CHAPTER 11

Distinctive Contours of Jesuit Enlightenment in France

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Due largely to their persecution of more radical strains of Enlightenment that emerged from Diderot’s editorship of the *Encyclopédie*, many historians have too commonly neglected the important contributions of French Jesuit scholars to eighteenth-century culture. The distinctiveness of French Jesuit contributions to scholarship during the century of Enlightenment is the subject of this chapter. This chapter also emphasizes some of the ways in which the radicalization of the eighteenth-century French *siècle de lumières*—specifically its strains of atheism and materialism—were ironically shaped, however accidentally and indeed unintentionally, by debates already well underway among Jesuit intellectuals themselves.¹ Accordingly, this chapter participates in a broader trend, evident among church historians as well as intellectual historians, of restoring agency to Jesuit writers in helping to forge the scholarly milieu from which emerged the wider European Enlightenment, even if the Jesuit contribution to the Enlightenment is often ironic in that many *philosophes* subverted the original impetus for Jesuit scholarship. This chapter also participates in scholarly conversations sparked in various ways by historians Alan C. Kors, Ann Thomson, and Margaret C. Jacob whose work situates the origins of Enlightenment radicalism in France, not strictly within a supposedly Spinozan atheism but rather within a more complex dialogue among theologians, scientists, and lay writers throughout Western Europe.²


Any chapter on Jesuit contributions to the eighteenth century necessarily entails some discussion of the relationship between Jesuit erudition and the Enlightenment. The question is not without its many complexities, if only because there is presently no clear consensus among eighteenth-century scholars as to how the Enlightenment ought to be defined, or when and where it took place. Conventionally, the Enlightenment has been defined as a largely (but not exclusively) eighteenth-century cultural and intellectual movement that optimistically assumed that extensive improvement of human nature was possible through educational reform, the popularization of the scientific method of empirical reason and its pervasive application to practical problems of socio-political reform. In addition, the Enlightenment is often defined as being almost essentially motivated by “modern paganism” whether in the form of attacks on established clergies, religious orthodoxies and orthopraxis, or a pervasive materialism that favored the disenchantment of nature and the secularization of the concept of the mind and soul. Complicating these rather straightforward