

A Jesuit Journal in the Age of the Enlightenment

by

Rev. Cyril O'KEEFE, S.J.,
Jesuit House of Studies, Toronto, Ontario

Although in recent years historians have shown considerable interest in that very formative period of European History, the Age of the Enlightenment, there still remain many problems in the period which deserve further investigation. It was a time of radical and sudden change, so rapid, in fact, that with reason it has been termed an Intellectual Revolution. The nature of the change, of course, is most important and has been the subject of long study; it is not so clear why the movement became so popular in such a short time. While the main contributions to the Age of Ideas were made by an intellectual élite, the student of the period is impressed by the speed with which these ideas were taken up by the educated public who enthusiastically accepted them as significant signs of the intellectual superiority of that age.

The problem is a most complex one, yet certain approaches to a solution might be suggested. Many of the writings of the *philosophes* were, to be sure, written with a popular appeal and were widely read; Diderot's *Encyclopedia* provided a compendium of the new ideas which was consulted with avid interest; the salons, where the new learning was discussed, were fashionable meeting places for the intelligentsia of both upper and middle classes. Still another method of popularization, and a most valuable one, was found in a new type of publication which first appeared in France in the mid-seventeenth century, and was aimed at making available to the public digests of all the main current publications in almost every field of knowledge. The new publication, a monthly periodical, called a journal, best described perhaps as a combination of the modern book digests and the scholarly journals, fulfilled a definite need. And yet even though by the beginning of the eighteenth century there were many journals in existence, it was the original, the *Journal des savants*, an official publication of the French Academy, which remained the most popular, and after which new journals were modelled. It was to this journal that the Jesuits turned in 1701 when they began their *Journal de Trévoux*. Using it as their model they began a new journal which grew to fame in its own right, and is still of importance today as a valuable source of information on current opinion of the Enlightenment movement.

It is a curious incident, perhaps one which reflects on the lack of interest on the part of Catholic historians in dealing with the period of the Enlightenment, that scholars have been slow to give to this journal the attention which it

undoubtedly deserves. In the last few years research has been begun in the form of dissertations in three leading secular universities. One of these dissertations has been recently published. Previously it had been the subject of two studies, one in the last century by the Jesuit historian Sommervogel, the other, the published Ph. D. thesis of Father Dumas, S.J. Finally, Prof. Palmer of Princeton University and the French historians, Paul Hazard and Daniel Mornet, have kept some general interest in the *Journal* alive by their references to it in their works on the Enlightenment.

The *Journal de Trévoux* (its full title was *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire des sciences et des beaux-arts*) was begun, it seems likely, on the initiative of Louis XIV's natural son, the Duke de Maine, who sought to provide for his personal duchy, the Duchy of Dombes, a small district near Lyons, a journal which would in some way compare with that of the French Academy. In answer to the Duke's appeal, the Jesuits at the influential college of Louis-le-Grand in Paris undertook to publish the new journal; the first number appeared in 1701, printed by the Duke's printers in the small town of Trévoux in Dombes. That the Jesuits' *Journal* compared favorably from the beginning with the Academy's *Journal des savants*, despite various technical difficulties which plagued the publishers in the early years of publication, is a distinct tribute to the competence of the members of the faculty of Louis-le-Grand and to their valuable library facilities, and as well to the many other Jesuit correspondents in France and in other parts of Europe who cooperated with the editors in providing material for publication. It is true that contributions from non-Jesuits were sought; some important articles, for example, appear in the *Journal* from such distinguished non-Jesuits as Leibnitz and Voltaire. The assumption is, however, that since most of the articles and summaries of books are unsigned, the greatest part of the material published was written by the editorial staff and other Jesuit correspondents.

Indeed it was precisely because the editors at Louis-le-Grand could supplement their work with the help of other members of their Order that the project was at all feasible. Since the Journalists' aim was to inform the public on advancements in learning, whether speculative or technical, their sources of information had to be extensive and dependable. At the same time they had to have recourse to the advice of specialists, where this was possible, in assessing the value of new works in fields outside the competence of the editors themselves. In practice the correspondents were called upon to send digests of books and news items. It is interesting to note that the early plan of the Journalists enabled the authors to provide their own abstracts of their work, but after some experimentation it was decided that more profit would come from summaries made by unbiased readers. The greater part of each number was devoted to these summary accounts; with the result that over a period of sixty-two years, in more than 150,000 printed pages, much of the literature which appeared in Europe in the first half of the eighteenth century was commented upon in the *Journal*. Little emphasis was placed upon original

articles, though they do occasionally appear, and are valuable indications of the mind of the editors and Journalists. Where the Jesuit Journal differed from the secular journals was in its effort to single out objectionable writings which were offensive on moral and religious grounds. In the early years the critical tone was not marked, but as the *philosophe* party sharpened its attack on religion and the government, particularly after 1750, the adverse criticism of the *Journal* increased. Yet there still remained a large portion of the new publications in the arts and sciences which were not only acceptable to the Journalists but praiseworthy indications of the advancement in learning of their day.

As is to be expected the standard of the Journal varied considerably in its more than sixty-year history. However, in the period from 1745 to the expulsion of the Jesuits from France in 1762, and the consequent discontinuation of the Journal as a Jesuit periodical, it seems to have maintained a consistently high quality, at a time when, because of the growth of irreligion, its usefulness to Catholic readers was most marked. No doubt the main reason for this success was the noted ability of its editor, Père Berthier, who, while a friend of many of the *philosophes* and ready to recognize their talents, did not hesitate to point out the harmful trends in their writings. Earlier in its history other distinguished Jesuits collaborated on the *Journal*: among these were Buffier, a philosopher highly regarded by his contemporaries; the scientist Castel, friend and advisor of Montesquieu; Tournemine, a gifted litterateur and close friend of Voltaire; and Charlevoix, an historian whose interests extended to New France which he once visited on official business of the French Court. Unfortunately, since no record of the circulation of the *Journal* has survived, it is impossible to say how widely the Journal was read. It is known, however, that reprints and translations of whole volumes were made around the mid-century by publishers in Italy and Holland and that some interest was shown by two booksellers in reprinting the whole collection of the numbers since 1701. And the esteem of the state government for the periodical was shown when it insisted on having the *Journal* continued after the expulsion of the Jesuits, and tried unsuccessfully to obtain the services of Berthier as editor.

Accepted then as an important periodical in its day, the *Journal de Trévoux* remains a valuable source of material for the modern historian of the Enlightenment. In common with the other leading journals it provides the historian of ideas with a bibliography and a summary of the current literature of the eighteenth century, particularly in France. A good deal of this literature has not survived, but still reflects in its own way, less impressively than the writings of the *philosophes*, it is true, the spirit of the times. The *Journal* illustrates too the shifts of emphasis of interests from 1700 to 1762 from the arts to the sciences, then to the practical and the technical, and later to social studies. This is still recognized as the trend which was established in the readjustment of ideas in the Enlightenment period. Of more value, however, is the judgement that the Journalists pass on the contemporary intellectual developments, a judgement which there is reason to regard as balanced and judicious, particularly in

comparison with that of the Jansenists, the *philosophes*, and other enthusiasts of the time. The Journalists took their part in the Enlightenment; they were in a sense men of the Enlightenment; they helped to spread the new learning. The Journalists demonstrate in their own way the important fact that the readjustment of ideas of this period extended to Catholics as well as to non-believers, that the Enlightenment was by no means essentially an irreligious movement upon which the Church looked with distrust.

An illustration of this attitude of the Journalists might be found, for instance, in their appraisal of Diderot's *Encyclopedia*, which, with certain qualifications, they found quite praiseworthy. In like fashion, they approved of the popular interest in philosophic studies and of the growth in science. At the same time the pages of the *Journal* testify to the dismay on the part of its editors at the growth of deism and religious indifference in France, which they felt was being encouraged by the many deist tracts smuggled into the country from England. Thus they sharply criticised Pope's *Essay on Man* for the deist doctrine it contained at a time when the poem was received with great acclaim in France. Their attitude is also illustrated in their treatment of Voltaire's writings. The Journalists, some of whom had taught Voltaire, singled him out early in his career as a most gifted writer, and indeed helped to popularize his writings. Objectionable trends in his early writings were noticed; but they appear to have regarded these as merely the signs of a versatile, though immature, poet misled by his deist and irreligious associates. Meanwhile in his correspondence with the Journalists which was carried on from 1730 to 1750 Voltaire showed that while he would not expurgate his works, he was anxious to continue his association with them. Various motives have been suggested for this association, perhaps a desire to have the advice of the Jesuits in literary questions, perhaps his personal friendship for the two Jesuits, Porée and Tournemine, which is described frequently in his letters. These more or less amicable relations ended rather abruptly in the early 1750's, partly for personal reasons, and partly because the *philosophes* had become united and were launching a vigorous and more open campaign against the Church. From then until 1762 the Journalists painstakingly and without rancor pointed out to its reading public the objectionable publications appearing, with the hope of offsetting the damage that might be done. How much they were able to accomplish in this respect it is impossible to say.

There are other aspects of the *Journal* which might be treated; those mentioned should be enlarged upon. But perhaps this brief account will give some indication of the nature of the task that the Journalists assumed in 1701 and how that task was carried out during the *Journal's* history. What the Journalists accomplished is still of value today to the historian of ideas, particularly to the Catholic historian of ideas. Its full value and full significance can only be grasped when it is considered in reference to the age in which it was published. For the *Journal de Trévoux* was not only a Journal in the Age of the Enlightenment, it was also in a real sense a Journal of the Age of the Enlightenment.