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**SOLITUDE AND LIFE IN THE
WORLD IN THE LETTERS OF
ANTOINE ARNAULD**

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SOLITUDE AND LIFE IN THE WORLD IN THE LETTERS OF ANTOINE ARNAULD

This article features the correspondence of Antoine Arnauld, who lived close to the Port-Royal monastery, as a case study for the perception of solitude in the spiritual literature of the 17th century. For Arnauld the world is corrupt, as a man in it is prone to an excess of temptation. A truly virtuous life means retirement from the world, not monasticism, but a refusal to comply with a world ruled by passions since the original sin. In his letters, Arnauld speaks of seclusion not only from the world but also from human nature with its sinful inclinations. Denouncing the world and its temptations Arnauld sees it as a battlefield for truth and his own mission in the protection of the latter from profanation. Despite seeing the solitary life as the most dignified, he compares the life of a virtuous married woman to a nun's. Thus, he does not exclude the chance of salvation for those who lead a virtuous secular life. By 1660s his views become more lenient; in one of the letters Arnauld comes up with an apology for the existing social order and its characteristic luxury, seeing it as a manifestation of God's will. The heterogeneity of Arnauld's views could be explained by the nature of our source, the letters, as his ideas there are in the process of development of which each letter only registers stages.

Keywords: Port-Royal, theology, early modern period, seclusion, Anthropology of religion, Counter-Reformation, correspondence, post-Trident Catholicism, secular virtue

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Introduction

The 17th century was a period of reflection on the experience of the preceding epoch, one marked by a religious crisis which had divided all of Europe into two antagonistic camps, and by a comprehension of the new vision of the world and its “infinite spaces,” whose silence so frightened Pascal. It was a time of intensive religious inquiry in the domain of institutional rules and monastic life, including the everyday life of those faithful who chose to live in society.

France was not excluded from this movement. In the 17th century, the country became a field of great spiritual renewal.¹ This is demonstrated by the volume of canonical books, sanctified by the Council of Trent and published during this period, and French translations of spiritual literature² meant to guide people who wanted to conform their everyday experience to Christian precepts.³

An important element of this Counter-Reformation movement, often called the “Catholic Reformation”,⁴ was interest in the first centuries of Christianity. Many early modern theologians were looking back at that epoch in search of examples of strict, authentic devotion. It was not incidental that those theologians had great reverence for the Fathers of the Church and for the Desert Fathers, especially for their ascetic practices. The theme of solitude became of interest to many of the 17th century French authors both secular and religious.⁵ This interest resulted from the crisis of the Thomistic conception of social life where the man was a political animal who can realise moral perfection only in relations with others.⁶

This paper examines 17th century views on solitude and life in society, through the letters of Antoine Arnauld, a great theologian of the time, tied to Port-Royal by family and spiritual matters. The analysis is based on Arnauld’s correspondence, starting with the first letter written in 1637 through the letters of 1669, the year when the Peace of the Church (*Paix de l’Eglise*) was proclaimed, closing the era of debates on the Jansenist question. Although Arnauld’s letters ended with his death in 1694, this period is central in his life: in 1637 he was studying theology at the Sorbonne, the following three decades were marked by intensive debates in which Arnauld matured as a thinker and polemist. This period is also significant for the cultural history of the 17th century: critics call the 1650–1660s as the apogee⁷ of the century, as many crucial texts were published during that decade.

¹ Pillorget R., Pillorget S. France baroque. France classique. Paris, 1995. P. 351.

² For example, “The Imitation of Christ” was published about 810 during the century and was the second book, after Bible, by the number of editions. See: Un succès de librairie européen l’Imitatio Christi (1470-1850) / M. Delaveau et Y. Sordet, dir. Paris, 2012. P. 21.

³ For statistics see: Martin H.-J. Livre, pouvoirs et société à Paris au XVII^e siècle. Genève, 1999. T. 2. P. 1067-1070.

⁴ For example: Chanut C.-P. Réforme catholique // Dictionnaire du Grand Siècle / F. Bluche, dir. Paris, 1990. P. 1305-1309.

⁵ Vigouroux M. Le thème de la retraite et de la solitude chez quelques épistoliers du XVII^e siècle. Paris, 1972. P. 113-124.

⁶ Guion B. Pierre Nicole moraliste. Paris, 2002. P. 316.

⁷ Adam A. Histoire de la littérature française au XVII^e siècle. Paris, 1997. T.2. P. 407-824.

Arnauld and his letters

Arnauld, considered by contemporaries as one of the most influential intellectuals of his era, today remains in shade of his contemporary authors and adversaries: he is known as the author of philosophical texts marked by Cartesianism, as an opponent of Malebranche, and for providing, with Pierre Nicole, arguments for Pascal's *Provinciales*. In his time, Arnauld was also known as a pedagogue, a translator, an editor, a spiritual director. "A wide-ranging genius, profound theologian, a philosopher as Christian as he is enlightened, a sublime metaphysician and even a geometer, and a man of letters, and possessed of all these to a distinguished degree",⁸ is the way he was characterized by his editor in the 1700s.

Arnauld's letters have never been studied by scholars. Correspondence reveals different aspects of its author's life. This is especially true for Arnauld, whose letters provide information about facets of his personality and legacy that are missing from existing scholarship. In his letters, Arnauld appears as a moralist, using vocabulary and normative imagery that allow him to be placed in the same reflexive framework as Pierre Nicole and François de La Rochefoucauld. He also appears as a spiritual director of great authority, due to which he occupies a principal place in the movement of spiritual renewal centred on Port-Royal where his sister, Angelic Arnauld (1599–1661) was an abbess. In 1609 she conducted a reform of the convent, introducing strict rules that gave Port-Royal an aura of sanctity that attracted a lot of people searching for authentic devotion: nuns from other convents, aristocratic ladies who built homes near the convent grounds,⁹ and people who refused to live in the society but, at the same time, had no desire to enter the orders. For example, the great epistolary author of the century, Madame de Sévigné, wrote about Port-Royal:

Port-Royal is a Thebaïd; it is a paradise; it is a desert where all the devotion of Christianity is to be found; a sanctity is spread from the place for a league round. [...] Everything connected with the place—their ploughmen, their shepherds, their workmen—everything has an air of simplicity. I assure you that I was charmed with the sight of this divine solitude of which I had heard so much.¹⁰

⁸ "Génie vaste, profond Théologien, Philosophe aussi chrétien qu'éclairé, sublime Métaphysicien Géometre même, & homme de Lettres, il avoit réuni tous les talens, & les a possédés tous dans un degré distingué..."*Arnauld A. Œuvres de Messire Antoine Arnauld*. Paris, Lausanne, 1775. T. 1. P. VI.

⁹ *Pillorget R., Pillorget S.* Op. cit. P. 435.

¹⁰ Madame de Sévigné, letter from January 26, 1674. As cited in: *Grant A.J.* The French Monarchy 1483-1789. Cambridge university press, 2013. Vol. 1. P. 302.

This group of hermits began with the reclusion in 1638 of Antoine Le Maistre (1608–1658), Arnauld's nephew. Announcing his decision to his father, he wrote about his resolution to change from “the glorious position of an orator and state advisor to that of a simple servant of Jesus Christ”.¹¹ At the same time, Antoine Le Maistre emphasized that he did not want to exchange one “ambition” for another, but rather wanted to live without caring about such notions as honours or privileges, whether in the world or under the aegis of the church, to “follow the purest precepts of the Church and the practice of centuries”.¹² Although Antoine Le Maistre, while renouncing society, did not intend to become a monk or priest, his actions prove that for him—as for many ecclesiastics of his contemporaries—living in the world and reclusion were not equal in regard to devotion.

Post-Tridentine teaching on solitude

The 1630s, when the first fruits of the Council of Trent became evident, were Arnauld’s formative period. The clergy of generations past, avaricious, not prepared for their duty, and acidly criticised by Luther and the Reformation, were succeeded by a new generation of priests, well educated and prepared to uphold the dignity of their profession.

An example of this new clergy was Jean du Vergier de Hauranne (1581-1643), the abbot of Saint-Cyran, one of the French Counter-Reformation leaders and the inspiration behind the reforms at Port-Royal. Young Arnauld chose him as his spiritual director. One of the first letters from his *Collected Works*, published at the end of the 18th century, is addressed to Saint-Cyran, in which he says it is as if the birth of a “new heart”¹³ coincided with the desire to express himself in written correspondence. The letters addressed to Saint-Cyran testify to a major change in his life, when, after a short period of hesitation, the young theologian decides to dedicate his life to serving God. Arnauld calls his life before his conversion “lethargy”, and compares it to St. Augustin’s youth of errors.¹⁴ On that occasion Saint-Cyran pronounced two general rules: the young Arnauld should spend his time alone and he should follow Christ in poverty. Arnauld follows his master’s advice without hesitation: he gives his inheritance to Port-Royal, leaving himself only a modest allowance to the end of his days, and he lives a very closed life while studying at the Sorbonne, at the end of which he decides to move to Port-Royal-des-Champs because his “home at the Sorbonne is absolutely unsuitable to the life of a priest, but Port-Royal

¹¹ “...ces belles qualités d’orateur et de conseiller d’État en celle de simple serviteur de Jésus-Christ.” *Delforge F. Solitaires de Port-Royal // Dictionnaire de Port-Royal / J. Lesaulnier et A. McKena, dir. Paris, 2004. P. 940.*

¹² “...suivre les règles les plus pures de l’Église et la pratique de tant de siècles.” *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.* P. 12.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* P. 2.

is absolutely necessary for it,”¹⁵ as the further a man is from the other human beings, the closer he is to God.¹⁶

Saint-Cyran, in one of his letters to Arnauld during that period of interior transformation, writes: “But it is necessary that you keep solitude, separating yourself entirely from all worldly companionship, except for that which you cannot avoid without scandal...”¹⁷ From this point of view the desire to serve people in the bosom of the Church could be considered as a temptation.¹⁸ Saint-Cyran makes this idea clear using a metaphor: “One who leads an active life in the Church is to one who lives in solitude as one who travels at sea compared to one who walks the earth: one is forced to watch the stars more often than the other.”¹⁹

Why was solitude so valued? According to Saint-Cyran, whose teachings Arnauld would follow, in solitude we are protected from the world and its vices, “by the grace that separates us from (base) creatures and unites us with God”.²⁰ Because of this, it is crucial to escape from the world, where there is “a secret air, which spreads now in all outside the Church, which is no less infectious to the soul than plague air is to the body.”²¹

While living in Port-Royal, dedicating all his efforts to spiritual work, Arnauld was far away from the vanity of the world. From that point of view, even the writing of a letter could have been judged as a reprehensible amusement, which averted the will from its only legitimate object—God. Thus, Arnauld apologizes for a pause in correspondence: “My distance from Paris, in solitude, where it pleased God for me to withdraw to, with no commerce with the world, not even letters, was the cause for my not replying to you earlier”.²² He qualifies as an exception only letters to his spiritual director: “Speaking with you does not violate my withdrawal; I am here only to speak (*entretenir*) with God, and that is what I’m doing, speaking with one with whom I am one with God and for God, and through whom I receive God’s orders.”²³

At the end of the same letter Arnauld, looking for his director’s approval, emphasizes

¹⁵ “la demeure de Sorbonne ne m’étoit nullement propre pour vivre en bon prêtre mais que celle de P.R. étoit absolument nécessaire pour cela” *Arnauld A. Œuvres de Messire Antoine Arnauld*. Paris, Lausanne, 1775. T.1. P. 18.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* P. 19.

¹⁷ “Mais il faut que vous gardiez la solitude, vous séparant entièrement de toute compagnie du monde qui ne sera pas dans votre dessein: hormis celles que vous ne pourrez éviter sans scandale...”¹⁷ *Ibid.* P. 9.

¹⁸ *Orcibal J.* La spiritualité de Saint-Cyran avec ses écrits de piété inédits. Paris, Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, 1962, p. 431

¹⁹ “Celui qui mène la vie active dans l’Eglise est à l’égard de celui qui garde la solitude, comme celui qui fait un voyage sur la mer à l’égard de celui qui marche sur la terre, c’est pourquoi l’un est plus obligé que l’autre de regarder plus souvent le ciel” *Ibid.* P. 432-433.

²⁰ “... par la grâce qui nous sépare des créatures et nous unit à Dieu.” *Ibid.* P. 433.

²¹ “... un air secret qui s’est répandu maintenant dans tous les dehors de l’Eglise qui n’est pas moins contagieux pour les âmes que l’air pestiféré [ne] l’est pour le corps.” *Ibid.*

²² “L’éloignement où je suis de Paris, dans une solitude où il a plu à Dieu de me retirer, n’ayant pas de commerce avec le monde, non pas même par lettres, a été cause que je ne vous ai pas répondu plus tôt.” *Ibid.* P. 54-55.

²³ “Ce n’est pas rompre ma retraite, que de vous parler ; parce que je n’y suis que pour m’entretenir avec Dieu, & que c’est le faire, que s’entretenir avec celui que je ne considère que dans Dieu & pour Dieu, & par le moyen duquel Dieu veut que je reçoive ses orders.” *Ibid.* P. 17.

that writing a letter is not an “indifferent” action for a person who decides to be God’s servant: “I do not know what you’ll think of such a long letter, especially from a hermit...”, giving a supplementary justification for its existence: “...also, the headache I had today kept me from prayer, and writing this restores my spirit.”²⁴ To love God means to live in solitude without any communication with the world: “...being obligated to follow God, rather than my inclinations, I have to follow the orders of his providence, which prevent me from maintaining commerce with the outside...”²⁵

The world as a place of sin

The term “the world” (*le monde*) in 17th century French was polysemous, with more than 10 entries in Furetière’s dictionary. This makes it difficult to correctly interpret the contexts in which the word occurs. In the moral discourse of the time it could mean “ways of living and conversing with men” as well as “the opinions of men, particularly those who are corrupt and contrary to Christian purity,”²⁶ and in this sense it was opposed to religious life and seclusion.

Arnauld perceives the world as an “infected place” (*lieu infecté*).²⁷ Metaphors related to infection, poisoning, dirtiness appear frequently in his descriptions of society. This image of the world figures prominently in a letter written to Saint-Cyran, dated September 15th, 1641:

It seems to me that we could find no better mark of the commerce of the world than by the words *diabolica contagia*, especially as regards myself, to whom this air is highly contagious, and who so easily takes in the infection, and that we reach that purity of heart that God demands of us, especially of priests, to be separated entirely from the corruption of the world, and to practice what I was reading today in Acts: *Salvamini à generatione istâ pravâ*.²⁸

For a Christian, the world should be a “strange land”, in which the good is transient

²⁴ “Je ne sais pas ce que vous direz d’une si longue lettre, principalement pour un solitaire...”

“...mais aussi-bien un petit mal de tête que j’ai eu aujourd’hui, m’a empêché de m’employer beaucoup à la prière, & en vous écrivant je me délasse l’esprit.” Ibid. P. 21.

²⁵ “...mais étant obligé de suivre Dieu, plutôt que mes inclinations, je me dois rendre aux ordres de sa providence, qui m’empêchent d’entretenir aucun commerce au dehors...” Ibid. P. 566.

²⁶ “des manières de vivre & de converser avec les hommes;” “des opinions qu’ont les hommes, & particulièrement de celles qui sont corrompues & contraires à la pureté chrétienne.” Furetière A. Monde // Dictionnaire universel / A. Furetière, ed. La Haye et Rotterdam, 1690.

²⁷ Arnauld A. Op. cit. P. 103.

²⁸ “Il me semble qu’on ne pourrait mieux marquer le commerce du monde, que par ces mots, *diabolica contagia*, principalement à mon égard, à qui cet air est extrêmement contagieux, & qui en prends facilement l’infection, & que cela nous apprenoit aussi fort bien le degré pour arriver à cette pureté de cœur que Dieu nous demande, principalement étant Prêtres, c’étoit de se séparer entièrement de cette corruption du siècle, et de pratiquer ce que je lisois aujourd’hui dans les Actes : *Salvamini à generatione istâ pravâ*.” Ibid. P. 19.

and has more to do with the world of imagination than with reality. The Christian can expect only “crosses, humiliations, insults and injustice.”²⁹ The world is also a field of falsehood: “the sages of the world take sincerity for stupidity.”³⁰ The world is a place where the essence of things is neglected, where their pragmatic aspect, without any reflection of the moral order, prevails: “[...] we look only at what hurts or helps our designs, without troubling ourselves over whether it is true or false.”³¹ In the world, people believe that their interests should be their main guiding principle.³² These are the reasons why the world, and life according to Christ’s teachings, could not be compatible.

Arnauld discusses this question in a letter from August 14th, 1653, written to a young woman, educated at the *petites écoles* in Port-Royal, whose parents wanted her to have a more active social life. Apparently, she had asked Arnauld for advice how to behave in this situation—as an obedient daughter or a good Christian? Arnauld’s answer was the following:

All I can say is that, being Christian, and knowing what it means to be Christian, you cannot deliberate whether you should give yourself to God or the world, as the deliberation itself would be criminal; Scripture assures us that one who would be friend to the world makes himself an enemy of God.³³

The world is a place of sin and concupiscence, as sin consists of averting from God in favour of His creatures. Thus, in a letter from March 29th, 1666, written to Madame Perrier, the sister of Blaise Pascal, Arnauld describes the fall of a mutual acquaintance: “[...] he listened to the Serpent, even though he was convinced that the serpent communicated with him through people, who inspired in him only love of the world, and who strove for only one thing: to instil revulsion for Godly things”.³⁴ Man was created to be with God, his only legitimate object of love and veneration. But, after the sin of Adam, this love was twisted into love for worldly things. So when we choose the world, we reproduce the original sin that separated man and God. After the Fall, man’s will was divided between two antagonistic guiding principles: love of God, brought to the point of denial of self, and love of self, which serves to deny God.

²⁹ “... des croix, des humiliations, des opprobres & des injustices...” Ibid. P. 527.

³⁰ “... les Sages du monde prennent la sincérité pour une bêtise...” Ibid. P. 339.

³¹ “... on n’y regarde que ce qui sert ou ce qui nuit à nos desseins, sans se mettre en peine s’il est vrai ou faux...” Ibid. P. 339.

³² Ibid. P. 462.

³³ “Tout ce que je puis dire, c’est qu’étant Chrétienne, & sachant ce que c’est qu’être Chrétienne, vous ne pouvez pas délibérer, si vous vous donnez à Dieu ou au monde, puisque la délibération même en seroit criminelle; l’Ecriture nous assurant que celui qui veut être ami du monde, se rend ennemi de Dieu.” Ibid. P. 70.

³⁴ Ibid. P. 551.

Augustinian theory of two loves and its 17th century reception

This Augustinian dichotomy was widely used in 17th century moral thought. For Augustine, love of the world was an element of the earthly city. 17th century French moralists acquired this theory via Cornelius Jansen's *Augustinus*, whose adepts were numerous among the Port-Royal group. Jansen put Augustinian theory into the framework of his theology of grace, making love of God equivalent to efficacious grace operating in human will, and love of self to sin. For Jansen, the love of self is the "leading and greatest source of all sin".³⁵ This was also be Saint-Cyran's view. In his thinking, love of self is at the origin of all sin and the love of God is the root of every good action.³⁶ Love of self will become a favourite subject for the French moralists of the second part of the century; they describe it as the reason behind a number perversions and ill actions. After the original sin, man—created to serve God—loses the ability to fulfil his duty. Pierre Nicole writes that, "love of ourselves [...] gives us a violent inclination for pleasure, for elevation, and everything that feeds our curiosity, to fill the terrible void that the loss of our true happiness caused in our heart".³⁷ After the original sin, human nature became dualistic—it is simultaneously great and miserably small, and, according to Nicole, consists of certain strengths, mixed with certain weaknesses: "[...] If we have reason to give thanks to God, for He has given us some love of his truth, we also need to bear some humbling, looking at ourselves as coming from that other inclination, as enemies of the same truth".³⁸ This "terrible emptiness" is the reason for all "rebellious human doings," but also for human inconstancy, pursuit of variety and distractions. People seek pleasure, but in reality they are trying to hide from themselves the fact that their souls are as a desert without God.

Arnauld does not discuss this subject specifically, but on occasion, he adds notes on human nature in its present condition, after the Fall of the First Man. He defines self-love as "sensual inclinations, which touch only upon ourselves, and that serve only to satisfy us, and not to render unto God that which we owe to Him in gratitude for his love."³⁹ Arnauld judges these inclinations, which divert man from God, as vicious because they lead to sin. Concupiscence is the principle of self-love, it is in the soul of man and in the foundation of world after the original sin: "[God] delivers us from sin, but does not relieve us of concupiscence. As long as we live on

³⁵ "...generalissimus et uberrimus fons omnium omnino vitiorum." Levy A. *French Moralists: the Theory of the Passions 1585 to 1649*. Oxford, 1964. P. 226.

³⁶ *Ibid.* P. 228.

³⁷ "...l'amour de nous-mêmes ... nous donne une inclination violente pour les plaisirs, pour l'élevation, et pour tout ce qui nourrit notre curiosité, afin de remplir par là le vide effroyable que la perte de notre bonheur véritable a causé dans notre cœur." Nicole P. *Essais de morale*. Paris, 1999. P. 345-346.

³⁸ "...si nous avons sujet de rendre grâces à Dieu de ce qu'il nous a donné quelque amour de sa vérité, nous avons aussi sujet de nous humilier en nous regardant selon cette autre inclination, comme ennemis de cette même vérité." *Ibid.*, pp. 340-341.

³⁹ "...inclinations sensuelles qui n'ont rapport qu'à nous-mêmes, & qui ne vont qu'à nous satisfaire, & non à rendre à Dieu ce que nous lui devons par le mouvement de son amour..." *Arnauld A. Op. cit.* P. 77.

earth, we still have this body of death, which forces us to moan and cry to God, that he may deliver us completely”.⁴⁰

The world is the kingdom of the sin, but Christians living in the world should still aspire to the “divine pleasures”. This aspiration is crucial, because God is the only source of virtue and virtuous action:

God is truth itself, justice itself, goodness itself, and our soul can only be just in so far as it participates in this immutable form of justice, in accordance with its eternal laws, which should be the rule of all its actions. Therefore, any just action undertaken by a Christian may not be committed in view of any personal or philosophical virtue, but in view of God, the source and principal of all virtue.⁴¹

According to Arnauld, the solitary life allows one to keep the soul separate from pernicious secular commerce, to enjoy the gifts of divine grace. However, solitude assumes not only separation from the external world, but also from the self. Thus Arnauld writes to his sister, Marie Angélique Arnauld, the abbess of Port-Royal, on 26th January 1656: “Pray to God, my dearest Mother,⁴² that I may commence and pursue the holiness of a life removed, committed to divine providence, and that my retreat be more internal, than external, and that I be more separated from myself, than from the world”.⁴³ Man should separate from himself because his nature is corrupt and impedes his elevation toward God. Saint-Cyran wrote to the young Arnauld, explaining what the concept of “internal solitude” means:

These two loves [love of God and love of self] cannot long coexist in the same heart, without one ruining the other. We must, as much as possible, live in constant separation not only from secular society [*gens du siècle*], but from ourselves, as concerns ourselves and our foremost feelings. We must always return to this separation when, due to the corruption in our nature, we fall away from it. Thus, we can gradually advance in virtue, as one advances,

⁴⁰ “Il [Dieu] nous délivre du péché, mais il ne nous ôte pas la concupiscence. Tant que nous vivons sur la terre, nous portons toujours ce corps de mort, qui nous oblige de gémir & de crier sans cesse à Dieu, afin qu’il nous délivre entièrement.” Ibid. P. 656.

⁴¹ “Dieu est la vérité même, la justice même, la bonté même, & notre âme ne peut être juste, qu’autant qu’elle participe à cette forme immuable de la justice, en se conformant à ses loix éternelles, qui doivent être la règle de toutes ses actions. C’est pourquoi quelque action de justice que fasse un chrétien, il ne doit pas la faire dans la vue d’une vertu particulière & philosophique, mais dans la vue de Dieu, source & principe de toute vertu.” Ibid. P. 473.

⁴² Here Arnauld uses the word “Mother” in the sense of Abbess.

⁴³ “Priez dieu, ma très-chère Mere, que je puisse commencer & poursuivre saintement la vie retirée dans laquelle la providence divine m’engage, & que ma retraite soit encore plus intérieure qu’extérieure, & autant séparée de moi-même que du monde”. Ibid. P. 100.

step by step, on a path that leads us away from the places and people we are used to, or, rather, as one rows upriver against the current.⁴⁴

Man is, thus, weak and filled with pride—his terrestrial life is full of “misery and regrets,”⁴⁵ while his will is directed by concupiscence.

The world as a place of salvation

Despite this pessimistic view, Arnauld does not condemn the world definitively. The positions of the Port-Royal theologians on this question were far from uniform. For Saint-Cyran, the matter does not consist of a categorical condemnation of the world, though the life of a hermit or monk is considered a higher choice than life in society. He admits the value of social activity, considering it a realisation of God’s will.⁴⁶

Martin de Barcos (1600–1678), another influent theologian from the Port-Royal group, held a different view. His thought was that the world is damned, and humans are capable only of faults and sins, and, therefore, there is no way to truth and salvation.

Arnauld’s view of this problem is similar to that of his spiritual director. He considers the world as a field of battle, in the name of God and truth, which it is the duty of every true Christian to defend. For example, Arnauld, in his early years wrote: “God calls me to battles, which will bring me injury, and perhaps death”.⁴⁷ Several times, Arnauld mentions that Jesus Christ did not come to the world to bring peace, but division and the sword, paraphrasing the Gospels of both Matthew and Luke.⁴⁸

Arnauld does acknowledge other forms of social being and interaction. With age, his attitude moderates to a considerable extent.

According to the moral discourse of the 17th century, concupiscence, which rules the social world, has three main forms. If man was created to love, to know and to aspire to God, then after the original sin, these three aims become twisted into concupiscence: the love that is

⁴⁴ “Ces deux amours ne sauraient subsister longtemps ensemble dans un même cœur, sans que l’un ruine l’autre. Or il faut vivre autant qu’il est possible dans une continuelle séparation, non seulement des gens du siècle, mais de nous-mêmes à l’égard de nous-mêmes et de nos premiers sentiments, et il faut toujours rentrer dans cette séparation lorsque nous en sortons par la corruption de notre nature. C’est ainsi qu’on s’avance peu à peu dans la vertu, comme on s’avance pas à pas dans une chemin en s’éloignant de la vue des lieux et des personnes que l’on avait accoutumé de fréquenter, ou pour mieux dire, comme on va à force de rames contre le fil de l’eau sur une rivière”. The quotation is from: *Donetskoff D.* Sacerdoce et solitude selon Saint-Cyran // *Chroniques de Port-Royal*. 2002. № 51. P. 102.

⁴⁵ *Arnauld A.* Op. cit. P.656.

⁴⁶ *Cognet L.* Le mépris du monde à Port-Royal et dans le jansénisme // *Revue d’ascétique et de mystique*. 1965. № 41. P. 393.

⁴⁷ “Dieu m’appelle à des combats qui me causeront des blessures, & peut-être la mort” *Arnauld A.* Op. cit. P. 19.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* P. 368.

God's due turns toward His creatures and transforms into lust and cupidity; the desire for knowledge transforms into a striving for empty things and degenerates into curiosity; the desire to be in communication with God becomes the desire to dominate others. Arnauld quotes the Gospel of John,⁴⁹ which lies at the origin of these distinctions, but only to moderate it because it seems to him to be excessively rigorous:

It should not be assumed that everything, which comes out of these three wicked sources that St. John writes of—lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is always a mortal sin. Where would we be if it were? The least of vanities would then be a crime [...].⁵⁰

In this passage, Arnauld's position is very moderate, as he writes that "the least of vanities" should not be considered as a mortal sin but as a venial sin, and that to insist upon the opposite means to support the heresy of "Lutherans and Calvinists, who do not distinguish between the venial sins [which may be atoned for] and mortal sins".⁵¹

Thus, life in the world could also lead to salvation, but less surely than the life of a monk or hermit. For example, in a letter to his elder brother, the hermit poet Arnauld d'Andilly, Arnauld writes about a mutual acquaintance who had recently fallen into disgrace:

[...Y]ou are too Christian to not send your thoughts to a higher place and see, with that hidden vision which is granted through piety, that there are no true virtues and no true evils, except those that are eternal, and that everything which is transient must be considered in relation to salvation: and that the people of the world [*les gens du monde*] will come into it more easily by poverty than by good fortune.⁵²

Terrestrial life should be considered preparation for the next life, and all judgement about people's doings in the world should be viewed from the perspective of potential salvation.

49 "For all that is in the world is the concupiscence of the flesh and the concupiscence of the eyes and the pride of life, which is not of the Father but is of the world." 1 John 2:16 Douay-Rheims Bible, 1582

⁵⁰ "Car il ne faut pas s'imaginer, que tout ce qui sort de ces trois mauvaises sources dont parle S. Jean ; ma concupiscence de la chair, la concupiscence deux yeux, & l'orgueil de la vie, soit toujours péché mortel. Où en serions-nous si cela étoit? les moindres vanités seroient des crimes". Arnauld A. Op. cit. P. 647.

⁵¹ "des Luthériens et des Calvinistes, qui ont ôté la différence entre les péchés véniels & les mortels". Ibid. P. 648.

⁵² "...vous êtes trop Chrétien pour ne pas porter vos pensées plus haut, & pour ne pas considérer avec cet œil invisible que donne la piété, qu'il n'y a de véritables biens & des véritables maux que ceux qui sont éternels ; que tout ce qui est temporel ne doit être considéré que par rapport au salut, & que les gens du monde y arrivent plus facilement par la mauvaise que par la bonne fortune..." Ibid. P. 629.

"Inner worldly asceticism" in Arnauld's interpretation

Despite the fact that the choice between the world and God is criminal, even in the world one can be a true Christian and carry one's cross. For example, in the previously mentioned letter from the August 14th, 1653, to the young lady educated at the "petites écoles" at Port-Royal, he writes:

And so, Sister, all that is left to deliberate, or rather to ask of God, is that he direct you to the manner in which you can serve Him, and which will be opposed to the spirit of the world...⁵³

Thus even living in the world, a Christian can follow the "narrow path" (*voie étroite*)⁵⁴ of devotion that leads to salvation. To a woman, Arnauld writes that marriage, like religious life, is also a cross to bear, as there is "the rule of God and the unchanging truth of Scripture, [that] requires a woman to obey her husband, to love and cherish him, however unbearable he might be".⁵⁵ In this sense, to live the life of a married woman means to bear a cross, and this cross is, according to Arnauld, no less heavy than that of a nun⁵⁶.

A Christian's life is in some aspects the "inner worldly asceticism," studied by Max Weber, a very strict obedience to Christian regulations, and service to God, even if one does not intend to retire from society.

Arnauld was not alone, as similar views were often developed by post-Tridentine Catholicism. For example, François de Sales, writing at the beginning of the "Introduction to the Devout Life," states that before him, theologians speculated about devotion which leads to hermitage, whereas he is going to consider how to be a Christian living in the world, with all of its vicissitudes.

However, Arnauld's conception of everyday devotion while living in the world can only be characterised as "inner worldly asceticism" to a limited extent, particularly when it comes to the letters of the 1660s. While he does not wholly condemn secular life, nor does he condemn the social order that structures relations between people, as every social caste has a divinely appointed role to play. In a letter from December 29th, 1668, Arnauld responds to the

⁵³ "...Et ainsi, ma Sœur, tout ce qui vous reste à délibérer, ou plutôt à demander à Dieu, est que de plusieurs manieres dont on peut être à [lui] Dieu, & qui sont toutes très-opposées à l'esprit du monde..." Ibid. P. 71.

⁵⁴ "13 Enter ye in at the narrow gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way that leadeth to destruction, and many there are who go in thereat. 14 How narrow is the gate, and strait is the way that leadeth to life: and few there are that find it!" Matthew 7:13-14, Douay-Rheims Bible, 1582

⁵⁵ "la regle de Dieu & la vérité immuable de l'Écriture [qui] oblige une femme à obéir à son mari, à l'aimer & à le chérir, quelque fâcheux qu'il puisse être" *Arnauld A. Op. cit.* P. 71.

⁵⁶ : "Cette croix n'est-elle point aussi pesante que celle de l'obéissance qu'une Religieuse doit rendre à sa Supérieur, qui ne lui commande qu'avec douceur & charité?" Ibid. P. 71.

question of whether all “things which directly and positively serve the pride of life”⁵⁷—in other words, luxurious objects—are sinful? This subject was discussed in Paris after a sermon in which the priest expressed his desire that “all the lace workers be in a state of sin, and damnation”,⁵⁸ because they produce luxurious objects that feed the love of self. Arnauld does not agree with such severe judgment, because he considers that “there is a legitimate purpose to these things, which at first appear unnecessary”⁵⁹:

This is the distinction between the conditions existing among men, which appeared since the Fall; in the state to which they have been brought by the Fall, they have become somehow necessary, so that the Christian religion does not seek to abolish them, as they merely mark the different duties of each estate and each condition, having established the spiritual equality of Christians, which consists of being in communion with the same grace, practicing the same virtues, and expecting the same rewards.⁶⁰

Therefore, if different social classes exist in a Christian city, there should be also features helping to distinguish people from different castes, which impress “in the minds of the people, feelings of respect and reverence that is due to those of a higher status”.⁶¹

People who are wearing lace are not in the condition of sin, because “that which is modest dress on the lord would be condemnably prideful on his valet.”⁶² Therefore, the women making lace are not in a condition of sin either, because they need to avoid “idleness, and not fall into extreme poverty, as that could lead them to engage in very unfortunate actions, while making an honest and easy living”.⁶³

⁵⁷ “... ouvrages qui servent directement & positivement à l’orgueil de la vie...” *François de Sales. Oeuvres. Paris, 1969. P. 23.*

⁵⁸ “... toutes les filles & femmes qui travaillent à des points de dentelle soient en état de péché & de damnation...” *Arnauld A. Op. cit. P. 645.*

⁵⁹ “il y a un autre usage légitime de ces choses, qui paroissent d’abord superflues”⁵⁹ *Ibid. P. 646.*

⁶⁰ “C’est la distinction des conditions parmi les hommes, qui ne se sont introduites que depuis le péché ; mais qui, dans l’état où le péché les a réduites, sont devenues comme nécessaires; de sorte que la Religion chrétienne n’a eu garde de les abolir, s’étant contentée de marquer les différens devoirs de chaque état & de chaque condition, & d’établir seulement une égalité spirituelle entre les Chrétiens, qui consiste dans la communion aux mêmes graces, la pratique des mêmes vertus intérieures & l’attente des mêmes recompenses...” *Ibid. P. 646.*

⁶¹ “...dans l’esprit du peuple, les sentimens de respect & de révérence qu’ils doivent avoir envers ceux qui sont d’une condition plus relevée...” *Arnauld A. Op. cit. P. 647.*

⁶² “Seigneur peut être modeste étant habillé d’une manière qui seroit condamner son valet de chambre d’un fort grand orgueil.” *Idem.*

⁶³ “...l’oisiveté, & ne pas tomber dans une extrême indigence, qui les peut engager en des choses très- fâcheuses, d’avoir des ouvrages honnêtes qui soient faciles, & où elles puissent néanmoins gagner commodément leur vie...” *Ibid. P. 648*

Conclusion

In his letters, Arnauld never formulated a monolithic, coherent view on life in the world and solitude, but this topic appears here and there in his correspondence. This explains the polyphonic nature of the views recorded in his letters. This polyphony is due to the nature of the source in question, as Arnauld's views changed with time, and his letters fix the points of change. From a synchronic point of view, this is inevitable, as in his letters Arnauld shows himself in different roles: as a friend, as a director, as a person seeking advice. His letters are different from the close discursive forms. It is rare that they express a coherent view, more often they are like a laboratory where ideas are formulated, sharpened, and tested. The epistolary subject has several faces, his is never fixed, and the letters record the moments of transformation.

In his other works Arnauld was more consistent in his views on solitude. For example, in his major work, *De la Fréquente Communion* (1643), one of the most important books on everyday devotion of the 17th century, he recommended living as a recluse as an exercise of penitence to prepare oneself for communion⁶⁴. According to Arnauld's views it was impossible to advance in virtue while living in the world. This book inspired many to retire and to join the community of Port-Royal hermits⁶⁵. However, even there Arnauld's position is not single-valued as he accepts the interactions related to real social duties and denies superfluous relations.⁶⁶ In his own life Arnauld was a true representation of his principles. In his very early years he renounced a career in society and lived very closed, this was partly due to the persecutions he experienced. At the same time it was not the life of a hermit, as he was active as a polemist and a writer. According to Arnauld, a quiet, solitary life was more valuable, but not when the Christian truth was threatened, as he perceived it to be in his lifetime.⁶⁷ So he was faithful to his duty to defend the truth in a world where it was profaned.

After Lucien Goldman's work, *Le Dieu Caché* (1955), there was a common opinion that Port-Royal was a close austere religious group with rigorous attitude to social life.⁶⁸ This paper shows that this thesis should be reconsidered. Arnauld's letters prove that people from Port-

⁶⁴ "Car quelle penitence peut estre plus agréable à Dieu, & en un sens plus publique que de rompre entierement, & à la veuë de tous, avec son ennemy, c'est à dire, avec le monde; que de renoncer pour jamais à tous les plaisirs, ou plustost à toutes les folies du siecle; que de quitter toutes de prétentions, pour embrasser une vie sainte & religieuse; que de retirer dans une solitude à l'exemple de tout de grands Saints, ou choisir le fond d'un monastère pour y satisfaire à la justice de Dieu pour les larmes continuelles (...), pour passer tout le reste de sa vie dans l'exercice des actions contraires à celles pour lesquelles on gemit". Arnauld A. *De la Fréquente Communion*. Paris, 1643. P. 177.

⁶⁵ Port-Royal / Plazenet L., éd. Paris, 2012. P. 214.

⁶⁶ "Ce qui consiste principalement à aimer la solitude et la retraite de sa maison, & peu la compagnie des gens du monde qu'une telle personne ne doit voir que par nécessité & par force pour s'acquitter des vrais devoirs civils, & non ceux qui sont superflus." Arnauld A. *De la Fréquente Communion*. Paris, 1643. P. 186.

⁶⁷ Arnauld A. *Œuvres de Messire Antoine Arnauld*. Paris, Lausanne, 1779. T. 27. P. 4.

⁶⁸ For example: Vigouroux M. *Le thème de la retraite et de la solitude chez quelques épistoliers du XVIIe siècle*. Paris, 1972. P. 81.

Royal had different and changing opinions on human destiny in this world. On the one hand, the world is a place of sin and merely being in it damages one's virtue. This position is characteristic of Arnauld's early letters, when he was experiencing a conversion and was entirely taken with his newfound resolve. On the other hand, he quotes Christ's words—that he brought not only peace but the sword, which means that it is necessary to fight for the truth, if it is profaned, to fight using purely “humane” methods, such as the art of rhetoric. The alternative to life in society is not the monastic vocation, but a life of solitude, which allows the hermit to separate from the world's temptations and to distance himself from his given nature, whose inclinations have degenerated as a consequence of Adam's sin. In his later years, this rigorous position changes, and Arnauld will be indulgent of the luxurious objects which were usually condemned as a manifestation of concupiscence, master of the world after the First Sin.

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