

# The religious climate

Julia Prest

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## CHAPTER 2

### *The Religious Climate*

*Julia Prest*

Molière's theatrical career took place during the Counter-Reformation, when the French Catholic Church was seeking to reimpose its authority and influence on all aspects of life in France, including the theatre. If, in liberal democracies today, diversity is something to be celebrated and promoted by all possible means of inclusion, in counter-reformation, would-be absolutist France, diversity, and especially religious diversity, was feared and, ideally, averted. If it could not be averted, religious diversity was, at best, tolerated, and, at worst, violently suppressed. It is not difficult for us to see why such totalising ambitions were destined ultimately to fail, but it is useful to consider what gave rise to such a movement in the first place and to unpick some of the key obstacles that it encountered along the way. This in turn will help us understand the religious context and significance of Molière's work, as well as the more extreme reactions that some of his plays provoked. While it is futile to try to pin down what Molière (or anybody else, for that matter) actually believed, we will also look briefly at how he presented the relationship between religion and the theatre in some of his writings.

Although most of what follows will be concerned with Christianity in some shape or form, it is important to recognise the presence in seventeenth-century France of other religions, notably Judaism and Islam (and, indeed, that of the increasing number of sceptics or free-thinkers, sometimes labelled *libertins*, who questioned the very legitimacy of religious doctrine in relation to matters of truth and morality). Unsurprisingly perhaps, counter-reformation France was not generally a welcoming place for Jewish people, who were excluded from the majority of French regions. Even in regions where Jewish people were permitted to settle, they often encountered humiliating legal restrictions on movement, clothing and/or trade.<sup>1</sup> Jewish people had, however, been actively encouraged to settle in the northeastern city of Metz, and it is estimated that in 1650 Metz had a Jewish population of around 2,000.<sup>2</sup> In light of the contemporary climate, it is remarkable that Louis XIV himself visited the synagogue in Metz in 1657, where he witnessed the local celebration of the Feast of the Tabernacles.<sup>3</sup> Molière does not appear to have been particularly interested in Judaism or the Jewish people, but his work incorporates common prejudices, at least as a source of passing comic satire. In *L'Avare*, for instance, the character of La Flèche reports to Cléante the rather stringent conditions attached to a possible loan, provoking the following anti-semitic response: 'What the devil? What kind of Jew, what kind of Arab is this?' (I. 1) (my translation; it is interesting to note that this line is cut from the Gravely and Maclean translation of the play, first published in the Oxford World's Classics series by Oxford University Press in 1968). As Patterson reminds us, this elision of usurer, Jew and Arab was longstanding, and still common in France in the period.<sup>4</sup> However, given that the individual from whom Cléante is unwittingly and indirectly proposing to borrow money is none other than his own father, Harpagon, the answer to Cléante's question would appear to be a usurer who is Christian, if only by default.

Even though there were no established Muslim communities in seventeenth-century France, Muslim people were not unknown in the country, notably in their capacity as traders and diplomatic

envoys. The attitude of the French authorities towards Muslims and their religion was complex and paradoxical: on the one hand, Islam was regarded as heretical and even barbarous; on the other, France became fascinated by the habits of the Ottoman Turks, in particular, with whom Louis XIV was closely allied – an alliance that would earn him the nickname ‘Most Christian Turk’ when he abolished the Edict of Nantes (see below). This resulted in an attitude that combined condemnation and mockery with orientalist exoticising and more than a hint of admiration. French fascination with *turqueries* was invigorated in 1669 by a visit to France and the French court by a Turkish embassy led by Suleiman Aga bearing a letter from the Sultan to be delivered only to the King himself. The awkward diplomatic visit was the inspiration behind the famous Turkish ceremony towards the end of Molière’s comedy-ballet *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*, which was given its courtly première at the chateau of Chambord in October 1670. The première featured Molière as the eponymous would-be gentleman, Jourdain, and the composer of the work’s music, Lully, disguised within the fiction of the play as a ‘great mufti’ (a senior Islamic legal authority). The pretend mufti supposedly ennobles Jourdain by making him a ‘mamamouchi’, in a scene that uses (a book representing) the Koran as a stage prop, and draws on linguistic elements taken from Arabic, Turkish and the trade language of the Mediterranean known as Sabir. Stage directors today would do well to consider how best to stage this parody in a way that does not cause unwitting offence, but, in Molière’s fiction, the primary butt of the joke remains Jourdain who, in his zeal, mistakes a fake Turkish ceremony for a real one.

Another religion (or religious branch) that was widely considered heretical in Molière’s lifetime was Protestantism. In France, the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century had led to the devastating Wars of Religion (1562-98), which were responsible for a staggering two to four million deaths. The wars were finally brought to an end in 1598 by the signing of the Edict of Nantes, which granted members of the Protestant minority, known as Huguenots, full civil rights and the right to worship freely and publicly in many, though not all, parts of the country. This was a remarkable act in a country that defined itself by its Catholicism, but it only ever spelled tolerance and not full acceptance. The widespread hope was that Protestantism would eventually be eliminated, ideally by its gradual assimilation (back) into the Catholic faith. In the course of the seventeenth century, the oppression and then the active persecution of what was referred in contemporary Catholic documents as the ‘so-called reformed’ religion increased and, in 1685, Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes.

The revocation of the Edict of Nantes in the form of the Edict of Fontainebleau banned Protestant worship altogether and banned Protestants from leaving France (except pastors who refused to convert who were given two weeks to get out of the country). This was a project of mass conversion by coercion. Although many Protestants did leave France illegally (a migration that left France considerably diminished in both demographics and skills), many others undertook more or less sincere conversions in order to save their lives. Although Molière did not live to witness the Edict of Fontainebleau, he would have been aware of the increasingly draconian measures being taken against the Huguenots. However, what affected Molière much more were the internal wranglings of the French Catholic Church and French Catholics more generally, to which we now turn.

Following the crisis provoked by the emergence of Protestantism, the Catholic Church in Europe sought, during the Council of Trent (1545-63), to clarify Catholic doctrine and to identify the

means to reinvigorate and reform the Catholic Church. Although the decrees of the Council of Trent were received in France in 1615, they were never validated by a French king. This did not, however, prevent many of the principles of Catholic reform from taking hold in France, and many groups and individuals were eager to put into practice the principle of ensuring that the Catholic religion informed all aspects of daily life. One such was the secret society called the Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement (Company of the Blessed Sacrament), which we know worked to suppress Molière's *Tartuffe* even before its courtly premiere, and which was widely criticised, among other things, for its secrecy and for its promotion of directors of conscience (people who offered spiritual guidance and who were not always ordained priests but sometimes lay people). There thus arose a powerful tension between, broadly, the *dévots* (devout), who sought to bring religion into every area of human existence, and the *mondains* (worldly people), the great majority of whom still identified as Catholic but who adopted a more moderate view and who argued in favour of the validity of some activities they considered to be beyond the direct purview of the Church. From a *mondain* perspective, the *dévots* were dangerous extremists; from a *dévo*t perspective, the *mondains* were dangerous laxists.

This tension and difference in outlook led to disputes about many areas of human life, including the theatre, which in some respects represented a rival to the Church for people's attention, money and loyalty. During the Counter-Reformation, the theatre was considered by many sections of the Church to be inherently sinful, although it is worth noting that while the theatres were closed in England under Cromwell and in Spain for periods in both the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, this did not happen in France.<sup>5</sup> The theatre's supposed sinful status was owing both to the fundamental nature of theatre itself, which was considered an inherent falsehood in conflict with the inherent truth of God's creation, and to the performance conditions of the public theatre, which promoted a variety of dangerous situations including those that arose from male-female contact within the audience, and the sinful effects of women appearing on stage. The alternative to female actors in the shape of cross-cast male actors was, of course, also condemned. In 1641, Cardinal Richelieu had famously passed an edict that sought to rehabilitate the theatre by absolving actors – the embodiment of guilty falsehood and bad influences – from any charges of infamy, but in practice the decision regarding whether or not an actor was permitted to receive the sacraments was one taken by the local bishop. Molière was famously denied a full Christian burial in Paris on the grounds that he had not renounced his acting profession before his death, and even the personal intervention of Louis XIV only resulted in a discreet night-time burial.

It was widely acknowledged by all *dévots* and most *mondains* that the theatre could promote sin, particularly in the case of vulgar farces. Where the two groups differed was on the possibility of a form or forms of theatre that were not necessarily sinful and could even serve a morally useful purpose. While some of the theatre's critics agreed that tragedies, particularly religious tragedies, could offer morally uplifting stories of exemplarity, it was more difficult to make a strong case for the moral usefulness of comedy, although attempts were made repeatedly. Indeed, Molière invokes comedy's corrective function in the first petition to Louis XIV written during the *Tartuffe* controversy, noting that it is the job of comedy to 'correct men while entertaining them' (OC, II, 191), and at more length in the preface to the published edition of the play a few years later (OC, II, 91-96). In the same preface, he admits there are more morally edifying activities than going to the theatre, but argues that it can offer an innocent diversion from one's religious activities. Ultimately, the question of whether or not theatre in general, and comedy in particular, could ever

be acceptable remained a matter of opinion. Certainly, Molière's tactically shrewd observation in the dedication of his *Critique de l'École des femmes* to the Queen Mother, Anne of Austria, whereby 'true devotion in no way runs counter to honest entertainment' (OC, I, 485) was a powerful one, since neither the Queen's piety nor her love of the theatre was ever in doubt.

More problematic was the case of the young Louis XIV, who was officially the Most Christian King and unofficially something of a personal pleasure-seeker.<sup>6</sup> However, a bigger problem from Molière's perspective was that even the pleasure-seeking young Louis XIV was shrewd enough to realise that additional religious controversy would not well serve the country (or his own totalising ambitions as a would-be absolute monarch). When Louis XIV began his personal rule in 1661, the biggest potential threat in religious terms was not the Protestant community, but the rigorous Catholic movement known as Jansenism. The Jansenists, who emphasised original sin and divine grace, were problematic firstly because they were unorthodox and were reluctant to toe the official Catholic line, which held that five heretical propositions were to be found in Jansen's theological work *Augustinus* (published posthumously in 1640). Jansenists were also problematic because they did not recognise the supposed absolute authority of their king (or, indeed, of their pope) in relation to matters they considered to be questions of individual conscience. In other words, the Jansenists were difficult to control.

Louis XIV was not a king to brook dissent, and he was even willing to invoke the authority of the pope, who was in many ways his rival for absolute authority, in order to try to force recalcitrant Jansenists to sign an official document indicating that the *Augustinus* did, indeed, contain the alleged five heresies. The original formulary that the Jansenists were supposed to sign was drawn up in 1657, and Louis XIV's personal campaign for signatures began shortly after the start of his personal rule in 1661. It peaked in 1664 (the year of *Tartuffe*'s première and the initial ban on public performances of the play) with a campaign of coercion launched against the nuns at the Jansenist base at Port-Royal in Paris, whose extraordinary resistance in the face of patriarchal and monarchical authority is to be noted.<sup>7</sup> It was eventually brought to a close with the so-called Peace of the Church in 1669, after the remaining rebellious nuns and bishops had been allowed to sign while retaining some mental reservations (a bit like signing with their fingers crossed).

This phase of the Jansenist controversy coincides almost exactly with the controversy over Molière's *Tartuffe*. Indeed, two briefs from the Pope confirming that the situation had finally been resolved were delivered to Louis XIV on 3 February 1669, and *Tartuffe* reopened at the Palais-Royal theatre just two days later.<sup>8</sup> This coincidence of dates is, in fact, no coincidence. We shall return briefly to the content of Molière's play below, but it is important to note here that the primary driving force behind the ban on public performances of *Tartuffe* between 1664 and 1669 was owing not to the inflammatory nature of the play itself, but rather to the decidedly tense religious atmosphere of 1660s France. The same King who was known to be trying to avoid a schism within the French Catholic Church by bringing the Jansenists to heel could not be seen to be stirring things up among his *dévot* subjects by allowing public performances of a play that the *dévots* (but not the *mondains*, nor the King himself) considered offensive to Christianity. There is no reason to think that Louis XIV considered the play itself to be dangerous per se, but he did understand that there was a danger in the mid 1660s in allowing it to be performed while Jansenist controversy was still raging, and while he was still in the process of establishing his own authority as a new king. When the ban

on public performances was finally and fully lifted, Louis XIV's personal authority was better established and the Jansenist threat had been averted, at least for the time being.

Some of the most ardent opponents of the Jansenists were their Catholic rivals, the Jesuits, who were the only confessional order in France and who thus acted as confessor-advisors to the king and other people in power (Molière was of course educated at a Jesuit school where religious drama was used as a tool of instruction in their Christian humanist education programme). In some circles, the Jesuits had a reputation for laxist tendencies, owing especially to their use of casuistry, or (sometimes overly) contorted argumentation. While this was a legitimate method of resolving individual moral dilemmas to which no clear answer could be found in scripture or other authoritative sources, it was one that was potentially open to abuse. By the clever use of casuistry, a Jesuit could potentially accommodate behaviour that did not match Christian precepts, and this is something that was satirised by the Jansenist philosopher and mathematician Pascal in his *Lettres provinciales* (1656-57) and by Molière in his *Tartuffe*. Using casuistical arguments, Tartuffe manages to suggest that his love, or rather his desire, for Elmire, who was of course a married woman and therefore out of bounds, is inspired by God and therefore legitimate (III. 3). He also uses casuistry to persuade Orgon to hand over his box of compromising documents, arguing that this way Orgon can truthfully claim not to have any such documents in his possession (V. 1).

To what religious group does Tartuffe then belong? In addition to his Jesuitical casuistry, Tartuffe displays traits associated with other groups. His zealously interfering nature and wish to police the activities of all the members of Orgon's household (described in I. 1) are reminiscent of the activities of the Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement, while his very deliberate references to his hairshirt and scourge in Act III, scene 2 suggest a more rigourist outlook. Tartuffe is also, of course, a hypocrite – as is made clear by his uncontrolled sensuality (described in I. 4) as well as his uncontrolled sexuality (as seen in IV. 5). Hypocrites and sincere believers were no doubt present in all areas of the Catholic church at this time. Tartuffe is thus a religious composite, a unique satirical creation, rather than a representative of any single identifiable group. He is, of course, a layman and not a priest, since the possibility of his marrying Mariane is raised in the course of the play. It is not difficult to see why contemporary *dévots* did not appreciate Molière's satire. However, it is also worth pointing out that the play contained elements that would ultimately prove more threatening to their cause than any portrait of religious hypocrisy, for the world that triumphs at the end of the play is that of Cléante, who is at best lukewarm in his Christianity, and Valère, who is 'generous and sincere' (V. 7. 1962)<sup>9</sup> but, as Orgon had remarked in Act II, scene 2, no regular churchgoer. The possibility of goodness beyond the structures of organised religion was in time to prove the greatest threat to Catholic France's project of reform.

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<sup>1</sup> See Jay R. Berkovitz, 'The Jews of France (1650-1815)', in *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, ed. Jonathan Karp and Adam Sutcliffe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 923-48 (p. 926).

<sup>2</sup> Philip Mansel, *King of the World: The Life of Louis XIV* (London: Allen Lane, 2019), p. 297.

<sup>3</sup> Mansel, *King of the World*, p. 297.

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- <sup>4</sup> Jonathan Patterson, *Representing Avarice in Late Renaissance France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 254.
- <sup>5</sup> Henry Phillips, *Church and Culture in Seventeenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 64.
- <sup>6</sup> See Julia Prest, *Controversy in French Drama: Molière's Tartuffe and the Struggle for Influence* (New York: Palgrave, 2014), Chapter Two.
- <sup>7</sup> See Daniella Kostroun, *Feminism, Absolutism, and Jansenism: Louis XIV and the Port-Royal Nuns* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
- <sup>8</sup> Prest, *Controversy in French Drama*, p. 186.
- <sup>9</sup> Molière, *Tartuffe*, transl. John Wood, in *The Misanthrope and Other Plays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1959).