

1660 PROVINCIAL LETTERS

by Blaise Pascal

translated by Thomas M'Crie

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1657 THE PROVINCIAL LETTERS

by Blaise Pascal

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LETTER I

Paris, January 23, 1656 SIR,

We were entirely mistaken. It was only yesterday that I was undeceived. Until that time I had laboured under the impression that the disputes in the Sorbonne were vastly important, and deeply affected the interests of religion. The frequent convocations of an assembly so illustrious as that of the Theological Faculty of Paris, attended by so many extraordinary and unprecedented circumstances, led one to form such high expectations that it was impossible to help coming to the conclusion that the subject was most extraordinary. You will be greatly surprised, however, when you learn from the following account the issue of this grand demonstration, which, having made myself perfectly master of the subject, I shall be able to tell you in very few words.

Two questions, then, were brought under examination; the one a question of fact, the other a question of right.

The question of fact consisted in ascertaining whether M. Arnauld was guilty of presumption, for having asserted in his second letter that he had carefully perused the book of Jansenius, and that he had not discovered the propositions condemned by the late pope; but that, nevertheless, as he condemned these propositions wherever they might occur, he condemned them in Jansenius, if they were really contained in that work.

The question here was, if he could, without presumption, entertain a doubt that these propositions were in Jansenius, after the bishop had declared that they were.

The matter having been brought before the Sorbonne, seventy-one doctors undertook his defence, maintaining that the only reply he could possibly give to the demands made upon him in so many publications, calling on him to say if he held that these propositions were in that book,

was that he had not been able to find them, but that if they were in the book, he condemned them in the book.

Some even went a step farther and protested that, after all the search they had made into the book, they had never stumbled upon these propositions, and that they had, on the contrary, found sentiments entirely at variance with them. They then earnestly begged that, if any doctor present had discovered them, he would have the goodness to point them out; adding that what was so easy could not reasonably be refused, as this would be the surest way to silence the whole of them, M. Arnauld included; but this proposal has been uniformly declined. So much for the one side.

On the other side are eighty secular doctors and some forty mendicant friars, who have condemned M. Arnauld's proposition, without choosing to examine whether he has spoken truly or falsely- who, in fact, have declared that they have nothing to do with the veracity of his proposition,

but simply with its temerity.

Besides these, there were fifteen who were not in favor of the censure, and who are called Neutrals.

Such was the issue of the question of fact, regarding which, I must say, I give myself very little concern. It does not affect my conscience in the least whether M. Arnauld is presumptuous or the reverse; and should I be tempted, from curiosity, to ascertain whether these propositions are contained in Jansenius, his book is neither so very rare nor so very large as to hinder me from reading it over from beginning to end, for my own satisfaction, without consulting the Sorbonne on the matter.

Were it not, however, for the dread of being presumptuous myself, I really think that I would be disposed to adopt the opinion which has been formed by the most of my acquaintances, who, though they have believed hitherto on common report that the propositions were in Jansenius, begin now to suspect the

contrary, owing to this strange refusal to point them out- a refusal the more extraordinary to me as I have not yet met with a single individual who can say that he has discovered them in that work. I am afraid, therefore, that this censure will do more harm than good, and that the impression which it will leave on the minds of all who know its history will be just the reverse of the conclusion that has been come to. The truth is that the world has become sceptical of late and will not believe things till it sees them. But, as I said before, this point is of very little moment, as it has no concern with religion.

The question of right, from its affecting the faith, appears much more important, and, accordingly, I took particular pains in examining it. You will be relieved, however, to find that it is of as little consequence as the former.

The point of dispute here was an assertion of M. Arnauld's in the same letter, to the effect "that the grace,

without which we can do nothing, was wanting to St. Peter at his fall." You and I supposed that the controversy here would turn upon the great principles of grace; such as whether grace is given to all men? Or if it is efficacious of itself? But we were quite mistaken. You must know I have become a great theologian within this short time; and now for the proofs of it!

To ascertain the matter with certainty, I repaired to my neighbor, M. N., doctor of Navarre, who, as you are aware, is one of the keenest opponents of the Jansenists, and, my curiosity having made me almost as keen as himself, I asked him if they would not formally decide at once that "grace is given to all men," and thus set the question at rest. But he gave me a sore rebuff and told me that that was not the point; that there were some of his party who held that grace was not given to all; that the examiners themselves had declared, in a full assembly of the Sorbonne, that that opinion was problematical; and that he himself held the

same sentiment, which he confirmed by quoting to me what he called that celebrated passage of St. Augustine: "We know that grace is not given to all men."

I apologized for having misapprehended his sentiment and requested him to say if they would not at least condemn that other opinion of the Jansenists which is making so much noise: "That grace is efficacious of itself, and invincibly determines our will to what is good." But in this second query I was equally unfortunate. "You know nothing about the matter," he said; "that is not a heresy- it is an orthodox opinion; all the Thomists maintain it; and I myself have defended it in my Sorbonic thesis."

I did not venture again to propose my doubts, and yet I was as far as ever from understanding where the difficulty lay; so, at last, in order to get at it, I begged him to tell me where, then, lay the heresy of M. Arnauld's proposition. "It lies here," said he, "that he does not acknowledge that the righteous have the power of obeying the commandments of

God, in the manner in which we understand it."

On receiving this piece of information, I took my leave of him; and, quite proud at having discovered the knot of the question, I sought M. N-, who is gradually getting better and was sufficiently recovered to conduct me to the house of his brother-in-law, who is a Jansenist, if ever there was one, but a very good man notwithstanding. Thinking to insure myself a better reception, I pretended to be very high on what I took to be his side, and said: "Is it possible that the Sorbonne has introduced into the Church such an error as this, 'that all the righteous have always the power of obeying the commandments of God?'"

"What say you?" replied the doctor. "Call you that an error- asentiment so Catholic that none but Lutherans and Calvinists impugn it?"

"Indeed!" said I, surprised in my turn; "so you are not of their opinion?"

"No," he replied; "we anathematize it as heretical and impious."

Confounded by this reply, I soon discovered that I had overacted the Jansenist, as I had formerly overdone the Molinist. But, not being sure if I had rightly understood him, I requested him to tell me frankly if he held "that the righteous have always a real power to observe the divine precepts?" Upon this, the good man got warm (but it was with a holy zeal) and protested that he would not disguise his sentiments on any consideration- that such was, indeed, his belief, and that he and all his party would defend it to the death, as the pure doctrine of St. Thomas, and of St. Augustine their master.

This was spoken so seriously as to leave me no room for doubt; and under this impression I returned to my first doctor and said to him, with an air of great satisfaction, that I was sure there would be peace in the Sorbonne very soon; that the Jansenists were quite at one with them in

reference to the power of the righteous to obey the commandments of God; that I could pledge my word for them and could make them seal it with their blood.

"Hold there!" said he. "One must be a theologian to see the point of this question. The difference between us is so subtle that it is with some difficulty we can discern it ourselves- you will find it rather too much for your powers of comprehension. Content yourself, then, with knowing that it is very true the Jansenists will tell you that all the righteous have always the power of obeying the commandments; that is not the point in dispute between us; but mark you, they will not tell you that that power is proximate. That is the point."

This was a new and unknown word to me. Up to this moment I had managed to understand matters, but that term involved me in obscurity; and I verily believe that it has been invented for no other purpose than to mystify. I requested him to give me an explanation of it, but he made

a mystery of it, and sent me back, without any further satisfaction, to demand of the Jansenists if they would admit this proximate power. Having charged my memory with the phrase (as to my understanding, that was out of the question), I hastened with all possible expedition, fearing that I might forget it, to my Jansenist friend and accosted him, immediately after our first salutations, with: "Tell me, pray, if you admit the proximate power?" He smiled, and replied, coldly: "Tell me yourself in what sense you understand it, and I may then inform you what I think of it." As my knowledge did not extend quite so far, I was at a loss what reply to make; and yet, rather than lose the object of my visit, I said at random: "Why, I understand it in the sense of the Molinists." "To which of the Molinists do you refer me?" replied he, with the utmost coolness. I referred him to the whole of them together, as forming one body, and animated by one spirit.

"You know very little about the matter," returned he.

"So far are they from being united in sentiment that some of them are diametrically opposed to each other. But, being all united in the design to ruin M. Arnauld, they have resolved to agree on this term proximate, which both parties might use indiscriminately, though they understand it diversely, that thus, by a similarity of language and an apparent conformity, they may form a large body and get up a majority to crush him with the greater certainty."

This reply filled me with amazement; but, without imbibing these impressions of the malicious designs of the Molinists, which I am unwilling to believe on his word, and with which I have no concern, I set myself simply to ascertain the various senses which they give to that mysterious word proximate. "I would enlighten you on the subject with all my heart," he said; "but you would discover in it such a mass of contrariety and contradiction that you would hardly believe me. You would suspect me. To make sure of the matter, you had better learn it from

some of themselves; and I shall give you some of their addresses. You have only to make a separate visit to one called M. le Moine and to Father Nicolai."

"I have no acquaintance with any of these persons," said I.

"Let me see, then," he replied, "if you know any of those whom I shall name to you; they all agree in sentiment with M. le Moine."

I happened, in fact, to know some of them.

"Well, let us see if you are acquainted with any of the Dominicans whom they call the 'New Thomists,' for they are all the same with Father Nicolai."

I knew some of them also whom he named; and, resolved to profit by this council and to investigate the matter, I took my leave of him and went immediately to one of the disciples of M. le Moine. I begged him to inform me what it was to have the proximate power of doing anything.