

Scepticism and Sovereignty: The Significance of Lamennais

David Nicholls

Scepticism has frequently been associated with authoritarianism both in politics and in religion. Those who have emphasised the limitations and fragility of human reason have needed to look elsewhere for a basis for certitude—some solid foundation to support a viable political or religious system. Few sceptics have been prepared to accept the view that knowledge and certitude are impossible; there is indeed something paradoxical about the very assertion. Although I shall refer to Lamennais as a sceptic, he firmly rejected pyrrhonism—for he believed that certitude is possible at least in some matters. Nor did he say that reason, or empirical knowledge (arrived at through sense experience) is useless, though he did emphasise the limits of these human faculties, stressing their dependence upon faith and authority.

Lamennais's life and writings raise questions of perennial importance both for theology and for political philosophy. What is the nature of authority? How are claims to authority legitimated? Are there any independent criteria by which to judge the decisions of political or religious authorities, if so how are they constituted? If custom and tradition are ultimate, does this imply ethical relativism? Can one ethnic group or religious party which happens to wield power (for example the British in nineteenth-century India, or Calvinists in sixteenth-century Geneva) justifiably impose its ideas of right and wrong on those of a different tradition.

PART I

Hugues Félicité Robert de la Mennais¹ was, if not the most influential, certainly the most colourful French churchman of his generation. His dramatic change from authoritarian papalist to spokesman of the masses and apostle of popular sovereignty shook the church throughout Europe and beyond. He had a profound influence upon such diverse figures as Victor Hugo, Alphonse Lamartine and Joseph Ernest Renan.² Looking

back, Gladstone referred to him as 'the greatest genius of the French clergy of his day'. Born at St Malo in 1782 of a prosperous family, he lived through the traumatic years of the French revolution and the Napoleonic dictatorship.³ During the terror, St Malo had felt the full force of Robespierre's policies, but with his fall in July 1794 a degree of stability returned. Jean Jacques Rousseau's influence on many of the revolutionary leaders was manifest and it is significant that Lamennais, in his most celebrated theological work, *L'essai sur l'indifférence*, the four volumes of which were first published between 1817 and 1823, saw the Genevan theorist as one of his principal adversaries. Much of the *Essai* is indeed a dialogue with Rousseau, whose significance the young priest never underestimated.

Lamennais: His Life and Works

Félicité—or Féli as he was known by family and friends—was a precocious child, who found difficulties with the Catholicism of his day and did not begin to practise his faith as a communicant until he was twenty two. He eventually decided to follow his elder brother Jean into the priesthood, though not until the age of thirty four. Napoleon had made a Concordat with the Papacy in 1802, but manifestly saw the church as little more than a useful tool for his imperial purposes. 'There is only one way of securing morality', he declared, 'and that is to re-establish religion. Society cannot exist without inequality of possessions, and inequality of possessions cannot subsist without religion.'⁴ It was against precisely this political manipulation of Christianity, which the restoration of the monarchy in 1815 did little to change, that the young Lamennais fulminated. His opening shots were fired in 1808, in an essay written in collaboration with his brother, Jean, *Réflexions sur l'état de l'église en France*. Here they blamed the sixteenth century reformers for introducing ideas of popular sovereignty and private judgment. These had led to a 'mercantile' religion, devoid of all tender sentiments, that minimised the love of God and strengthened human oppression, as illustrated in the cruel treatment suffered by slaves in the Dutch and British colonies.

In his later work, *De la religion dans ses rapports avec l'ordre politique et civil*, of 1825–6, he linked this French Erastianism to the Gallican tradition, as exemplified in the articles of 1682. These asserted among other things that a monarch's authority derives directly from God and is therefore independent of a church which he effectively controls. The young Breton was determined to assert the freedom and rights of the church, under its sovereign ruler the pope, adopting a radically ultramontane position from which to do so. He asserted the principle: no

pope no church, no church no Christianity, no Christianity no religion or society. He nevertheless rejected the idea that popes can justifiably interfere in civil matters, maintaining a clear distinction between the legitimate concerns of church and state.

In his early writings Lamennais manifested a passionate concern for the independence of the church and for the interests of the poor. At first he believed that this was compatible with a high view of monarchy, but in the late twenties he began to doubt this and pinned all his hopes on the papacy. The newspaper, *L'Avenir*, which he founded in 1830 called on the church to lead the masses into a new era of freedom, abandoning its identification with the rulers and the rich. It was obvious to him that the Christian gospel involves what would today be called a 'preferential option for the poor'. The pope must take a lead in transforming the church into a people's church. Lamennais had absolutely no doubt that the infallible pope would—if forced to speak on the matter—identify with the interests of the poor, defend the independence of the church from domination by the state, and thus vindicate the policy of *Avenir*. In company with the liberal priest Henri Lacordaire and the layman Charles de Montalembert, he visited Rome in the firm hope of securing papal backing. So far from supporting these radical policies, Gregory XVI condemned Lamennais's efforts in his 1832 encyclical *Mirari vos*. Lamennais's record of these events is to be found in *Affaires de Rome*.

Retiring to his home at La Chênaie, near St Malo, Lamennais worked on his *Essai d'un système de philosophie catholique*, the first parts of which appeared in 1840. His fate was, however, already sealed after having in 1834 published *Paroles d'un croyant*, a prophetic and revolutionary tract, which immediately became a best-seller. Its aim was, in the words of a British writer, 'to raise up a democratic religion, full of energy, life and passion, in face of the spectral majesty of mitred Rome'.³ 'Love one another', he urged the poor, 'and you will not fear the great, neither princes nor kings. They are strong against you only because you are not united' and, echoing the English medieval preacher John Ball, he went on, 'God made neither lowly nor great, masters nor slaves, kings nor subjects, he made all men equal'. [O.C., XI, 15 & 24]⁶ From this time onward Lamennais drifted further and further from the institutional church, but he never abandoned hope in a reborn Christianity, and played an active part in French intellectual and political life until his death in 1854.

Here I shall particularly be concerned with Lamennais's attempt in his early years to build an authoritarian political and religious creed on what may be called a sceptical base. He was a sceptic in the sense that he doubted the reliability of individual human reasoning and argued that

appeal must always be made to the common judgment, *le sens commun*, whose authority even the natural sciences accept. This universal sentiment he was happy to call prejudice, which he opposed to the vain speculations of philosophic reason. It was the error of Protestantism and, growing out of this, of Enlightenment 'philosophy', to believe in the infallibility of individual reason, a principle which ultimately undermines all authority and leads to madness.

While Lamennais believed that in human affairs appeal should be made to *le sens commun*, this common sense (or judgment) requires that in religious matters some divinely appointed body is the appropriate authority. The sovereignty of the church, and more specifically of the pope, is thus—in matters of divine revelation—analogueous to the authority of the common reason in human affairs and replicates on earth the celestial sovereignty of God. Lamennais's appeal to *le sens commun*—a sort of epistemological populism—provided the ground upon which he later developed a political populism and subordinated religious as well as secular knowledge to the tribunal of popular authority.

There is a curious consistency running through the thought of Lamennais. He was an unfailing critic of liberal individualism, attacking it from the standpoint of catholic authoritarianism in his early years, and from that of populism and workers' solidarity in later life. He perceived, on one hand, a connection between scepticism (with respect to individual reason) and authoritarianism in politics and religion, this position being represented by the catholicism of his day. On the other hand he saw a link between Protestantism, democracy and respect for individual reason. In his early life he accepted the former position, in later life the latter. In the late 1820s and early 1830s he aspired, however, to forge an alliance between democracy (or more properly speaking populism) and ecclesiastical authoritarianism. He failed in this endeavour.

The Authority of the Common Judgment

In his attack upon the 'philosophers', who teach that the individual reason of each person is ultimate, Lamennais was thinking of an Enlightenment tradition which he traced to Descartes and to the Protestant principle of private judgment. With Joseph de Maistre and Louis de Bonald, he ascribed the evils of the French revolution and the terror to this principle. Its origins can be found in those Greek philosophers who taught 'the sovereignty of man'. In submitting tradition and received beliefs to private judgment they called all truth into question. To believe that one's own reason is superior to the general

reason is the very essence of madness. A scientist who 'put his judgment above that of all the scholars' would forfeit the respect of his fellows. [O.C., V, xiv, 13 and II, lxxxv & 30] Two men make the statement 'I am the king of France', the difference is that in one case the claim is recognised by the common judgment and in the other it is recognised by no one except the person making it, and he is called mad. Lamennais asserted that madness increases in countries where the spirit of authority is weak and where private judgment is exalted, as in England at the time of the reformation. This quasi-Durkheimian principle is, however, made tautologous by Lamennais's assumed definition of madness in terms of non-conformity. [O.C., II, lviii.] He summed up his belief in *le sens commun* as follows

In a word, we maintain that in everything and always, that which conforms to the common judgment is true, that which is opposed to it is false, that the individual reason, the particular judgment may err, but that the general reason, the common judgment, is sheltered from error, and that one cannot suppose otherwise without doing violence to language itself, or to human reason, of which language is the expression. [O.C., V, xviii.]⁷

Certitude, Lamennais argued, is necessary in order to know, and knowledge is necessary in order to live. Knowledge implies certitude. To be unsure whether one knows is not to know, doubt is ignorance unacknowledged. Certitude demands an authority which may not be questioned, which is sovereign and whose judgment is ultimate. In temporal matters this sovereignty is attributed to the common judgment, in divine matters to an infallible pope. The authors of the famous *Encyclopédie* had undermined all authority, calling everything into question, except their own private reason. This resulted in the revolution and the terror, which proved 'the incurable weakness of human reason'. [O.C., VI, 68.]

In developing his new apologetic for Christianity and the church, Lamennais rejected the Cartesian rationalism that dominated most catholic seminaries in France and in other parts of Europe. The conventional position distinguished clearly between reason and revelation, or natural and revealed religion. But, he argued, the former depends on the latter; reason depends on faith and tradition for its validity. Following Bonald, he maintained that all human thought depends on language and language is not founded in reasoning but is handed down by tradition and sustained within a tradition—it is a gift of God.

Lamennais believed that unless some conception of an authoritative

sens commun be accepted the sceptical argument will succeed in throwing everything into doubt. If individual reason be sovereign, and discussion be the proper method of inquiry, universal doubt is the consequence. [O.C., II, 183–4, see also O.C., IX, 302] The three ways a person may come to know anything—the senses, sentiment and reason—may all mislead. Even the reliability of human memory, upon which rest all attempts to verify the truth of judgments, is dependent upon the witness of memory itself [O.C., II, 37 and 14] Scepticism is, however, a position that people are unable, in practice, to accept; there are things they are psychologically incapable of doubting. Therefore a position that ends in radical scepticism cannot be viable. [O.C., II, 18–19 and 187–8, also *Essai d'un système*, 11]

The conclusion Lamennais drew was that individual reason must submit to the authority of universal judgment. Thus even in terrestrial matters reason is based on faith. He referred here not to supernatural faith, but to the fact that certitude in this world is possible only by trusting some authority whose claims cannot rationally be demonstrated. [O.C., II, 162 and O.C., V, 103f.] Elsewhere he distinguished between the order of faith and the order of science (or conception). The former is transmitted by language and speech, as Bonald had maintained. [*Essai d'un système*, xxxix]^a The 'order of conception', based on individual reasoning, is inferior to the 'order of faith' based on the authority of *le sens commun*, and ultimately depends upon it for its foundation. To reverse this priority would be to recognise the right of one individual to impose his beliefs on others and thus deprive them of their liberty. The limited validity of individual reasoning is itself dependent on *le sens commun*. 'To live it is necessary to believe before understanding, before even examining, and to believe on testimony, otherwise, no order, no reason, no existence is possible'. [O.C., IX, 303f. and O.C., V, 115]. It is, therefore, quite possible to know that something is so, in secular as much as in religious matters, without understanding how it can be so, a point which Newman was later to emphasise. I may know, for example, that my will can control many of my bodily movements without understanding how it does so. [O. C 7 II, 3]

As might be expected Lamennais supplied a theological basis to his notion of universal reason, for it is nothing but a participation in the divine reason. We are thus led to recognise divine truths as conforming to our human nature, which God has created. These universal beliefs may indeed be seen as part of an original revelation and in no way obviate the need for a special revelation of the divine will, which we shall consider in due course. [O.C., II, lxxviii and III, 20–1]. Lamennais, naturally, denied that he intended to denigrate reason; quite the reverse.

It is belief in the ultimacy of private judgment which does this by issuing in universal doubt. He claimed to have established reason on a firm foundation. The reason of each individual contributes to the common reason, but is subordinate to its authority. This is not to denigrate reason. The judge who accepts something on the basis of a consensus among the witnesses cannot be said generally to deny the importance of the individual witness. 'It is extraordinary', he exclaimed in his *Défense de l'essai sur l'indifférence*, 'that we ourselves have been accused of scepticism'! [O.C., II, lxvi f. and O.C., V, 101]

Authority in Religion

Up to the crisis of 1832 Lamennais was an inflexible papalist, asserting the universal jurisdiction and infallibility of the pope. His religion was authoritarian through and through. But how did he arrive at this position from his belief in the authority of *le sens commun*? Surely this common judgment of humanity cannot be said directly to authorise belief in the fundamental doctrines of Christianity. He argued both univocally and analogically. In the first place the common judgment or general reason witnesses to the need for religion and requires that a religion to be true must be one, universal and perpetual. Christianity is the sole religion which qualifies, therefore it is the only true religion. [O.C., IV, 97] Christianity in turn assumes a divine revelation, this requires an infallible authority to proclaim and interpret it; the Roman church is the only body to claim such infallibility therefore the Roman church is the only true church. Sovereign authority must be located at single point, otherwise dispute and division is possible. [O.C., VII, 131] The only possible centre is the pope, he is therefore the locus of the church's infallibility. A king who made laws but did not make them clear would be a tyrant—as Hegel pointed out in another context—so would God be if he refused humans an infallible means for discovering religious truth. [O.C., II, 126]

Lamennais advanced analogical arguments for a recognition of papal infallibility. Just as common judgment must arbitrate between rival claims in secular matters, so the pope makes authoritative pronouncements on matters of faith and morals. 'There are two societies', he declared, 'the political or civil society relative to time and the spiritual society relative to eternity, now there are two authorities, and these two authorities are infallible each in its order.' [O.C., II, 197] While the former deals with contingent matters, the latter pronounces on immutable truths which are but the development of dogmas and precepts witnessed to by human consent.[O.C., II, 199] When the common mind of humanity speaks on a secular issue its judgment must be accepted on

pain of folly, which means the death of reason, when the infallible church speaks on a question of faith, Christians must submit on pain of heresy which is the death of faith. The 'philosopher' and the heretic are seen as playing an analogous role by their challenge to respective authorities. [O.C., V, 163 and 155f] The analogy is, however, imperfect, for there is no identifiable institution, parallel to the papacy, which is the organ of *le sens commun*. If in secular affairs the human race can manage without such an institution, why not in religion? After 1832, when his own position was condemned, this is what the Breton priest came to see.

In his early years Lamennais had insisted that there is a sure and easy method of discovering religious truth and that is by receiving the teaching of an infallible church. The essence of faith is indeed a willingness to accept the dictates of authority. 'The primitive and fundamental law of belief and consequently of reason', he wrote, 'is obedience to the external authority or to the common reason which proclaims what is true'. [*Essai d'un système*, xxxvii.] Protestants fail to understand the nature of faith as obedience and think of all Christian truths as opinions. 'Eternal life,' he proclaimed, 'is nothing but eternal obedience'. [O.C., II, pp liii, xlii and 201].⁹ There is no middle path, either in secular or in religious matters, between certitude and nihilism. To deny the possibility of certitude is, as we have seen, to repudiate knowledge, it is a matter of all or nothing. The principle of authority leads to the catholic faith, its denial leads to universal scepticism, without it nothing may subsist. [O.C., II, lxvi and 204]

The position which Lamennais, in common with many other authoritarians, put forward requires that it is impossible to judge the legitimacy of an authority by the validity of the dogmas it proclaims, for there is no independent means of judging this validity. To accept the authority of the pope on the ground that his teaching is true is to commit a fallacy:

Assured of the means by which we are able to discern the true religion, it will now be easy for us to discover it, without discussing any dogma, it is a question of knowing what is the spiritual and visible society which possesses the greatest authority. This society, once recognised, all uncertainty vanishes. To contest its witness, to deny what it attests, is to abjure reason, to disobey its laws is a crime.[O.C., II, 201–2]

It is a familiar argument. A writer like H.L. Mansel accepted the same notion of authority, as externally validated, though in his case the authority was the scriptural record of revelation, it was validated

through being attested by miracle and by the fulfilment of prophesy.¹⁰ In the case of Lamennais the mode of validation appears to be nothing more than the claim to infallibility itself 'L'Église catholique seule établit sa doctrine sur le fondement immuable d'une autorité toujours enseignant'.¹¹ Yet other religious sects have made equally bold claims to infallibility and to unconditional obedience from their members and it is hard to see how, on Lamennais's argument, these rival bids are to be resolved. Has the pope no more solid ground upon which to stand than that of Father Divine or of Jim Jones of Jonestown? It is the position to which Newman's arguments led him, despite his better judgment. All Christian beliefs are reduced to a single article: 'I believe in the pope and in everything he says'. This is the consequence of authoritarianism as Lamennais recognised in later life. There is one further criterion to which he appealed—the moral effects of accepting an authority. This was a position developed more fully by W. G. Ward in his *Ideal of a Christian Church*.¹² The Breton theologian saw revelation as regulative rather than speculative in its principal significance. God 'has granted to us the precise measure of light that we need in our present condition, but nothing more', he wrote, 'In granting to man all that is necessary to him for arriving at his end, He refuses that which would only serve to gratify a vain curiosity':

I do not ask to see the distant scene,
One step enough for me.

(Newman)

God has revealed only something of his being and his relationship with humanity, our freedom, indeed our very existence, depends on this mixture of light and obscurity and hence the merit of faith. [O.C., I, 415 and O.C., II, 82-3] Human reason alone (even *le sens commun*) is unable to discover divine truths, which must be revealed. To reject a single one of the divinely revealed truths is to reject the authority of God and deliver up revelation 'defenceless to the deists'. [O.C., I, vi and 169]

Religion is primarily a question of obedience to the dictates of an external authority. It thus involves a moral decision. God, he wrote, has ordained that the knowledge of divine truths should depend not upon the reason, but upon the will. [O.C., I, 428 and O.C., II, 201] With Pascal and many religious apologists since, he observed how neutrality is impossible, being equivalent to doubt [O.C., I, 232-3]. Appealing to the conscience of the indifferent, he asked,

Is it not true that he feels an extreme repugnance to everything which reminds him of religion, its menaces and its promises? Is it not true that inwardly he would wish that it were false? Is it not true that he has always fled from the opportunity of instructing himself

therein from a secret apprehension of being convinced, or at least shaken, by the numerous proofs upon which it leans? ... Now what is all this but hatred of truth, and consequently enmity towards God, the supreme truth? [O. C ., I, 232-3]

These words might well have been spoken from the pulpit of Oxford's University Church in the 1830s! Those who rescue faith from the dominion of reason, frequently end by handing it over to the sway of morality, thus nullifying the words of Jesus, 'I came not to call the righteous but sinners' (Mark 2:17).

From all this it follows that the source of unbelief and heresy is human pride, the greatest of all sins. 'Pride, always in revolt against power, is the first cause of this great disorder, by which man, fixed on himself, remains suspended between light and darkness'. [O.C., II, 191-2] Pride is the crime of the atheist, the deist and the protestant, who proclaim themselves greater than God by setting themselves up as judges of his word. Humans are born to obey, the sin of pride aspires to individual sovereignty, but the church in demanding absolute submission dispels pride. [O.C., II, 191-2]

God and the State

How did Lamennais, in this earlier part of his life, conceive of God in his relation to the world and particularly to the social and political life of humanity? In the first place, to deny God is to reject the basis of all authority; atheism is the equivalent of anarchism. The 'legal atheism' in France had led to the dissolution of community and authority, the country had become 'a vast aggregation of individuals deprived of ties'. [O.C., VII, 30 and 82] Atheism undermines 'society', which is a natural order of human relationships created by God. Echoing a theme of Maistre, Lamennais criticised the idea that communities can be constructed by human efforts as 'one of the most dangerous follies of our age.' [O.C., I, 272] Analytical reason which questions the basis of the constituted order will lead to anarchy. He quoted Pascal: 'The art of overturning states is to shake the established customs, by probing them to their source, it is a certain way to lose everything'. Human reasoning can never establish or maintain social institutions, by itself it can only doubt and destroy.¹³

One of the things which human reasoning may destroy, when conceived of as sovereign, is the moral basis of the state, rooted in the nature of things. 'Philosophy' teaches that the state is a mere human creation, possessing only those rights which are recognised by its individual subjects. Ruling must then be done by force. In striking

anticipation of 'pluralist' political systems described by A.F. Bentley and his followers, the French priest wrote:

When, in one word, authority is nothing more than force, social order is but force, and morality is but force, each man then tries his, and labours to increase it by subjecting the forces of others, and independence produces a universal tendency to domination. Society transforms itself into a vast arena in which all interests attack each other, and fight with fury In the midst of this disorder the State lasts for some time only because a certain number of private interests league themselves with the private interest of the government, and oppress all the others. [O.C., I, 288–9]

God is seen, in contrast, as 'the sovereign Being', creator and monarch, whose reason and will constitute the sole universal determinant of right. Following Leibniz, he viewed humans, not as isolated individuals, but as links in the great hierarchy of beings—members of 'the eternal society of intelligences'. The whole creation is established and preserved by the will and sovereign power of God. [O.C., iv, 99; O.C., II, 125 and I, 348] All human power and authority derive ultimately from God whose role is replicated in the domestic and political realms by the father and the king respectively, whose will and reason—conforming to the divine will and reason—constitute 'the sole right, the sole power, the sole law'. Beyond the divine law there is no binding rule in family or state apart from 'la volonté du Roi et du père'. [O.C., II, 106n.–107n] Authority is indeed nothing but the right to command, carrying with it a duty to obey. God is the sole source of legitimate authority and without him political rule is reduced to a question of force. [O.C., I, 350]

Yet God is not be viewed as an isolated being, issuing arbitrary commands from a celestial throne. This he denounced as deism. As the earthly king and father are bound by the divine justice, so God 'submits to the laws which derive from his nature'. Like God these laws are perfect and immutable. While insisting on the unity of God, Lamennais echoed the poet and theologian John Donne in proclaiming: 'In the unity of his being he is in no way isolated In the most secret depths of his being, God himself is a great and eternal society'. [O.C., V, 155, O.C., II, x and 109.]¹⁴

Though he denounced the Gallicanism of the French church, Lamennais was, prior to 1830, an apologist of royal power and of divine right. He indeed wrote in 1817 of the king as the 'image' of God, [O.C., I, 336] who plays an analogous role in his realm to that played by God in his, but he was aware of the limits to the analogy. The king's

authority is derived ultimately from God, whose being (unlike that of the king) constitutes the measure of his will. [O.C., VII, 168–9] Thus Lamennais's idea of divine right is severely restricted. Any civil law contrary to the divine law, as interpreted by the pope, lacks legitimacy. Without this legitimacy all that remains is naked power leading to despotism. [O.C., II, 106n. and O.C., VII 187f.] He attacked the post-1815 European constitutions, half-republican and half-monarchic, as 'temporary treaties between despotism and anarchy', [O.C., I, 40–1] claiming that the Christianity which Europe was rejecting had on the one hand commanded citizens to obey and on the other prevented the abuse of power by rulers. The Christian does not merely obey government, he loves it as coming from God. In revealing the true notion of sovereignty, Christianity 'has at once tamed power and exalted obedience'. [O.C., T, 356 and O.C., IV, pp 375 and 379]

While Lamennais, following Maistre, insisted that 'sovereignty'—a supreme power having the right to command—is necessary in any society and must be located at a single point, [O.C., VII. 131 and O.C., VIII, 238] his ideas are far from those of Hobbes. This right of the monarch is always limited by divine law and the interpreter of this law is the pope. In denying this limit, Gallicans were advocating 'an unlimited despotism'. [O.C., VII, 186-7 and 190] The Breton priest also assailed ideas of popular sovereignty, any idea that the authority of the monarch derives from consent of the governed was denounced. He praised Maistre's work *Du pape* as 'one of the most remarkable works to have appeared for a long time' and maintained that there is but one error in the world: 'the sovereignty of man'. [O.C., VIII, 101 and O.C., VIII, 178.] This error found classic expression in the Reformation, when 'the bloody spectre of the sovereignty of the people' was called up. 'The fanaticism of religious liberty brings forth the fanaticism of political liberty', princes become mere delegates of the people and all authority is undermined. [O.C., I, 294] It was a spectre he came near to embracing in later life.

The Crisis

By 1830 Lamennais and those associated with him had come to doubt whether there was any hope for secular government in France. They had rejected the last vestiges of a belief in divine right, all that was left was the papacy and the people. In *L'Avenir* the pope was urged to lead the people of Europe into a new era, a kind of populist theocracy, in which the mighty would be put down from their seat and the poor exalted. A preliminary condition for this to take place was, he believed, to free the church from its state connections; Lamennais and his friends called for a

free church in a free state—for the abolition of the privileged status of the church in France, which carried with it the corollary of state interference in the life of the church. The sovereign pope, in whom they put their trust, was not prepared, however, to desert his old friends. He himself was, in addition to being the spiritual leader of the Roman church, the temporal monarch of the Italian papal states. He was one of Europe's monarchs and could hardly be expected to respond to the revolutionary call. A more temperate and diplomatic man than Lamennais would have let sleeping cardinals lie, continuing his journalistic and political work until condemned by Rome. Lamennais wanted more than a temporary toleration, he sought the active support of the pope and went with his colleagues to demand it. The infallible pope, guide and ultimate earthly authority in matters of faith and morals, the one to whose interpretation of the divine will all sovereigns must bow, was called on to speak. The position being asserted by Lamennais was no mere political programme, it was a prophetic and religious vision—mystique rather than politique—as became clear in his 1834 tract *Paroles d'un croyant*. On 15 August 1832 the oracle spoke the word of condemnation in the form of an encyclical letter, *Mirari vos*. [reprinted in O.C., XII, 3 1 6f.]

Lamennais with his colleagues submitted. *L'Avenir*, whose publication had been suspended for some time, was finally closed and the other work of propaganda and education ceased. As happened in the case of Tyrrell, Loisy and the later modernists, papal condemnation marked the end of the movement as such. Yet the problems remained and the church continued to lose credibility among the European masses and intellectual elites.

Lacordaire and Montalembert remained within the church, but Lamennais gradually separated himself from her communion and revised his political theology. He reversed his stand on some fundamental issues. The papal condemnation was, then, accepted but it led Lamennais to reassess his whole position. Catholicism he understood to be an authoritarian system, in which the pope was sovereign head and infallible organ. Like Hobbes, in his conception of the sovereign, he claimed that the pope says and must say, 'La raison c'est moi'. [D.C. lii-liiii.] On a matter of faith and morals the Papacy had clearly sided with the forces of oppression and injustice. The very essence of catholicism was seen by Lamennais as obedience to an authority. The creed had been reduced to one article. It was no accident that in the four volumes of his *Essai sur l'indifférence* there is almost no discussion of the substantive elements of Christian belief; only one brief chapter is devoted to Christology. For the authoritarian it does not

matter what a person believes, so long as he believes what the church tells him. Lamennais thought that authoritarianism was no mere aberration in catholicism which might be overcome, and saw no possibility of a liberal catholicism, it was a contradiction in terms.[D.C., xlii] His only course was to leave the church.

- 1 In the latter part of his life he spelled his name Lamennais, thus removing the aristocratic flavour of the original spelling.
- 2 For the reception of his writings in England see W.G. Roe, *Lamennais and England* (London 1966), for his influence in South America see F.M. Spindler, 'Lamennais and Montalvo: a European Influence upon Latin American Political Thought', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, XXXVII, 1976, pp. 137f.
- 3 W.E. Gladstone, *Contemporary Review*, October 1875, p. 447. For biographical details see Christian Marechal, *La famille de La Mennais* (Paris, 1913) and *La jeunesse de La Mennais* (Paris, 1913), also Alec Vidler, *Prophesy and Papacy: a Study of Lamennais, the Church and the Revolution* (London, 1954).
- 4 Quoted in Vidler, *Prophesy*, p 37.
- 5 *British Critic*, 19, 1836, p. 306.
- 6 Works of Lamennais frequently quoted in the text:

D.C.	Introduction to Dante, <i>La Divine Comédie</i> , Paris, 1863.
<i>Essai d'un système</i>	<i>Essai d'un système de philosophie catholique</i> , Rennes, 1954.
<i>Esquisse</i>	<i>Esquisse d'une philosophie</i> , Paris and Leipzig, 1840-46.
O.C.	<i>Oeuvres complètes de F. de Lamennais</i> , Paris, 1836-7
O.G.	<i>Oeuvres</i> , ed. H. Guillemin, Geneva, n.d.
O.P.	<i>Oeuvres posthumes</i> , Paris, 1855-59

- 7 Also 'Le seul moyen de verification qui soit en notre pouvoir...consiste a comparer nos perceptions, nos pensées, nos jugements, avec les jugements, les pensées, les perceptions des êtres de même nature que nous, et des raisons du même ordre.' Lamennais, *Essai d'un système*, p 6.
- 8 See Louis de Bonald, *Recherches philosophiques*, in *Oeuvres de Bonald* (Paris, 1858), pp. 61f, also Jules Gritti, 'Influence de Bonald sur les premiers écrits de La Mennais', *Revue de Rouergue*, no. 65, 1963, pp. 25-6.
- 9 This position was later adopted by Isaac Williams and other fathers of the Oxford Movement.
- 10 See *The Limits of Religious Thought*, London, 1858.
- 11 'Lettres à un anglais sur le protestantism' (1815), *Oeuvres inédites de F. Lamennais*, Paris, 1866, II, p 277.
- 12 See David Nicholls, 'Conscience and Authority in the Thought of W.G. Ward', *Heythrop Journal*, October 1985.
- 13 *Pensées de Pascal* (Brunschvicg text) fragment 294 (p. 151), and *Essai*, O.C., I, p. 272 (E.T. p 184). Lamennais's quotation omits some words of Pascal in the Brunschvicg text.
- 14 On Donne see David Nicholls, 'The Political Theology of John Donne', *Theological Studies*, 49:1, 1988, p. 53.

(to be continued)