However, the French government supported the pope. In 1656 Arnauld was deprived of his degree, in spite of Pascal's *Provincial Letters* (1656-1657), begun in an attempt to save him. In 1661 a formulary, or solemn renunciation of Jansen, was imposed on all his suspected followers; those who would not sign it went into hiding, or to the Bastille. Peace was only restored under Pope Clement IX in 1669.



This peace was treated by Jansenist writers as a triumph; really it was the beginning of their downfall. They had set out to reform the Church of Rome; they ended by having to fight hard for a doubtful foothold

within it. Even that foothold soon gave way. King Louis XIV was a fanatic for uniformity, civil and religious; the last thing he was likely to tolerate was a handful of eccentric recluses, who believed themselves to be in special touch with Heaven, and therefore might at any moment set their conscience up against the law. During the lifetime of his cousin, Madame de Longueville, the great protectress of the Jansenists, Louis stayed his hand; on her death (1679) the reign of severity began. That summer Arnauld, who had spent the greater part of his life in hiding, was forced to leave France for good.

Six years later he was joined in exile by Pasquier Quesnel who succeeded him as leader of the party. Long before his flight from France Quesnel had published a devotional commentary - *Reflexions morales sur le Nouveau Testament* - which had gone through many editions without exciting official suspicion. But in 1695 Louis Antoine de Noailles, bishop of Chalons, was made archbishop of Paris. He was known to be very hostile to the Jesuits, and at Chalons had more than once expressed official approval of Quesnel's *Reflexions*. So the Jesuit party determined to wreck the archbishop and book at the same time. The Jansenists played into their hands by suddenly raising (1701) in the Paris divinity school the question whether it was necessary to accept the condemnation of Jansen with interior assent, or whether a "respectful silence" was enough. Very soon ecclesiastical France was in a blaze. In 1703 Louis XIV. wrote to Pope Clement XI, proposing that they should take joint action to make an end of Jansenism for ever. Clement replied in 1705 with a bull condemning respectful silence.

This measure only whetted Louis's appetite. He was growing old and increasingly superstitious; the affairs of his realm were going from bad to worse; he became frenziedly anxious to propitiate the wrath of his maker by making war on the enemies of the Church. In 1711 he asked the pope for a second, and still stronger bull, that would tear up Jansenism by the roots. The pope's choice of a book to condemn fell on Quesnel's *Reflexions*; in 1713 appeared the bull *Unigenitus*, anathematizing no less than one-hundred-and-one of its propositions. Indeed, in his zeal against the Jansenists the pope condemned various practices in no way peculiar to their party; thus, for instance, many orthodox Catholics were exasperated at the heavy blow he dealt at popular Bible reading. Hence the bull met with much opposition from Archbishop de Noailles and others who did not call themselves Jansenists.

In the midst of the conflict Louis XIV died (September 1715); but the freethinking duke of Orleans, who succeeded him as regent, continued after some wavering to support the bull. Thereupon four bishops appealed against it to a general council; and the country became divided into "appellants" and "acceptants" (1717). The regent's disreputable minister, Cardinal Dubois, patched up an abortive truce in 1720, but the appellants promptly "re-appealed" against it. During the next ten years, however, they were slowly crushed, and in 1730 the *Unigenitus* was proclaimed part and parcel of the law of France. This led to a

great quarrel with the judges, who were intensely Gallican in spirit and had always regarded the *Unigenitus* as a triumph of ultramontanism. The quarrel dragged indefinitely on through the 18th century, though the questions at issue were really constitutional and political rather than religious.

Meanwhile the most ardent Jansenists had followed Quesnel to Holland. Here they met with a warm welcome from the Dutch Catholic body, which had always been in close sympathy with Jansenism, although without regarding itself as formally pledged to the *Augustinus*. But it had broken loose from Rome in 1702, and was now organizing itself into an independent catholic church centered in Utrecht.

The Jansenists who remained in France had meanwhile fallen on evil days. Persecution usually begets hysteria in its victims; and the more extravagant members of the party were far advanced on the road which leads to apocalyptic prophecy and "speaking with tongues." About 1728 the "miracles of Saint Medard" became the talk of Paris. This was the cemetery where was buried Francois de Paris, a young Jansenist deacon of singularly holy life, and a fervid opponent of the *Unigenitus*. All sorts of miraculous cures were believed to have been worked at his tomb, until the government closed the cemetery in 1732. This gave rise to the famous epigram: *De par le roi, defense a Dieu De faire miracle en ce lieu.*

On the miracles soon followed the rise of the so-called Convulsionaries. These worked themselves up, mainly by the use of frightful self-tortures, into a state of frenzy, in which they prophesied and cured diseases. They were eventually disowned by the more reputable Jansenists, and were severely repressed by the police. But in 1772 they were still important enough for Diderot to enter the field against them. Meanwhile genuine Jansenism survived in many country parsonages and convents, and led to frequent quarrels with the authorities. Only one of its latter-day disciples, however, rose to real eminence; this was the Abbe Henri Gregoire, who played a considerable part in the French Revolution. A few small Jansenist congregations still survive in France; and others have been started in connexion with the Old Catholic Church in Holland.

Literature: - For the 17th century see the *Port Royal* of Sainte-Beuve (5th ed., Paris, 1888) in six volumes. See also H. Reuchlin, *Geschichte von Port Royal* (2 vols. Hamburg, 1839 - and C. Beard, *Port Royal* (2 vols., London, 1861). No satisfactory Roman Catholic history of the subject exists, though reference may be made to Count Joseph de Maistre's *De l'eglise gallicane* (last ed., 1844), Lyons, 1881). On the Jansenism of the 18th century no single work exists, though much information will be found in the *Gallican Church* of Canon Jervis (2 vols., London, 1872). For a series of excellent sketches see also Seche, *Les Derniers Jansenistes* (3 vols. Paris, 1891). A more detailed list of books bearing on the subject will be found in the 5th volume of the *Cambridge Modern History*; and J. Paquier's *Le Jansenisme* (Paris, 1909) may also be consulted.

