

Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association Rapport de l'assemblée annuelle de la Société historique du Canada

Report of the Annual Meeting

Education Against the Jesuits: A Weapon of the Enlightenment

Richard M. Saunders

Volume 43, Number 1, 1964

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/300443ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/300443ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0317-0594 (print)

1712-9095 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Saunders, R. M. (1964). Education Against the Jesuits: A Weapon of the Enlightenment. *Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association / Rapport de l'assemblée annuelle de la Société historique du Canada*, 43(1), 71–79. <https://doi.org/10.7202/300443ar>

EDUCATION AGAINST THE JESUITS : A WEAPON OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

RICHARD M. SAUNDERS
University of Toronto

When, on the sixth of August, 1762, the Parlement of Paris proclaimed the famous *Arrêt* which ordered the exclusion of the Society of Jesus from France it was made very plain in that document that concern for public education was one of the main reasons for taking this drastic step. Furthermore, an examination of the charges brought against the Jesuits during the several trials in which they were involved shows that an attack upon their system of education and upon them as teachers played an important part in the construction of the case against the order. This line of attack was, indeed, an especially telling weapon in the hands of those who desired the destruction of the Society. In view of the long history of outstanding Jesuit success in the realm of education this fact requires explanation.

It must be remembered, first of all, that the years of the trials in the early 1760's were exactly the time when the intellectual and cultural movement that we call the Enlightenment was coming to full flood. Bernard de Fontenelle, who had preached the gospel of rational progress since 1688, had died in centenarian glory in 1757, honoured, respected, revered as herald of the road to the future. Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique* had had two generations in which to work its destructive ferment and John Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding* an equal time in which to raise hope. Voltaire's *Lettres philosophiques* was now nearly a generation old. His *Siècle de Louis XIV* appeared in 1751 and his *Essai sur les Mœurs* in 1756. This crusade, whose aim was *écraser l'infâme*, was reaching a climax. Montesquieu's *L'esprit des Loix* came out in 1748 and the *philosophe* editors of the *Encyclopédie*, which was launched in 1750, could count several of their volumes on library tables by the end of the decade. In the very years of the trials France would see Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, his *Emile* and *Le Contrat Social*. Truly, many Frenchmen were in a state of turbulent doubt and, at the same time, they were beginning to dream of a roseate future. It was, indeed, a period, as Paul Hazard has so aptly pointed out, when there was a profound *crise de la conscience*.¹

This spiritual crisis, which was a century or more developing, took an acute turn in the chaotic years after the death of Louis XIV when respect for tradition and authority suffered serious lapses. With an

¹ Hazard, Paul, *La Crise de la Conscience européenne* (Paris, 1935).

increasing distrust of the old ways and ideas went a mounting feeling of frustration as those who were sure they knew the way to bring about a new and better world found their way blocked, their hopes deferred by the as yet unbreached barriers of the Old Regime. In such a situation, education, with all its implications for the formation of the public mind and for the shaping of the future, was a natural field of battle.

Since, in the eyes of the newly enlightened, the Church in France and traditional Christianity were considered as being indissolubly bound up with the old society, — indeed, as being the spiritual core of that society and culture —, it was inevitable that the men of the new faith should open attack upon them. It was all the more certain that they would do so in that the faith of reason to which the enlightened adhered was in truth a new religion, a fact that became steadily more apparent as the fight went on. And, as the men of reason believed that education, properly conceived, was the chief — indeed the only means of ultimately creating the society of which they dreamed, they were bound to press for fundamental changes in that sphere. But at the helm of the ship of education in France stood the Church; in particular, the monastic orders with their nearly complete monopoly. If the Church appeared outmoded, an institution in need of renovation, the monastic orders were to the enlightened absolutely anachronistic. In these circumstances it is clear that the question, Should the control of education be left in the hands of this institution and of these people? was bound to arise.

Of all the monastic orders in eighteenth-century France none was more certain of being attacked, if opportunity offered, than the Society of Jesus. In spite of the tremendous prestige of the Jesuit schools, of Jesuits as educators, in spite of the influence that the order wielded in many ways, there were always Frenchmen who remembered that this order had come from outside France during the time of the terrible civil wars of the sixteenth century and that its origins and main inspiration had been Spanish. Spain had been France's mortal enemy and had nearly effected her ruin. Whatever the validity of the connection in French minds between the Jesuits and the fear and hatred of Spain the association of this order with the fear of a hostile enemy was there. It found repeated expression in every generation.

The fear of this "foreign order" was given especial point by common linking of its name with the assassination of the beloved Henri IV, the victor over Spain and the restorer of France. The charge of encouraging and teaching regicide was serious enough and much was made of it during the trials but that the king involved should have been Henri IV was particularly important in mid-eighteenth century for this king's name had now become synonymous not only with national glory but also with rational tolerance and freedom of thought. This was the king who had ended religious and civil strife in France with an act of toleration, the

Edict of Nantes, and who had put the interests of the country above those of religion. Though the men of reason theoretically opposed sanctification there can be no doubt that by the middle of the eighteenth century *Henri-Quatre* was to them a saint. The act of sanctification is to be read in the pages of Voltaire's *La Henriade*, published in 1728. That the Jesuits should be thought to have been involved in his assassination was bad enough for them. That they should also have been associated in many minds with Louis XIV's revocation of *Henri-Quatre's* Edict of Nantes, with, that is, an act of intolerance and oppression, was a further bitter blow to their reputation.

The Jesuits were also thought to have advised Louis XIV not to proceed too far in the creation of a Gallican church, thereby incurring the hatred of those French patriots who saw in the Gallican liberties the seal of national interest against a foreign power, in this case, Rome. Finally, they were a main party to the prolonged and bitter quarrel with the Jansenists, a struggle that earned them anew the name of abettors of religious strife, of intolerance and even of loose moral teaching. Pascal's *Lettres provinciales* had made that repute ineradicable. In these regards it is not to be forgotten that the greatest strength of both continuing Gallicanism and Jansenism lay in the magistracy, in the courts of France.

The Society of Jesus, it is clear, existed in eighteenth-century France in the midst of a highly emotional situation. This was made even worse when in 1757 the name of the order was coupled with Damiens' attempt to assassinate Louis XV. In view of the feelings that were aroused and of the suspicions that were being associated with their name it may easily be seen that their very prestige and power, especially in the field of education, was in itself a fearsome liability. It made their enemies doubly determined to get rid of them. At the same time the men of enlightenment were certain that getting rid of the Jesuits would be one of the best, one of the necessary ways of opening the gates to the new world of hope. "Les Jésuites étaient des troupes régulières; ralliées et disciplinées sous l'étendard de la superstition; c'était la phalange Macédonienne qu'il importait à la raison de voir rompue et détruite." Thus did D'Alembert express the view of the men of reason.² It is little wonder that the trials of the Jesuits became a *cause célèbre*.

It is not yet fully understood why the Jesuits committed the great imprudence of appealing the adverse decision of the Marseille court in the La Valette case to the Parlement of Paris. Once this unfortunate decision was made the case entered the national sphere and came to involve not only the Paris Parlement but the provincial parlements as well. What had been a local case became a full-fledged investigation of the place of the order in France and, finally, an all-out attack upon it.

² D'Alembert, J.B., *Le Rond, Sur la Destruction des Jésuites en France* (Paris, 1767), p. 248.

This attack focussed upon the Constitutions of the order and telling indictments were drawn up both in Paris and in other places. Of these the most important was that prepared by M. de la Chalotais, *Procureur-général* of the *Parlement de Bretagne*. This particular indictment was used with devastating effect, with the result that the author became a central figure in the trials and a hero to D'Alembert, to Voltaire and to all the *philosophes*. "Parmi tant de magistrats," wrote D'Alembert, "qui ont écrit dans l'affaire de la société de longs réquisitoires, M. de la Chalotais, procureur-général du parlement de Brétagne, paraît surtout avoir envisagé cette affaire en homme d'état, en philosophe, en magistrat éclairé et dégagé de tout esprit de haine et de parti."³

La Chalotais in his opening remarks in the *Compte Rendu des Constitutions des Jésuites*, published in 1762, makes it plain that he believes that this investigation involves great consequences for society, both civil and religious, for the state and for the education of youth. He then lays down his guiding principles: 1) A religious society must never act contrary to the laws of the state; 2) It must always have as its aim usefulness to humanity and the advantage of religion; 3) The constitutions and structure of any order must be tested by natural law and by positive laws, both human and divine, but particularly by those of France.⁴ Proceeding thence to a general critique of the ignorance and incapacity of priests in France, especially foreign priests and monks, he assails the neglect and oppression of the national secular clergy and the failure of successive religious orders to do a proper job of Christian education. Therefore, what was now necessary was a general reform of education.

There follows a long, critical analysis of the origins, government and character of the Jesuit order. It is, he contends, a society of dubious and dangerous origins. "Cet ordre, comme la plupart des autres ordres religieux, avait pris naissance dans des Pays Méridionaux; il avait été formé par des esprits échauffés et mélancoliques, et dans des temps de guerres de religion, guerres qui sont ou des causes ou des effets de l'enthousiasme et du fanatisme. Établi d'après les idées ultramontaines les plus outrées et l'esprit barbare de l'Inquisition, il fut composé d'abord, pour la plus grande partie, de sujets nés chez les ennemis de la France."⁵

In these lines breathes the crusading spirit of the Enlightenment, amply bolstered by the national fervor of Gallicanism. Every *philosophe* would comprehend and would echo these views as he would the ringing condemnation with which La Chalotais summarizes his argument, saying

³ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

⁴ La Chalotais, Louis-René de Caraduc de, *Compte Rendu des Constitutions des Jésuites* (Paris, 1762), pp. 4-5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 72.

that in the last analysis the Constitutions and the regime of the Jesuits are "l'enthousiasme et le fanatisme réduits en règle et en principe."⁶

For the *philosophes* this would have been condemnation enough but to make the case against the Jesuits crack-proof the *procureur-général* went on to point out that this source of dangerously irrational influences had become an incredibly powerful organization, worldwide in scope. It was, moreover, a danger to the existence of any state, including France, because of the vow of absolute obedience to the Pope and of the delegation of absolute authority by the Pope to the Society, i.e., to the General of the Order. This self-contained order, irrational in outlook, foreign in inspiration and loyalty, insufferably powerful, ready to go to any length, even to the teaching and practice of regicide to maintain its power had shown itself to be "un régiment étranger", a menace to the security of France.⁷ How then, asks La Chalotais, can the education of French youth reasonably be left in the hands of a Society like this ?

Not only is it dangerous to the interests of France to permit such control, it is also futile and wasteful. For the education which the Jesuits offer in their schools clings, he emphasizes, to "l'esprit ultramontain qui les domine, à l'esprit de parti qui les agite, en conséquence aux anciens préjugés et à l'ignorance du seizième siècle."⁸ It is based upon the antiquated *Ratio studiorum* and is thus seriously defective in such subjects as Philosophy, Belles-Lettres, Mathematics, History and the Sciences. And to backwardness in curriculum and out-moded attitudes they add the teaching of a lax morality, a particularly dangerous consideration when the loyalty of the Order to France and to the Crown is suspect.

In the end La Chalotais addresses his final plea to the King. His Majesty must realize that it is only "les sciences et les bonnes études qui puissent arracher le bandeau de l'ignorance et de la superstition qui sont les véritables sources du fanatisme; car il n'y a que la lumière qui puisse chasser les ténèbres."⁹ What then is basically needed is educational reform. "Réformez, sire, l'éducation de la jeunesse dans tous les collèges de votre Royaume, elle est vicieuse et barbare, surtout dans les Collèges de la Société."¹⁰ In the universities and in the academies are to be found the men who can do this great task for the King. To them Louis should make his appeal for "ils sont Français de naissance et d'inclination, ils le sont par principes, ils sont instruits et convaincus des maximes de votre état."¹¹ Let them draw up a plan of education for all ages and professions.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 196.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 233.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ La Chalotais, *Compte Rendu*, 235.

That the ardent *procureur-général*, his associates in the Parlements and his *philosophe* friends hoped really to enlist the interest and support of a languid and largely hostile King by the pleas for educational reform may be questioned. It cannot be doubted, however, that use of the educational weapon against the Jesuits during the trials and the final condemnation and dissolution of the order in France did, as La Chalotais and his friends hoped, rouse a great deal of interest in the problem of public education. A door had, in part, been opened to the discussion and proposal of new programmes of education. Amongst those who seized the opportunity he had done so much to help create was La Chalotais himself. His *Essai d'Éducation Nationale ou Plan d'études pour la Jeunesse* was presented to the Parlement at Rennes in 1763. It was clearly designed to carry on from the point where his attack on the Jesuits in the trials had left off. "C'est peu de détruire," he wrote, "si on ne songe à édifier."¹² He would complete his work; he would demonstrate to the King that solution of this grave problem was at hand. It remained for him a life-long mission and when he died in 1785 he was at work on a revision of his plan.

The inclusion of the word "nationale" in the title of the book sets the tone and gives the clue to La Chalotais' whole scheme. If the old form of education did not fit its graduates for life in modern society, did not serve the true interests of state, did not point to the future the new plan of education certainly would. It could best achieve these ends, he asserted, when organized on a secular and national basis. "Le bien public, l'honneur de la nation, demandent qu'on y substitue une éducation civile qui prépare chaque génération naissante à remplir avec succès les différentes professions de l'état."¹³ The goal in mind was clearly the establishment of a system of state-controlled education in France.

This would enable the public weal and the practical needs of everyday life to be better met. It would also enable France to rise to a higher place of power and prestige amongst the nations since the country would be served by an enlightened people and "le peuple qui sera le plus éclairé... aura toujours de l'avantage sur ceux qui le seront moins."¹⁴ More even than that was held to be at stake for a new and proper system of education would enable mankind to ascend towards perfection. "Si l'humanité est susceptible d'un certain point de perfection c'est par l'instruction qu'elle peut y arriver."¹⁵ Thus could France and Frenchmen not only better themselves and their nation, they could show the way to all mankind.

¹² La Chalotais, *Essai d'Education nationale ou Plan d'études pour la Jeunesse* (Paris, 1825), p. 1.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

In order to accomplish these great ends there would have to be a unified, national system of education aiming at the one fundamental aim, the furtherance of the public and national weal. The character of the new education must, therefore, be based upon a proper evaluation of the interests of state. For instance, points out La Chalotais, the present educational programme produces far too many soldiers, lawyers and ecclesiastics, especially monks. This creates an unfortunate imbalance in society, an over-multiplication of types of people who live at the expense of others and, at the same time, a serious lack of adequately-trained personnel in many other fields. There are too few farmers, sailors and other artisans, too many useless professional men and ecclesiastics. All this could be altered for the better not by increasing the number of schools but by establishing fewer and better schools, by changing the curriculum, the present course of studies being too long, too difficult and loaded with useless subjects, and by eliminating celibate monks as teachers, putting in their place good citizens with a practical understanding of everyday life. "Je prétends revendiquer pour la nation une éducation qui ne dépende que de l'état, parce qu'elle lui appartient essentiellement, parce que toute nation a un droit inaliénable et imprescriptible d'instruire ses membres; parce qu'enfin les enfants de l'état doivent être élevés par des membres de l'état."¹⁶

With such aims it is not strange that La Chalotais should have produced a plan of studies that is fundamentally Lockean in character, which emphasizes direct experience and reflection as opposed to a more generalized and abstract approach. He insisted that whereas the existing system of education was remote from practical affairs and full of meaningless terminology it was really "les choses mêmes qu'il importe de connaître." Hence it had become necessary to get back "au vrai et au réel; car en soi la vérité n'est autre chose que ce qui est, ce qui existe et dans notre esprit ce n'est que la connaissance des choses existantes."¹⁷ In other words education must be concrete, practical and useful.

In the earliest years of the programme the emphasis was to be placed upon teaching children how to read, write and draw as these were essential tools for future development. Then, in the age bracket, five or six to ten, children would be introduced to history, geography, natural history and physical and mathematical "recréations." In each case the stress is upon usefulness. Instruction in history, for example, is regarded as fundamentally moral training, as providing criteria for the better knowledge of and judging of people and a basis for knowing good and bad. However, in order to be truly useful history books would have to be written by *philosophes*. Natural history was deemed to be one of the most worthwhile subjects at this stage as it would reveal to the

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.

child the foundations of economics, medicine, commerce and even politics. It would emphasize direct observation and so make teachers "écarter le fabuleux."¹⁸ It would provide a chance to study things that were familiar to the child such as farm animals and plants used in medicine and would enable the teacher to praise those who had made discoveries in the sciences, thereby providing a moral stimulus to go and do likewise. The physical and mathematical "récréations" would bring out the great importance of mathematics and would introduce the pupil to the all-essential process of right reason. All this could be done in an easy and gay atmosphere, making education pleasant and attractive instead of the cold and regimented procedure it now was.

The education of children over ten years of age would continue the same basic core of useful subjects, treated more fully now as the sciences, but to these would be added the humanities, particularly courses in French and Latin literatures. Greek would be made available for the few who had a taste for it. The chief stress, though, would be upon the living languages since one of the worst gaps in the current system of education was disregard for these necessary subjects. A knowledge of English, for instance, was needed for progress in the sciences, and of German for the conduct of military affairs. Above all, proper teaching of French was required since this was the mother tongue. What a shame it is, grieves La Chalotais, that the national language should be so neglected in the schools. A good book of up-to-date, modern French readings could and should be the basis for arousing in children a true appreciation of good taste, of the beautiful and the moral, of proper ideas and values, especially of the worth of their own native tongue. Here was the field of teaching where literature, history and morality could all join hands. "Qu'il naisse un Plutarque français," enthused our crusading planner, "et des cendres des héros dont il célébrera la gloire, il naîtra des hommes qui feront honneur à leur maison, à leur siècle, à l'humanité."¹⁹

Crowning this scheme of education in the last years was the final rounding off of the training in right thinking or proper logic and again suitable instruction in sound morality, the latter being the most important of the sciences and the one most inadequately treated in existing education. To make students realize that morality had its roots in natural law and in a moral sense born into man was the most significant role of both education and religion. Indeed, this is the point where religion, natural religion, found its place in La Chalotais' scheme. For any other kind of religion he had no place at all. Natural religion like morality, with which it was largely synonymous, was a product of right reason, correct knowledge and proper conduct. It could, therefore, be suitably

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 96-7.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 156.

incorporated into an educational programme that was basically utilitarian in emphasis.

The author of this plan considered that he had erected his programme upon correct and solid foundations since, he tells us, it is based upon a real understanding of the nature of the human mind and of the principles of human knowledge. A young man who would receive his schooling to the age of 17 or 18 under such a plan would have received a general education that would serve him permanently as the foundation of a good life. He would then be ready for the more specifically professional or vocational part of his education and he could be expected to select wisely what he would do with his life. Above all, he would emerge a useful citizen of his country, a loyal subject to his King and a true *philosophe*, a rational citizen of the world.

All this could be accomplished, continued La Chalotais, if only the King would speak and create a uniform, national scheme of education under royal supervision. Through it all we see again both the profound optimism and the deep sense of frustration of the men of the Enlightenment. Such views on education were widely held amongst the *philosophes*, the *Encyclopédistes* and those influenced by their writings. Diderot and others expressed closely similar ideas. Increasingly, education came to be regarded as the one sure road to an ideal future. That neither Louis XV nor Louis XVI listened to these pleas, that nothing was done about them, was one of the most rankling and thwarting experiences that the enlightened felt they had to endure in the pre-revolutionary generation. This combination of hope and frustration, focussing upon education, added considerably to the accumulation of revolutionary steam and much to the roseate character of the revolutionary dream.

Eventually, when the French Revolution did break out there came a moment when the Marquis de Condorcet, "le parfait philosophe", was called upon to draw up a project of national education for the National Convention. In doing this Condorcet relied heavily upon the writing and thinking of his predecessors, notably upon the work of La Chalotais. From Condorcet the line of educational planning and reorganization runs straight to Napoleon Bonaparte, who used Condorcet's project, and thence to modern France.

Thus has a point of view about education, which was made to serve as a weapon in the attack upon the Jesuits in eighteenth-century France, revealed itself as being fraught with consequences of untold import not only for that *cause célèbre* but also for a long future. Indeed, the last chapter of this story has not and cannot yet be written for it lies among the secrets of the unknown years ahead.