

## NOTES

THE DATE OF THE FIRST EDITION OF D'HOLBACH'S  
CHRISTIANISME DÉVOILÉ

FOR MANY YEARS, Jacques-André Naigeon's testimony concerning the publication of baron d'Holbach's *Le Christianisme dévoilé, ou examen des principes et des effets de la religion chrétienne*, as recorded by the bibliographer Antoine-Alexandre Barbier, was accepted without reservation. The first edition, bearing the date 1756 on the title-page, was said to have been published in 1761, but because this printing ran into difficulties with the French authorities, the book's diffusion was delayed until the 1766 edition.<sup>1</sup> Recently, however, Barbier's story has been contested. It is a matter of dispute whether Manfred Naumann or Jeroom Vercruysse first put forward new claims,<sup>2</sup> and it is one which I am not in a position to judge, but it suffices to note that there is now a strong case for believing that the first edition of *Le Christianisme dévoilé* did not appear until 1766. While carrying out research on d'Holbach, I have discovered several facts that shed some light on this book's date of publication.

Since Vercruysse's claims form part of the most thorough and ambitious bibliography of d'Holbach's writings yet attempted, I will scrutinise his case.<sup>3</sup> He puts forward essentially three arguments for a 1766 date of publication: firstly, *Le Christianisme dévoilé* is not referred to in contemporary writings until 1766; secondly, the watermark of the paper in the first edition dates from 1762 or 1763; and thirdly, the date on the title-page of a copy of the first edition held in the Bibliothèque Nationale has been corrected — by an eighteenth-century hand, Vercruysse asserts — from MDCCLVI to MDCCLXVI. The latter argument is far from conclusive: we do not know who added the "X" to the printed date, how well informed he was about the book's publishing history, or when he added it. The second argument is more substantial: if the watermark discerned by Vercruysse does in fact date from 1762 or 1763, there is no possibility of the work having been published in 1761. Still, it would not be unreasonable to suppose that Naigeon or Barbier got the date slightly wrong, as 1762-63 is closer in time to 1761 than 1766. It is Vercruysse's first argument, therefore, that is most crucial to his case. Unfortunately, his claim that there are no references to *Le Christianisme dévoilé* in contemporary writings before 1766 is false, for in Grimm's *Correspondance littéraire* of 15 August 1763 there is a lengthy review of the work.<sup>4</sup> This seems to rule out a 1766 date of publication.

There is, however, much more to be said about this review and its implications for a bibliography of d'Holbach's writings. Grimm opens his discussion of *Le Christianisme dévoilé* by comparing it with Nicolas-Antoine Boulanger's *L'Antiquité dévoilée par ses usages, ou examen critique des principales opinions, cérémonies et institutions religieuses et politiques des différents peuples de la terre*, and he notes that while the former is intended to appear as a companion piece to the latter, they are obviously not written by the same hand.<sup>5</sup> What is intriguing about this comparison is that *L'Antiquité dévoilée* definitely did not appear until 1766.<sup>6</sup> This fact leads one to assume that Tourneux misplaced this review and that its rightful place is in the 1766 numbers. Much recent research has revealed the editorial practices and errors that make all the nineteenth-century editions of the *Correspondance littéraire* unreliable and misleading in parts,<sup>7</sup> and as our present concern is an excellent demonstration of the need for a new edition, I would like to say a little more about the publishing history of the review of *Le Christianisme dévoilé*. Censored by Napoleonic authorities in 1813, when the Michaud and Chéron edition of the *Correspondance littéraire* for the years 1753 - 69 appeared,<sup>8</sup> the review was first published in 1829 by François Chéron and L. F. Thory along with all of the other censored pieces. It was placed in a section dated 15 August 1763, which also contained a letter by Diderot to Sophie Volland and a review of Boulanger's *Recherches sur l'origine du despotisme oriental*.<sup>9</sup> One presumes the editors followed the MSS of censored pieces as they found them, but it is quite conceivable that the papers were jumbled to some extent. Our lack of knowledge here prevents us from determining how the review of *Le Christianisme dévoilé* originally found its way into the number of 15 August 1763. In editing this, Tourneux has simply followed the earlier published material: his version consists of Diderot's letter to Sophie, the review of Boulanger's *Recherches*, the review of *Le Christianisme dévoilé*, and several brief literary notes. Tourneux, consequently, is not entirely to blame for the misplacement of the review of d'Holbach's book.

Since both external and internal evidence testify to this error in existing printed editions of the *Correspondance littéraire*, we are now faced with the problem of determining the review's real date. The best guide to this is the manuscripts of Grimm's periodical held in Stockholm and Gotha.<sup>10</sup> In these, the review appears not in the number of 15 August 1763, but in that of 1 June 1766, which makes Grimm's lines the earliest contemporary reference to d'Holbach's *Le Christianisme dévoilé*.<sup>11</sup> In both MSS, the review is preceded by Dorat's "Épître à Alexandrine" and followed by a review of Robinet's *De la nature*, volumes 3 and 4: and the handwriting is identical. It is perhaps odd that Tourneux, although having access to the Gotha Ms, did not correct the placement of the review. Was this editorial sloppiness, or did

he regard the Chéron and Thory version as more authoritative? We do not know the answers to these questions. Yet we do know, incidentally, thanks to the research of Jean Varloot, that Tourneux suppressed Dorat's poem altogether as part of an editorial practice of omitting minor writers in general, especially for the years 1765-70.<sup>12</sup>

The above facts establish that Grimm's review of d'Holbach's *Le Christianisme dévoilé* belongs to the number of 1 June 1766. Thus our questioning of Vercruysse's main argument has in fact strengthened it: the absence of any reference to the baron's book prior to 1766 strongly indicates publication in this year, and in the light of this, Vercruysse's other arguments — the watermark of the paper and the hand-corrected title-page — confirm this date. The Stockholm and Gotha MSS also tell us that *Le Christianisme dévoilé* was published in the first half of 1766. There are still avenues that could be followed in this matter: we might learn something by focusing on the Nancy printer of the book, Leclerc, or on Saint-Lambert's activities at the time when he reputedly took d'Holbach's MS to Nancy. At best, the facts I have uncovered are a useful addition to the all too thin file on the baron's publishing career.

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<sup>1</sup> Antoine-Alexandre Barbier, *Dictionnaire des ouvrages anonymes*, 4 vols., 1872 (rpt. Hildesheim, Georg Olms, 1963), I, 594-95. There is no evidence of the work's diffusion in manuscript form.

<sup>2</sup> Rudolf Besthorn, review of Jeroom Vercruysse, *Bibliographie descriptive des écrits du Baron d'Holbach* in *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire*, 53 (1975), 194.

<sup>3</sup> Jeroom Vercruysse, *Bibliographie descriptive des écrits du Baron d'Holbach*, Paris, Minard, 1971, 1756.

<sup>4</sup> *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique par Grimm, Diderot, Raynal, Meister, etc.*, ed. Maurice Tourneux, 16 vols., Paris: Garnier, 1877-82, V, 367-68.

<sup>5</sup> Tourneux, V, 367.

<sup>6</sup> Vercruysse, 1766. It circulated in manuscript form before this date, but with a different title.

<sup>7</sup> See *La Correspondance littéraire: 1<sup>er</sup> janvier-15 juin 1761*, ed. Ulla Kolving (*Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis: Studia Romanica Upsaliensia*, vol. 22, Uppsala, 1978), and *La Correspondance littéraire: 1<sup>er</sup> janvier-15 juin 1763*, ed. Agneta Hallgren (*Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis: Studia Romanica Upsaliensia*, vol. 25, Uppsala, 1979).

<sup>8</sup> *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique, adresse à un souverain d'Allemagne, depuis 1753 jusqu'en 1769, par le baron de Grimm et par Diderot: Première Partie*, 6 vols., Paris, Longchamps et Buisson, 1813.

<sup>9</sup> *Correspondance inédite de Grimm et de Diderot, et recueil de lettres, poésies, morceaux et fragmens retranchés par la censure imperiale en 1812 et 1813*, Paris, H. Fournier J<sup>e</sup>, 1829, p. 186-96.

<sup>10</sup> Stockholm, Kungl. Biblioteket, Vu 29:7, p. 296-97; Gotha, Forschungsbibliothek, Schloss Friedenstein, B 1183<sup>f</sup>, f. 434<sup>v</sup>-35<sup>r</sup>. Special thanks are due to Eva Dillman, of Stockholm, and Dr Helmut Claus, of Gotha, for the trouble they went to in response to my enquiries.

<sup>11</sup> See Vercruysse, 1756.

<sup>12</sup> Jean Varloot, 'La Correspondance littéraire de F.-M. Grimm à la lumière des manuscrits de Gotha: contributions ignorées, collaborateurs mal connus', in *Beiträge zur Französischen Aufklärung und zur Spanischen Literatur: Festgabe für Werner Krauss zum 70. Geburtstag*, Berlin, Akademie-Verlag, 1971, p. 435-6.

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