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Louis XIV's Attitude to the Chinese Rites Controversy

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Abstract

Although Louis XIV's sponsorship of a French Jesuit presence in China is well known, his attitude to the major dispute over the Chinese rites which engulfed the mission has been barely explored. This article shows that, as the Chinese Rites Controversy reached its peak in Paris and Rome in the years around 1700, Louis XIV's response was surprisingly inconsistent, reflecting the fact that the two groups of missionaries whose work in east Asia he had supported – the Missions étrangères de Paris (MEP) and the French Jesuits – were pitted against one another. Furthermore, the king's somewhat contradictory interventions were due to the opposing directions in which his chief advisers on ecclesiastical matters pushed him: his confessor La Chaise towards support of the Jesuits, and his wife Madame de Maintenon and Archbishop Noailles of Paris towards helping the MEP. In the end, Louis decided not to wield his influence in Rome in favour of one side or the other, but to leave the decision to the Holy See while prohibiting publication on the 'Chinese affair' in France. In doing so, the article offers an exploration of ecclesiastical policy in the making under the Sun King.

Keywords: early modern France; Jesuit mission to China; Chinese Rites Controversy; Louis XIV of France; Roman Catholic Church

It is well known that Louis XIV (r. 1643–1715) sponsored the establishment of a French Jesuit presence in China, dispatching a team of missionaries to the Qing empire in 1685. Connected to the Académie royale des sciences and given the status of 'mathematicians of the king', the French Jesuits have been studied extensively as vectors of cultural and scientific exchange between France and China.¹ They flattered their royal patron

¹Isabelle Landry-Deron, 'Les Mathématiciens envoyés en Chine par Louis XIV en 1685', *Archive for History of Exact Sciences*, 55 (2001), 423–63; Han Qi, 'Sino-French Scientific Relations through the French Jesuits and the Académie Royale des Sciences in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries', in *China and Christianity: Burdened Past, Hopeful Future*, ed. Stephen Uhalley and Xiaoxin Wu (New York, 2001), 137–47; Florence C. Hsia, *Sojourners in a Strange Land: Jesuits and Their Scientific Missions in Late Imperial China* (Chicago, 2009); Catherine Jami, *The Emperor's New Mathematics: Western Learning and Imperial Authority*

at Versailles by drawing parallels between his reign and that of the Kangxi emperor (r. 1661–1722), who met the mathematicians in 1688 and retained two of them – Jean-François Gerbillon (1654–1707) and Joachim Bouvet (1656–1730) – to serve at his court in Beijing. How glorious for the Sun King if this illustrious contemporary were drawn to Catholicism through an esteem for French arts and sciences – not to mention admiration for Louis XIV, for the Kangxi emperor allegedly listened with pleasure to stories of the French monarch’s ‘great actions’ narrated by the mathematicians. Perhaps, mused Bouvet, God had reserved the miracle of a Catholic emperor in Beijing and a Christian China for the reign of Louis XIV as a just recompense for the Sun King’s ‘zeal and ... heroic magnanimity’.² The existence of such an exciting possibility no doubt helps explain why Louis continued over the coming years to support the departure of more French Jesuit mathematicians to China.³

The Jesuits were not, however, the only French missionaries operating in east Asia under the Sun King’s patronage. Members of the Société des Missions étrangères de Paris (MEP), a society of secular clergy whose seminary received letters patent from the king in 1663, were also active; indeed, there were several MEP missionaries on the ship that carried the first group of Jesuit mathematicians to Siam on their way to China.⁴ Like the mathematicians – whose arrival in China challenged the existing Jesuit mission under the Portuguese *Padroado* (patronage), from which the French Jesuits would formally split in 1700 – the MEP was part of a struggle within the church for control over missionary activity.⁵ The Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith sought to assert papal control to the detriment of the *Padroado* by appointing members of the MEP as ‘vicars apostolic’ with episcopal authority.⁶

Louis XIV no doubt wanted both groups of French missionaries to work together for France’s interests in Asia.⁷ Instead, the MEP and the French Jesuits played a major role in reigniting a long-standing dispute over the extent to which Catholicism could accommodate ritual practices that were deeply rooted in Chinese culture. In 1693, Charles Maigrot (1652–1730), the MEP vicar apostolic of Fujian Province, promulgated a mandate (episcopal instruction) prohibiting Chinese converts from performing the rituals venerating family ancestors and Confucius that the Jesuits deemed acceptable but which he considered idolatrous.⁸ Over the following years, the MEP procurator

during the Kangxi Reign (1662–1722) (Oxford, 2011), 102–19; Lü Ying and Yan Guodong, ‘Luyi shisi paiqian “huangjia shuxuejia” chuanjiaoshi laihua de beijing’, *Shixue jikan*, 2 (2012), 74–80; Mario Cams, ‘Converging Interests and Scientific Circulation between Paris and Beijing (1685–1735): The Path towards a New Qing Cartographic Practice’, *Revue d’histoire des sciences*, 70 (2017), 47–78.

² Joachim Bouvet, *Portrait historique de l’empereur de la Chine, présenté au Roy, par le P. J. Bouvet, de la Compagnie de Jesus, Missionnaire de la Chine* (Paris, 1697), 3–9, 164, 255–6, 259–60.

³ Liam Matthew Brockey, *Journey to the East: The Jesuit Mission to China, 1579–1724* (Cambridge, MA, 2007), 182–4.

⁴ Adrien Launay, *La Société des Missions-étrangères*, 2nd edn (Paris, 1919), 15–16; Raphaël Vongsuravatana, ‘Guy Tachard ou la marine française dans les Indes Orientales (1684–1701)’, *Histoire, Économie et Société*, 13 (1994), 251–2.

⁵ Brockey, *Journey to the East*, 158–61.

⁶ Claudia von Collani, ‘Beginning with Obstacles: The First Attempts of the Propaganda Fide to Establish Relations with China’, *Hong Kong Journal of Catholic Studies*, 14 (2023), 49–77.

⁷ Andreina Albanese, ‘Il ruolo della Francia nei rapporti tra oriente ed occidente nel sec. XVII’, *Rivista degli studi orientali*, 70 (1996), 367–97.

⁸ Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF), MS latin 16,980, fos. 18r–20v (*Declaratio seu Mandatum*).

in Rome, Nicolas Charriot (1655–1714), worked indefatigably to secure confirmation of this mandate from Pope Innocent XII (r. 1691–1700). As the cogs of papal bureaucracy began to turn once the Holy Office of the Inquisition started to examine the mandate in 1697, the ‘Chinese Rites Controversy’ became a major topic of discussion in Europe. Knowing that a prohibition of Confucian and ancestral veneration could endanger the entire mission, the Jesuits defended their more tolerant attitude to the rites in works such as the *Nouveaux Mémoires sur l’état présent de la Chine* (1696) by Louis Le Comte (1655–1728), one of the original mathematicians who had returned to Paris. The polemic surrounding these issues became particularly heated in France in 1700. In that year, the MEP published an open letter to Innocent XII accusing the Jesuits of tolerating idolatry in China; they also submitted Le Comte’s *Nouveaux Mémoires* and two other Jesuit books to the Faculty of Theology of the University of Paris (the Sorbonne), recommending a formal censure for heresy.⁹ This was not a merely trivial debate. The controversy was an important milestone in the history of Christianity in China, and indeed in the broader history of interaction between Europe and China.¹⁰ It also played a crucial if underappreciated role in exacerbating the religious tensions that were such a significant feature of the later period of Louis XIV’s reign.¹¹

Despite the importance of ‘l’affaire de la Chine’, as it was known, the question of how Louis XIV himself reacted to the explosion of controversy between the two groups of French missionaries has been scarcely explored. Most historians of his reign give the dispute only a brief mention and say nothing of the king’s attitude to it.¹² Even Philip Mansel’s recent biography, which frames Louis as a globally engaged monarch (and thus one who would presumably take an interest in matters pertaining to his missionaries in China), is silent on his attitude to the controversy. Mansel does, however, give the impression that the king’s desire for dialogue with the Chinese court was impeded by the intolerance of the papacy and the Sorbonne, reflecting the default opinion that Louis XIV probably supported the Jesuits.¹³

Historians of the Chinese Rites Controversy, on the other hand, have tended to focus on the intellectual content of the dispute, the nature of the Jesuit synthesis of Confucianism and Catholicism, and the events surrounding the papal legations to

⁹*Lettre des messieurs des Missions étrangères au Pape, sur les idolâtries et les superstitions chinoises* (s.l., [1700]); Jacques Davy, ‘La condamnation en Sorbonne des Nouveaux mémoires sur la Chine du P. Le Comte’, *Recherches de science religieuse*, 37 (1950), 366–97.

¹⁰Dariusz Klejnowski-Różycki, ‘The Chinese Rites Controversy and Its Relevance’, *Studia Oecumenica*, 24 (2024), 231–44.

¹¹Sean Heath, ‘Jansenism, the Chinese Rites, and the Path to *Unigenitus*’, *English Historical Review*, forthcoming.

¹²François Bluche, *Louis XIV*, trans. Mark Greengrass (Oxford, 1990), 300; Olivier Chaline, *Le règne de Louis XIV* (Paris, 2005), 366–7. Some biographers ignore the Chinese Rites Controversy entirely; see for example Thierry Sarment, *Louis XIV: Homme et Roi* (Paris, 2012). Even historians of religious disputes do not tackle Louis XIV’s attitude to the Chinese Rites Controversy; see Joseph Bergin, *The Politics of Religion in Early Modern France* (New Haven, 2014). The topic is not addressed in scholarship on the king’s engagement with China; see Stéphane Castelluccio, ‘Louis XIV, le Siam et la Chine’, *Extrême-Orient Extrême-Occident*, 43 (2019), 25–44.

¹³Philip Mansel, *King of the World: The Life of Louis XIV* (London, 2019), 290–1. For a similar view, see the flawed 2024 documentary *Kangxi yu Luyi shisi* (*Kangxi and Louis XIV*), which I have discussed in *The Historian*, 168 (2025/6), 39–43.

China in the early 1700s.¹⁴ Although these are all crucial issues, the eventual decision of Innocent XII's successor Clement XI (r. 1700–21) to condemn the Jesuit attitude to the rites also needs to be understood in terms of the European political landscape, including the attitudes of Catholic monarchs and the activities of their diplomats in Rome. The only historian to have done so in the case of Louis XIV is Xie Ziqing, who explains that he found no evidence of how Louis viewed the rites controversy but argues that the king simultaneously supported the MEP and protected the Jesuits.¹⁵ The present article incorporates archival material not discussed by Xie to give a fuller picture of the French king's attitude.¹⁶ It shows that, rather than consistently supporting both sides, Louis vacillated and went back on his decisions more than once. Xie perhaps expected to find that Louis XIV had a clear opinion – after all, was he not the Sun King, the ultimate example of absolute monarchy, notorious for his tireless efforts to ensure religious uniformity in his realm? In this article, however, a detailed consideration of the French king's response to the Chinese Rites Controversy gives a quite different picture of his decision-making in church matters.

First, though, it is worth asking why Louis XIV's attitude to the Chinese Rites Controversy might be important. One reason is that French missionaries played an increasingly significant role in this debate at the turn of the eighteenth century, giving the king opportunities to intervene. Nevertheless, Louis did not have the power to determine the outcome of the dispute – that rested with the Holy See. He could, however, influence the decision by putting pressure on the curia. By the late 1690s, relations with the papacy had improved since the major rupture of the 1680s between the curia and the French crown.¹⁷ The French secretary of state for foreign affairs from 1696, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, marquis de Torcy (1665–1746), worked to continue the détente.¹⁸ Clement XI's decision to confirm Louis's grandson as king of Spain in 1701 left Rome exposed to Vienna's anger in the emerging War of the Spanish Succession, and thus more dependent on Versailles. The diplomatic context of the late 1690s and early 1700s – the years with which this article is concerned – was therefore one in which neither Versailles nor Rome wished to undermine the recently established concord by antagonising the other unnecessarily. This gave weight to Louis XIV's interventions in Rome, and his sustained pressure on the papacy to issue decisive condemnations of Quietism in the late 1690s and Jansenism in the subsequent decade

¹⁴George Minamiki, *The Chinese Rites Controversy from Its Beginning to Modern Times* (Chicago, 1985); David E. Mungello (ed.), *The Chinese Rites Controversy: Its History and Meaning* (Nettetal, 1994); Litian Swen, *Kangxi de hongpiao: quanqihua zhong de Qingchao* (Beijing, 2024); Ines G. Županov and Pierre Antoine Fabre (eds.), *The Rites Controversies in the Early Modern World* (Leiden, 2018).

¹⁵Xie Ziqing, *Zhongguo liyizhizheng he Luyi shisi shiqi de Faguo (1640–1710) – zaoqi quanqihua shidai de Tianshujiao haiwai kuozhang* (Shanghai, 2019), 220–1, 268–9.

¹⁶For the significance of sources such as the letters of Charmot, see Bruno Neveu, 'Nouvelles archives mises à jour sur les rites chinois', in *Actes du VII^e colloque international de Sinologie de Chantilly: La mission française de Pékin aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles* (Paris, 1976), 137–40.

¹⁷Pierre Blet, 'Innocent XII et Louis XIV', in *Riforme, religione e politica durante il pontificato di Innocenzo XII (1691–1700)*, ed. Bruno Pellegrino (Lecce, 1994), 335–52; Joseph Bergin, *Crown, Church and Episcopate under Louis XIV* (New Haven, 2004), 255–8.

¹⁸John C. Rule and Ben S. Trotter, *A World of Paper: Louis XIV, Colbert de Torcy, and the Rise of the Information State* (Montreal and Kingston, 2014), 116.

shows that he was not averse to using it.¹⁹ As with the Chinese Rites Controversy, Louis did not have the power to determine the Church's response to Quietism and Jansenism, but few historians would deny that his determination to crush these 'heresies' played a major role in shaping the papacy's actions.

This article argues that Louis XIV's approach to the Chinese Rites Controversy was different from his more forceful interventions in the Quietist and Jansenist quarrels, requiring us to rethink how religious policy was formulated in the later decades of his reign. The inconsistencies in the king's attitude were linked to the conflicting positions of key individuals who pushed him in different directions. Louis's instincts were to support the Jesuits, but his morganatic wife Françoise d'Aubigné, marquise de Maintenon (1635–1719), and her close associate Louis-Antoine de Noailles (1651–1729), archbishop of Paris from 1695 and cardinal from 1700, repeatedly intervened in the interests of the MEP; on the other side, the king's long-standing Jesuit confessor, François de La Chaise (1624–1709), acted to support his confrères. Louis XIV's frequently contradictory interventions in Rome and Paris were largely the result of these competing influences. His only consistent policy was to try to shut down the controversy in France with a ban on discussion of matters pertaining to the Chinese rites and Confucius. As such, the article provides a close examination of ecclesiastical policy in the making under Louis XIV – and reveals him to have been considerably more hesitant, changeable and easily influenced than might be expected from the man often considered to be the most absolute of monarchs.

Influences at Versailles

The extent of Madame de Maintenon's influence over Louis XIV's decisions has long been debated, but according to Mark Bryant it was 'ministerial in scope' by the late 1690s, particularly in the sphere of ecclesiastical affairs.²⁰ Her access to the king meant she could present him with information that was sometimes at cross purposes to that which he received from officials, and Torcy viewed with suspicion her interference in church business and relations with the Holy See.²¹ Maintenon's shadowy figure can be glimpsed behind the MEP's attack on the Jesuit attitude to the Chinese rites in France in 1700, linked to a faction including Noailles, Jacques-Benigne Bossuet (1627–1704), bishop of Meaux, and Charles-Maurice Le Tellier (1642–1710), archbishop of Reims.²²

The context for Maintenon's attitude to the Chinese rites was her long-standing association with the MEP, particularly the alternating superiors of that institution, Jacques-Charles de Brisacier (1641–1736) and Louis Tiberge (1651–1730). From the late 1680s, these two priests were confessors at Saint-Cyr, Maintenon's cherished school

¹⁹Mark Bryant, 'The Catholic Church and its Dissenters, 1685–1715', in *The Third Reign of Louis XIV, c. 1682–1715*, ed. Julia Prest and Guy Rowlands (Abingdon, 2017), 145–61.

²⁰Mark Bryant, *Queen of Versailles: Madame de Maintenon, First Lady of Louis XIV's France* (Montreal and Kingston, 2020), 4, 21, 96, 214.

²¹Rule and Trotter, *A World of Paper*, 385–8.

²²René Etiemble, *Les Jésuites en Chine (1552–1773): La Querelle des rites* (Paris, 1966), 60; Chen Zhe, 'Liyizhizheng' zai Faguo: 1700 nian Bali Waifangchuanjiaohui shang jiaozong shu beihou de paixi douzheng', *Shijie lishi*, 2016, no. 3, 53–5; Xie, *Zhongguo*, 241–6, 269–70.

for noble girls.²³ Despite occasional quarrels, the relationship was generally close (at least until the last years of the reign, when Maintenon distanced herself after the MEP came under suspicion of Jansenism).²⁴ Brisacier and Tiberge's proximity to Maintenon in the 1690s and early 1700s was widely recognised as enhancing the MEP's credit at the French court.²⁵ She spoke in their favour to the papal nuncio.²⁶ Unsurprisingly, her links to the MEP were known in Rome; Charlot told cardinals and the pope about Maintenon's esteem for Brisacier and Tiberge, no doubt hoping that intelligence that someone so close to Louis XIV protected the MEP would factor into the curia's decision on the Chinese rites.²⁷ It was also widely known that Maintenon was on bad terms with the Jesuits.²⁸

Unsurprisingly, Maintenon made every effort to present the MEP's side of the Chinese rites dispute to the king, particularly in the late summer and autumn of 1700, when the Sorbonne was debating its censure and the controversy was at a high point in Paris.²⁹ Louis XIV inclined towards the Jesuit side – although, as will be shown, he had in the previous year already pulled back from fully supporting the Jesuits in Rome. On 26 September 1700, he read to Maintenon a pamphlet defending the Jesuits against accusations that they had mistreated the MEP missionary Artus de Lionne (1655–1713) in China.³⁰ Maintenon told the king 'that my friends claimed the exact opposite of what I was hearing and that it was unfair to only listen to one side' – in other words, the king should not trust the Jesuits automatically.³¹ Nevertheless, Louis seems to have been unwilling to discuss the issue and responded to her interventions with silence, as demonstrated a few days later when Maintenon told Brisacier and Tiberge that:

The king does not speak of your affairs with the Jesuits; he only desires a decision from the Holy See to end disputes that harm charity.

As for me, who am not to be taken into account, especially in such matters, I maintain the silence that befits me, but if I had to take a side, you cannot doubt that it would be yours.³²

²³Françoise d'Aubigné, marquise de Maintenon, *Lettres de Madame de Maintenon/Correspondance: Lettres à Madame de Maintenon*, ed. Hans Bots et al. (11 vols., Paris, 2009–18), I, 736 (Maintenon to Marie-Madeleine de Senneterre de Brinon, c. 25 Oct. 1687), 798–9 (Maintenon to Geneviève de Montfort, Jan. 1689).

²⁴Maintenon, *Lettres*, III, 97 (Maintenon to Michel Chamillart, 20 Aug. 1698), 518 (Maintenon to Mme du Pérou, 11 Sept. 1704); V, 668 (Maintenon to Charles-François de Méroville, 26 Aug. 1713).

²⁵Archives nationales de France, Paris (AN), K/1374, no. 9 (note from 1698), no. 11 (note from 1694), no. 17 (note from 1701–2).

²⁶Archives des Missions étrangères de Paris (AMEP), A/13, pp. 304–5 (Tiberge and Brisacier to Charlot, 21 Jan. 1697).

²⁷BnF, MS latin 16,980, fo. 115r (Charlot to Noailles, 8 June 1700).

²⁸AN, K/1374, no. 11 (note from 1695); Anne-Marguerite Petit du Noyer, *Lettres historiques et galantes de deux dames de condition ...*, new edn (Amsterdam, 1738), I, 106.

²⁹Sean Heath, 'Parisian Street Songs and the Propaganda Campaign over the Sorbonne's Chinese Censure (1700)', *French History*, 39 (2025), 322–41.

³⁰The pamphlet was almost certainly Jean de Fontaney's *Relation de ce qui s'est passé à la Chine*, which was circulating in manuscript at the time: Sean Heath, 'Gender, Rumor, and Religious Polemic in Louis XIV's France: Paul Payen de Lionne's Intervention in the Chinese Rites Controversy', *French Historical Studies*, 47 (2024), 616.

³¹Maintenon, *Lettres*, III, 218 (Maintenon to Noailles, 27 Sept. 1700).

³²*Ibid.*, III, 219–20 (Maintenon to Brisacier and Tiberge, 29 Sept. 1700).

Maintenon informed Noailles that she had spoken to the king concerning the affair about which he had written to her (presumably the Chinese controversy): '[The king] listened to me, but he was full of other things; I don't know what will come of it.'³³

As a woman, Maintenon had to be careful not to overstep the bounds of propriety in meddling in ecclesiastical affairs.³⁴ One person who, by virtue of his position, clearly had the authority to intervene was her close associate, Archbishop Noailles, who consistently supported the anti-Jesuit side of the Chinese Rites Controversy. In 1699, he told Charlot that 'you support the cause of God ... I will wholeheartedly do everything I can to help you in this, you can count on that.'³⁵ Charlot's letters to the archbishop brim with gratitude for his support; Noailles was implored to make the papal nuncio in France aware of his positive stance towards the MEP, as this would have a good effect in Rome.³⁶ After gaining his red hat in 1700, the archbishop went one better and wrote 'very strongly' on the Chinese rites to the pope himself; according to Brisacier, '[Noailles] will lose no occasion to petition His Holiness'.³⁷

The support of Maintenon and Noailles was perceived by informed observers to have emboldened the MEP in its attack on the Jesuits in France in 1700. In May, Brisacier and Tiberge presented the text of their open letter to Innocent XII criticising the Jesuits to Bossuet, Le Tellier and Noailles, asking if they should request the king's permission to print it. According to the Abbé Ledieu, a close associate of Bossuet, 'the opinion of the prelates was that it was necessary to print [the letter] without telling the king, who could stop the text, or order that it be communicated to Père La Chaise, which would lose this case and the cause of the church'.³⁸ The MEP had the letter printed without privilege by a bookseller in Rouen; when the chancellor, Louis-Phélypeaux de Pontchartrain (1643–1727), ordered the seizure of the edition, the superiors of the MEP went to ask for grace for the printer. Pontchartrain accepted this but reproached Brisacier and Tiberge, saying he was astonished that those who went so far to preach the Gospel did not practise it themselves; although no partisan of the Jesuits, he found the 'satirical and scathing' tone of the MEP's letter to be scandalous.³⁹ This rebuke from the chancellor revealed the risky nature of the MEP's actions.⁴⁰ According to the anti-Jesuit observer Germain Vuillart (who, unlike Pontchartrain, found the letter a masterpiece of good sense), no-one believed that 'Brisacier and Tiberge took such a bold and brilliant step, without having devised it with Madame de Maintenon'. The letter was presented to the Assembly of the Clergy at Saint-Germain and forwarded to members of the court and the Parlement of Paris. Partisans of the MEP wrote that it circulated widely and was well received by the public,

³³ *Ibid.*, III, 219 (Maintenon to Noailles, 28 Sept. 1700).

³⁴ Bryant, *Queen of Versailles*, 97, 148, 215.

³⁵ AMEP, A/14, p. 111 (Noailles to Charlot, 10 Aug. 1699).

³⁶ BnF, MS latin 16,981, fos. 150r–151r (Charlot to Noailles, 9 June 1699).

³⁷ AMEP, A/14, pp. 496–7 (Brisacier to Charlot, 3 Aug. 1700).

³⁸ François Ledieu, *Mémoires & Journal sur la vie et les ouvrages de Bossuet*, ed. René-François Guettée (4 vols., Paris, 1856–7), II, 47–8.

³⁹ AN, K/1374, no. 14.

⁴⁰ When Pontchartrain expressed astonishment that the letter was published without a privilege, Brisacier responded 'it is true ... but we have used it in this way to avoid a double embarrassment, for you to refuse us, for us to be refused': Germain Vuillart, *Lettres de Germain Vuillart, ami de Port-Royal, à M. Louis de Préfontaine (1694–1700)*, ed. Ruth Clark (Geneva, 1951), 345 (16 June 1700).

turning opinion against the Jesuits and the 'idolatries' of China.⁴¹ Soon there were rumours that the king had expressed irritation at the Jesuits for provoking responses such as the letter with their own writings on the Chinese affair.⁴² This remark suggested that Louis had not engaged with the content of the letter but was displeased by the polemical nature of the debate.

It should be noted that the intrigues of Maintenon and Noailles against the Jesuits often failed or were met with non-committal silence on the part of Louis XIV. The pair was unable to prevent the appointment of the Jesuit Louis Le Comte as confessor to the king's granddaughter-in-law the duchesse de Bourgogne (1685–1712) in 1696.⁴³ When Maintenon spoke to the king in 1699 of Le Comte's admiration for Archbishop François de Fénelon (1651–1715) in a clear attempt to undermine the Jesuit by linking him to Fénelon's disgrace over Quietism, Louis XIV 'listened to me with attention and replied nothing'.⁴⁴ The fact that Maintenon had recently had her own fingers badly burned in the Quietist affair – her association with Fénelon having left her dangerously exposed when his writings were condemned – may have undermined the monarch's confidence in her judgement.⁴⁵

Still, it was important for the anti-Jesuit side in the Chinese Rites Controversy to have powerful protectors so close to the king. Following the death of Innocent XII on 27 September 1700, Noailles travelled to Rome to participate in the conclave. There were fears among partisans of the MEP that, in the cardinal's absence from Paris, the Jesuits would be able to persuade Louis XIV to stop the Sorbonne from concluding its censure by describing its assemblies as 'full of turmoil'. If this succeeded, they would then claim that nothing that could be censured had been found in the Jesuit books. It was reported that Noailles informed the 'defenders of the Chinese' that if they did anything to impede the Sorbonne during his absence, he would 'find the means to make them repent of it'.⁴⁶ The censure was indeed concluded in October, but in the days immediately following, Maintenon remarked that the king was being told by partisans of the Jesuits that only the younger (and thus more easily influenced) members of the Faculty of Theology had supported censuring the three Jesuit books. She declared to Noailles that she would not respond to such insinuations, although she clearly feared what the Jesuits could achieve in the cardinal's absence at such a critical time.⁴⁷

Maintenon's concern was focused on the king's confessor, La Chaise, with whom she had a difficult relationship, each resenting the other's influence on ecclesiastical affairs.⁴⁸ La Chaise intimated to Louis XIV that the opinions of some Sorbonne doctors supporting the censure appeared dangerously close to Jansenism.⁴⁹ Vuillart

⁴¹Ledieu, *Mémoires*, II, 47–8; Vuillart, *Lettres*, 341–2 (9 June 1700).

⁴²Vuillart, *Lettres*, 345 (16 June 1700). Brisacier told Charlot 'that His Majesty has not read this letter, and that M[adame] de M[aintenon] is not at all scandalised by it': AMEP, A/14, p. 547 (Brisacier to Charlot, 13 Sept. 1700).

⁴³Maintenon, *Lettres*, II, 721, 744 (Maintenon to Noailles, 25 Sept., 4 Nov. 1696).

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, III, 152 (Maintenon to Noailles, 17 Aug. 1699).

⁴⁵Bryant, *Queen of Versailles*, 137–88.

⁴⁶[Jacques Le Fèvre], *Six lettres d'un docteur ou Relation des Assemblées de la Faculté de Théologie de Paris ...*, 2nd edn (Cologne, 1701), 57, 298.

⁴⁷Maintenon, *Lettres*, III, 222, 233 (Maintenon to Noailles, 24 Oct., 8 Nov. 1700).

⁴⁸Bryant, *Queen of Versailles*, 111, 151–5; Bergin, *Crown, Church and Episcopate*, 162–4, 274–5.

⁴⁹Ledieu, *Mémoires*, II, 137–8. On the Jesuit strategy of accusing their opponents of Jansenism, see Heath, 'Jansenism, the Chinese Rites, and the Path to *Unigenitus*'.

noted on 25 September 1700 that La Chaise was doing everything possible to persuade the king that the meetings of the Sorbonne were descending into chaos, but that a 'good angel' (presumably Noailles) had intimated to the monarch that any disorder had been created by the partisans of the Jesuits.⁵⁰ This is a good illustration of the rivalry between the king's confessor and the archbishop of Paris, who both conferred with the monarch weekly on religious affairs, either separately or together as part of the *conseil de conscience*.⁵¹

Whereas Maintenon and Noailles were clearly trying to push the king towards supporting the MEP, La Chaise naturally sided with his own order, the Jesuits. The confessor had a long-standing interest in the mission to China, having played a crucial role back in the 1680s in persuading Louis XIV to send and fund the French Jesuit mathematicians, with whom he maintained a correspondence.⁵² As will be seen, La Chaise repeatedly used his proximity to the king to intervene on their behalf.

In addition to La Chaise, it is possible that Maintenon's efforts in favour of the MEP were counterbalanced by another member of Louis XIV's family with close connections to the Jesuits – his legitimised (but originally bastard) son Louis-Auguste de Bourbon, duc du Maine (1670–1736). Maine was particularly intelligent and favoured by his father.⁵³ His interest in China had been apparent in 1684, when he was only fourteen; several sources allege that his enthusiasm played an important role in Louis XIV's decision to send the Jesuit mathematicians there.⁵⁴ The Jesuits took pains to cultivate Maine's enthusiasm for their activities in China. It is notable that two of the three volumes censured by the Sorbonne in 1700 were dedicated to him. The *Histoire de l'Edit de l'Empereur de la Chine* by Charles Le Gobien (1653–1708) begins with a flattering letter to Maine praising his protection of the French Jesuits.⁵⁵ Louis Le Comte's *Lettre à Monseigneur le duc du Maine* (1700) was an extended defence of the Jesuit position in the Chinese Rites Controversy. It mentions that the Society had been honoured with Maine's protection for over fifteen years and that his zeal for the Jesuit mission to China, which had touched his father the king, had only increased with age.⁵⁶

⁵⁰ Vuillart, *Lettres*, 374 (25 Sept. 1700).

⁵¹ Joseph Bergin, 'The Royal Confessor and his Rivals in Seventeenth-Century France', *French History*, 21 (2007), 188; Bergin, *Crown, Church and Episcopate*, 155–60.

⁵² Louis Le Comte, *Nouveaux Mémoires sur l'état présent de la Chine ...*, 2nd edn (3 vols., Paris, 1697), II, 214–15; *Lettre sur les progrès de la religion à la Chine, à Monsieur l'abbé de *** (Paris, 1697), 20–9 (Fontaney to La Chaise, 1692 and 1693), 41–7 (Jean-François Gerbillon to La Chaise, 1695); Jami, *Emperor's New Mathematics*, 104.

⁵³ Guy Rowlands, 'Bastardizing the State: The Power and Rise of the duc du Maine under Louis XIV' / 'La bâtardeisation de l'État: le pouvoir et l'essor du duc du Maine sous Louis XIV' in *Bulletin du Centre de recherche du château de Versailles*, 28 (2026) – special issue on *Le pouvoir du sang: les princes et les princesses de la Maison de France en politique (1661–1848)*.

⁵⁴ *Nouvelles de la république des lettres* (April 1686), 428–9; Guy Tachard, *Voyage de Siam des Pères Jésuites envoyez par le Roy aux Indes & à la Chine ...* (Paris, 1686), 3; Jannette Gatty (ed.), *Journal de Siam du Père Bouvet* (Leiden, 1963), 16. It is worth noting, though, that plans to send a Jesuit scientific expedition to China were first discussed in 1681; Jami, *Emperor's New Mathematics*, 103.

⁵⁵ Charles Le Gobien, *Nouveaux Mémoires sur l'état présent de la Chine: tome troisième contenant l'Histoire de l'Edit de l'Empereur de la Chine ...*, 2nd edn (Paris, 1700), 'Epistre A Très-Haut & Puissant Prince Monseigneur Louis Auguste de Bourbon...', unpag.

⁵⁶ Louis Le Comte, *Lettre du R. Père Louis le Comte, de la Compagnie de Jésus: à Monseigneur le duc du Maine, sur les cérémonies de la Chine* (Paris, 1700), 7–9.

Dedicatory letters cannot, of course, be taken as automatic evidence that the dedicatee shared the opinion of the author. Opponents of the Jesuits on the Chinese rites wrote that a prince as devout as Maine would be horrified at the sections of Le Comte's letter that justified prostrations in Confucian temples.⁵⁷ However, there is no indication that Maine's support for the Jesuits wavered in these years. After all, it was in 1701 that Trévoux, the capital of his sovereign principality of Dombes, became the base from which, under his protection, the Jesuits published their famous journal.⁵⁸ Although I have found no direct traces of Maine intervening in the controversy, circumstantial evidence suggests that he supported the Jesuits. It is important to be aware of influences on the king that might not have survived in the historical record; Maine's long-standing association with the Jesuit missionaries makes it possible that he spoke to his father on the issue of the Chinese rites, and his favour with Louis XIV makes it likely that his opinion would have had some influence.

Confusion in Rome

The competing influences around Louis XIV regarding the 'Chinese affair' can be seen clearly in the inconsistent directives transmitted to French representatives in Rome a year before the high point of the controversy in Paris. In January 1699, Louis and Torcy's instructions were drawn up for the newly appointed extraordinary ambassador of France to the papacy, Louis Grimaldi, prince de Monaco (1642–1701). In over 200 pages of detailed analysis of the European diplomatic situation and discussion of how the ambassador should handle Roman politics, China was mentioned only once: 'Monsieur de Monaco shall make known that the intention of His Majesty is to accord on all occasions a particular protection to the Chinese missions.'⁵⁹

This rather vague instruction was understood to refer to the Jesuits. Monaco mentioned it in a letter to the king of 21 July 1699, saying that he was being pressed by the Jesuits and that La Chaise had written to him reinforcing the king's orders on this matter. As such, Monaco had raised the topic with Innocent XII, telling him of Louis XIV's ardent desire for the success of the China mission and speaking of the achievements of the French Jesuit mathematicians at the Kangxi emperor's court. The pope responded by praising Louis XIV's piety and detailing his own view that nothing was more important than the establishment of the missionaries in China, but that the issue of the rites had given rise to contestations. Monaco then implored the pontiff to listen carefully to the best informed and least partisan witnesses to understand the truth in a matter of such consequence. Innocent told the French ambassador that he would give this matter, 'the most important of his pontificate', every necessary care and do everything to avoid schism and establish the truth and purity of religion in China.⁶⁰

Monaco was sure that Louis XIV would be satisfied with the way he had executed his instructions, but his representations to the pope were far from a full endorsement of

⁵⁷[Noël Alexandre], *Lettre d'un docteur de l'Ordre de S. Dominique sur les cérémonies de la Chine, au R.P. Le Comte de la Compagnie de Jésus...* (Cologne, 1700), 23.

⁵⁸Pierre-Louis Lensel, *Le duc du Maine: le fils préféré de Louis XIV* (Paris, 2021), 177–8.

⁵⁹Archives des Affaires étrangères, La Courneuve, Paris (AAE), Correspondance politique: Rome/Saint-Siège, 109CP/392, fo. 95r (*Instruction donnée par le Roy à Monsieur le Prince de Monaco*).

⁶⁰AAE, 109CP/392, fos. 295r–296v (Monaco to Louis XIV, 21 July 1699).

the Jesuit position in the dispute and apparently did little to sway Innocent's thinking. A more assertive statement of support for the Jesuits was made in the king's name by Emmanuel-Théodose de La Tour d'Auvergne, cardinal de Bouillon (1643–1715), who had been French *chargé d'affaires* in Rome from 1697 to the appointment of Monaco in 1699 and was an ally of the Jesuits.⁶¹ The king told Bouillon on 25 June that the Jesuits had sought his protection and the cardinal should render them his good offices when the occasion presented itself – although Louis did not want to enter the detail of the controversy.⁶² Bouillon made the most of this directive when he spoke at length during a meeting of the Holy Office to consider the Chinese rites, declaring to his fellow cardinals that he was obliged to support the interests of the Jesuits since Louis XIV was taking them under his protection. Observers thought that Bouillon's intervention, like that of Monaco, was due to the machinations of La Chaise and other Jesuits who had convinced the king that the Society of Jesus was being persecuted by a cabal in Rome. The Jesuits hoped to use Louis' authority to delay or prevent a reconsideration of the Chinese rites issue, which they argued had already been judged in their favour by Pope Alexander VII (r. 1655–67) in 1656.⁶³ Innocent XII was reported to be astonished that the French were encroaching on his spiritual jurisdiction.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, the MEP procurator Charlot feared that, despite the pope's inclination to condemn the Jesuit side of the controversy, 'the king's name makes much impression on him'.⁶⁵

It was at this point, however, that Louis XIV's support for the Jesuit side faltered. As Monaco was completing his dispatch of 21 July, he received an extraordinary message by courier from the king dated 2 July. This informed the ambassador that Louis had previously written to Bouillon permitting the cardinal to use his influence in favour of the Jesuits if their demands conformed to the interests of religion, and that the Jesuits had subsequently asked Louis to write the same to Monaco. But having done so, the monarch seemed to have had second thoughts: 'I wanted to know more particularly what the principal points of the accusations formed against [the Jesuits] were, and having learnt them from themselves, I have seen that it belongs uniquely to the pope and to the ecclesiastical superiors to decide on the purity of their doctrine.' As such, Louis XIV was now ordering Monaco and Bouillon *not* to extend full support to the Jesuits, as he did not wish to meddle in doctrinal matters. However, because the Jesuits feared that their judges in Rome were too partisan, Monaco and Bouillon could act together to prevent an unjust condemnation.⁶⁶

The revised instruction is somewhat surprising, given that Louis XIV did not hesitate to immerse himself in doctrinal disputes concerning Quietism and Jansenism. The half-hearted support for the Jesuits – applying no pressure on the papal decision but still somehow acting to prevent an unjust condemnation – sounds suspiciously like the line Monaco had apparently already taken in his audience with Innocent XII, and

⁶¹Bryant, *Queen of Versailles*, 163–4, 171, 177, 186; Rule and Trotter, *A World of Paper*, 113.

⁶²AAE, 109CP/401, fo. 208r–v (Louis XIV to Bouillon, 25 June 1699).

⁶³AAE, 109CP/396, fos. 192r–193v (anonymous letter of 21 July 1699). For the 1656 decree, see Minamiki, *Chinese Rites Controversy*, 29–30.

⁶⁴Vuillart, *Lettres*, 265 (16 Aug. 1699).

⁶⁵BnF, MS latin 16,981, fo. 155r (Charlot to Noailles, 20 July 1699).

⁶⁶AAE, 109CP/399, fos. 71r–72v (Louis XIV to Monaco, 2 July 1699); see also 109CP/396, fo. 35r (Louis XIV to Bouillon, 2 July 1699).

it is possible that the ambassador retrospectively edited his account of his conversation with the pope to fit the king's revised instructions. Whereas Monaco told the king that he had anticipated the new orders, other accounts presented the ambassador as being far more forthright in supporting the Jesuits earlier in July 1699.⁶⁷ In any case, Louis XIV was pleased with Monaco's account of his conversation with the pope, telling the ambassador that it was now up to Innocent to decide in the interests of religion; Monaco should make no further intervention in the affair.⁶⁸

Louis told Monaco that he had informed himself of the details of the controversy from the Jesuits, but other sources indicate that it was Maintenon and Noailles who had told the king that the Jesuits in China were condoning idolatry and that the affair was a matter of religion which could be judged only by the Holy See.⁶⁹ If so, Louis's letter of 2 July 1699 pulling back from offering full support to the Jesuits and leaving the affair to the pope (who was by now widely expected to judge against the Jesuits) was the moment in which the MEP's credit with Maintenon paid off.

It is worth noting that in addition to his official instructions from the king and Torcy, Monaco was simultaneously being pressed by Maintenon to use his influence in favour of the MEP.⁷⁰ This was probably through the intermission of Anne-Jules, duc de Noailles (1678–1708), elder brother of the archbishop.⁷¹ Monaco told the duc de Noailles that he could only favour the MEP if given assurances that the king would not disapprove. Nevertheless, he thought that the MEP agent in Rome (Charmot) was content with him and 'knows perfectly my good intentions'.⁷²

This letter is hard to square with the perception that Monaco favoured the Jesuits in the affair.⁷³ Indeed, far from viewing the ambassador as a friendly figure, Charmot was confused as to his objectives. Hoping to gain Monaco's favour – and fearing Jesuit attempts to use the king's authority to escape papal judgement of the Chinese rites – Charmot asked Tiberge to secure a letter of recommendation from Maintenon.⁷⁴ Still, he found it hard to shake off the suspicion that Monaco would ultimately act in the interests of the Jesuits:

[H]e did not even want to witness to the pope that he had an order from the king not to get involved in our matter in favour of the Jesuits, which gives enough

⁶⁷AEE, 109CP/392, fos. 304v–305r (Monaco to Louis XIV, 21 July 1699); 109CP/396, fo. 192r (anonymous letter of 21 July 1699).

⁶⁸AEE, 109CP/399, fos. 94r–97r (Louis XIV to Monaco, 10 Aug. 1699).

⁶⁹AN, M/243, no. 2, fo. 109v; AN, K/1374, no. 9. Charmot wrote to Noailles on 20 July 1699 asking him and Maintenon to inform the king of the importance of the Chinese affair and the fact that it concerned the purity of religion: BnF, MS latin 16,981, fo. 152r.

⁷⁰Monaco had a tense relationship with Torcy, with whom he had quarrelled before his departure for Rome; indeed, his appointment as ambassador was due partly to Maintenon's influence: Rule and Trotter, *A World of Paper*, 78, 387.

⁷¹Archbishop Noailles told Maintenon that Charmot needed her protection and she wrote in his favour to Monaco via 'a man in whom he has confidence', probably the duc de Noailles: AMEP, A/14, p. 111 (Archbishop Noailles to Charmot, 10 Aug. 1699).

⁷²BnF, MS français 6921, fos. 220r–221r (Monaco to the duc de Noailles, 28 July 1699).

⁷³AEE, 109CP/396, fo. 194r (letter of 21 July 1699).

⁷⁴AMEP, A/205, p. 294 (Charmot to Tiberge, 7 July 1699); BnF, MS latin 16,981, fo. 152v (Charmot to Archbishop Noailles, 20 July 1699).

reason to fear that he will serve them one way or another. Someone wrote to me that M. de M[aintenon] had caused him to be written to ..., but he never showed me anything about it nor to those he knows are involved in our interests; on the contrary, he seemed to insinuate that nothing had been written to him on our behalf, even less does he say that he will be of service to us.⁷⁵

During one encounter with the ambassador in mid-July, Monaco even tried to claim that Maintenon had recommended the *Jesuits* to his protection and stated that he had no orders other than to support the Society of Jesus.⁷⁶ In the end, however, Charmot was pleased with Louis XIV's revised instructions of 2 July, which would silence those who might otherwise criticise the French king for wanting to arbitrate religious matters.⁷⁷ Whatever the ambiguity of Monaco's position – which itself was perhaps a result of hedging due to conflicting signals emanating from the court, or even confusion over the details of an affair on which he had presumably had to brush up quickly when he started his posting in Rome – the danger of Louis ordering his ambassador to show open support for the *Jesuits* had been neutralised.

The French government's position on the controversy in 1699 was therefore confused, as reflected in the changeable signals emanating from Versailles, where there was a lack of coordination and sometimes direct contradiction between the instructions of the king and Torcy and the parallel interventions of Maintenon. Although there was a moment when, prompted by La Chaise, Louis had appeared ready to protect the *Jesuits* in the Chinese Rites Controversy, under the influence of Maintenon and Noailles he withdrew from this position only weeks later, leaving the matter to the Holy See to adjudicate. As such, the king had ultimately not come down clearly on one side or the other, although he continued to gesture towards support for the *Jesuits*.

In this context, the official French response to the controversy was further clouded by the activities of the French cardinals in Rome. Prior to his disgrace in 1700, the cardinal de Bouillon was a figure of considerable influence at the curia. As has been shown, in 1699 he launched a full defence of the *Jesuits* on the king's authority, but he had long been perceived as a supporter of their position in the Chinese Rites Controversy. In September 1697, the Holy Office, which was expected to render judgement on Charles Maigrot's 1693 mandate against the rites, unexpectedly granted the *Jesuits* a delay of four months to respond to the MEP's accusations; 'no-one doubts that the cardinal de Bouillon is behind this', as Bossuet was informed by his nephew.⁷⁸

Nevertheless, the underhand nature of Bouillon's manoeuvres meant that for some time the directors of the MEP were unsure what his own views were and whether he would declare against them.⁷⁹ On 29 June 1699, shortly after the king's revised instructions had arrived in Rome, Bouillon told Charmot that he would have prevented Maigrot from issuing his mandate for the pragmatic reason that 'not everything that is decidable should always be decided' and that prudence in China was necessary to avoid

⁷⁵ AMEP, A/205, p. 372 (Charmot to Tiberge, 8 Sept. 1699).

⁷⁶ BnF, MS latin 16,981, fo. 152v (Charmot to Noailles, 20 July 1699).

⁷⁷ BnF, MS latin 16,980, fos. 149r–150v (Charmot to Noailles, 4 Aug. 1699).

⁷⁸ Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, *Œuvres complètes de Bossuet* ..., ed. François Lachat (31 vols., Paris, 1862–75), XXIX, 146–68, 155–60, 162–4, 171–6 (abbé Bossuet to Bossuet, 3 Sept., 27 Sept., 30 Sept., 11 Oct. 1697).

⁷⁹ AMEP, A/13, pp. 381–2, 665 (Tiberge to Charmot, 1 July 1697, 22 Sept. 1698).

persecution.⁸⁰ A few days later, the cardinal clarified to Charmot that he approved of Maigrot's mandate in principle. When Charmot pointed out the inconsistencies between this and what he had said on 29 June, Bouillon responded 'it is true, I said all that to you'. Nevertheless, the cardinal was informing the Holy Office 'that His Majesty had since written that he was not taking sides for anyone in particular'. Charmot, suspecting that this was all a smokescreen to obscure continued support for the Jesuits, told Bouillon that he and Monaco should say as much directly to the pope.⁸¹ The cardinal's protestations of cordiality to the MEP therefore did little to reassure Charmot, although Noailles told him he had nothing to fear from Bouillon, 'who acts more from the heart than from higher orders'.⁸² By the end of the year, it was clear that Bouillon was defending the Jesuits.⁸³

Having also received the revised instructions of 2 July 1699, Bouillon had in fact been quick to comply, telling the pope that Louis XIV's protection for the Jesuits in the Chinese Rites Controversy did not concern matters of doctrine, which were for the church authorities to decide; rather, the king simply wanted to ensure the decision was based on the interests of religion rather than anti-Jesuit prejudice.⁸⁴ Similarly, Bouillon stated in a meeting of the Holy Office that Louis was now leaving the matter to the Holy See.⁸⁵ In a letter to the monarch, however, Bouillon presented his own opinion, claiming that the issue was one of 'the most considerable' before the church and demanded to be treated with prudence and zeal:

And to sum up in a few words to Your Majesty what I think, based on the most precise information I have tried to gather about this matter, I would tell you that at first glance it seems very contrary to the sentiments of the Jesuits, but upon reflection, considering the examples of things tolerated even in Rome itself ... and the consequences to be feared from conduct opposed to that of the Jesuits; all these considerations seem to me very favourable to their sentiments.⁸⁶

The fact that Bouillon was still presenting the Jesuit case to the king even after the revised instructions of 2 July shows that the MEP was right to be suspicious of his true position. Louis XIV's response indicated that he now wanted to stay out of the controversy. Although he acknowledged the importance of the affair, he added it was now important not to embarrass the pope by pressing him in any way.⁸⁷

Louis XIV's disinclination to involve himself gave the French cardinals a degree of latitude in developing their individual attitudes to the Chinese Rites Controversy. Cardinal César d'Estrées (1628–1714), a long-standing diplomat in Italy, was rumoured

⁸⁰AMEP, A/205, p. 294 (Charmot to Tiberge, 7 July 1699).

⁸¹AMEP, A/205, p. 372 (Charmot to Tiberge, 8 Sept. 1699).

⁸²AMEP, A/205, pp. 384–5 (Bouillon to Charmot, 15 July 1699); A/14, p. 111 (Noailles to Charmot, 10 Aug. 1699).

⁸³AMEP, A/205, pp. 468–70 (Charmot to Tiberge, 15 Oct. 1699); A/14, p. 195 (Tiberge to Charmot, 16 Nov. 1699).

⁸⁴AAE, 109CP/402, fo. 34r–v (Bouillon to Louis XIV, 21 July 1699).

⁸⁵AAE, 109CP/402, fo. 82r (Bouillon to Louis XIV, 1 Sept. 1699).

⁸⁶AAE, 109CP/402, fo. 35r (Bouillon to Louis XIV, 21 July 1699).

⁸⁷AAE, 109CP/402, fos. 55v, 115r (Louis XIV to Bouillon, 10 Aug., 1 Oct. 1699).

to have written in favour of the Jesuits to the pope.⁸⁸ As for Cardinal Toussaint de Forbin-Janson (1631–1713), who had been the French *chargé d'affaires* in Rome from 1690 to 1697, Brisacier hoped in July 1700 that Maintenon could help in winning him to the MEP's side in the dispute.⁸⁹ In the same month, Brisacier was assured by Noailles that d'Estrées would be more friendly to the MEP in future.⁹⁰ Only the next month, however, Brisacier noted with fear that the MEP had four great figures against them in Rome – Bouillon, d'Estrées, Forbin-Janson and Monaco.⁹¹ Yet by September 1700, the MEP was consoled with the knowledge that d'Estrées had acknowledged that the Jesuit position on the Chinese rites could not be salvaged.⁹² All of this indicates an atmosphere of confusion in Rome stemming from the contradictory signals emanating from the French court.

Silence in France

Although Louis XIV was content to let the rites dispute play out in Rome and leave the final decision to the papacy, he moved decisively to shut down debate in France. As has already been shown, the controversy flared up in Paris in 1700, with Maintenon, Noailles and La Chaise trying to draw the king to one side or the other. Many of these attempts were less than fully successful, as shown by the fact that the king frequently responded to his wife's entreaties with silence; he did, however, act swiftly to remove potential sources of trouble, leading to an eventual imposition of silence about the Chinese rites in France.

As soon as Louis Le Comte's writings were denounced to the Faculty of Theology on 1 July 1700, the king, 'alarmed' that the duchesse de Bourgogne's conscience was in the hands of a confessor whose work was being examined for heresy, removed him from court.⁹³ Le Comte would go to Rome to defend the Jesuit attitude to the rites, after which he would carry on to China.⁹⁴ Although some presented Le Comte's treatment as tantamount to being disgraced, it is worth noting that Louis XIV granted him a pension of 200 écus on 24 July.⁹⁵ Even Brisacier noted that Le Comte had not been disgraced and would prove to be a new adversary in Rome.⁹⁶ Although Le Comte was initially received coldly by the prince de Monaco, the latter was reassured by Versailles that the Jesuit was in fact still officially the duchesse de Bourgogne's confessor, with the replacement being merely an interim appointment; subsequently, Monaco treated Le Comte honourably.⁹⁷ Le Comte made a good impression on d'Estrées, who was convinced of his 'moderation', although there was some embarrassment when the Jesuit

⁸⁸ AMEP, A/14, p. 93 (Tiberge and Brisacier to Charmot, 13 July 1699); *Esprit des cours* (Dec. 1699), 770.

⁸⁹ AMEP, A/14, p. 490 (Brisacier to Charmot, 27 July 1700); Rule and Trotter, *A World of Paper*, 113, 240.

⁹⁰ AMEP, A/14, p. 489 (Brisacier to Charmot, 27 July 1700).

⁹¹ AMEP, A/14, p. 497 (Brisacier to Charmot, 3 Aug. 1700).

⁹² AMEP, A/14, p. 551 (Tiberge to Charmot, 20 Sept. 1700).

⁹³ Louis de Rouvroy, duc de Saint-Simon, *Mémoires de Saint-Simon*, new edn, ed. Arthur de Boislisle (45 vols., Paris, 1879–1931), VII, 165–8.

⁹⁴ Philippe de Courcillon, marquis de Dangeau, *Journal du marquis de Dangeau ...*, ed. Eudore Soulié et al. (19 vols., Paris, 1854–1860), VII, 335.

⁹⁵ Vuillart, *Lettres*, 357 (11 July 1700); Dangeau, *Journal*, VII, 345; AN, O¹/44, fo. 318 r–v.

⁹⁶ AMEP, A/14, pp. 504, 517 (Brisacier to Charmot, 10 Aug., 17 Aug. 1700).

⁹⁷ AN, M/243, no. 2, fo. 189r.

was revealed to have a weak command of the Chinese language in a four-hour debate in the cardinal's presence.⁹⁸ Even this embarrassment did little to impede Le Comte in the long term. By May 1701, it was reported that he was having long conversations with Clement XI, who enjoyed his company.⁹⁹

Le Comte's dismissal from the French court should therefore not be taken as an indication that Louis XIV had totally abandoned the Jesuits on the issue of the Chinese rites. Indeed, the king continued to give gestures of support. During the summer of 1700, he augmented the pension of the Jesuit missionaries by 6,000 *livres*, compared to 2,000 *livres* for the MEP missionaries.¹⁰⁰ On his return from China in August, the leader of the mathematicians, Jean de Fontaney (1643–1710), was received by the king in an audience lasting over an hour. Fontaney presented Louis with numerous gifts and a letter from the Kangxi emperor.¹⁰¹ He also brought the message that devotion to Confucius was being gradually Christianised, but that if the philosopher's cult were abolished, the Chinese church might not survive. It was thus safer to continue with the Jesuit approach to the rites.¹⁰² When Fontaney had another audience with the king at Fontainebleau in October, Louis XIV offered funds to build and equip four churches in China.¹⁰³ The favour shown to Fontaney made Brisacier worry that the Jesuit message was cutting through.¹⁰⁴

Although he continued to signal favour to the Jesuits, however, Louis XIV did not change his 1699 decision to leave the rites controversy to the Holy See. Instead, his most decisive move was simply to shut down the dispute in France by imposing silence. From the late 1690s, and particularly in 1700, there was a flood of pamphlets on the Chinese rites.¹⁰⁵ Short polemics on ecclesiastical controversies were a good way for printers to make quick money.¹⁰⁶ But the very quality which made pamphlets sell – their aggressive and sarcastic tone – made them appear damaging to the unity of the church. The dispute over the Chinese rites 'was making the presses run so quickly that the court finally grew tired of seeing so many writings published here and there'.¹⁰⁷ Louis XIV was said to be of the opinion 'that a war of words in matters of religion can have more harmful consequences than a war of swords in matters of state' and he had indeed stated to the cardinal de Bouillon that the disputes over the Chinese rites were causing scandals in the church.¹⁰⁸ In early September 1700, the king ordered the cardinal de Noailles to instruct both parties to stop writing on the subject and wait for

⁹⁸ AMEP, A/14, pp. 513–14 (Brisacier to Charmot, 17 Aug. 1700); *Esprit des cours* (Nov. 1700), 471–2; *Gazette d'Amsterdam* (28 Oct. 1700).

⁹⁹ AN, K/1374, no. 12.

¹⁰⁰ AN, K/1374, no. 17. In July 1700 the MEP only asked for a continuation of their pension of 2,000 *livres*: AMEP, A14, p. 489 (Brisacier to Charmot, 27 July 1700).

¹⁰¹ AN, M/243, no. 2, fos. 149r–150r; *Mercure galant* (Sept. 1700), 284–5; *Esprit des cours* (Oct. 1700), 356.

¹⁰² *Esprit des cours* (Oct. 1700), 351–2.

¹⁰³ The funds amounted to 24,000 *livres* according to AN, K/1375, no. 20 (note on Fontaney).

¹⁰⁴ AMEP, A/14, p. 504 (Brisacier to Charmot, 10 Aug. 1700).

¹⁰⁵ See the lists of pamphlets on the Chinese rites printed in France in the years around 1700 in AN, K/1375, nos. 55–61, 68–9.

¹⁰⁶ Trude Dijkstra, *Printing and Publishing Chinese Religion and Philosophy in the Dutch Republic, 1595–1700: The Chinese Imprint* (Leiden, 2022), 228, 255–7.

¹⁰⁷ *Mercure historique et politique* (Oct. 1700), 435.

¹⁰⁸ *Esprit des cours* (Oct. 1700), 353–4; AAE, 109CP/402, fo. 159v (Louis XIV to Bouillon, 12 Nov. 1699).

the Holy See to make its decision. He even ordered Brisacier and the Jesuit provincial in France, Jean Dez (1643–1712), to visit each other, presumably in an attempt to draw a line under the acrimony of the dispute and foster a sense of courtesy between the warring sides.¹⁰⁹

While this might seem like a neutral policy, Tiberge thought that La Chaise was behind this imposition of silence, claiming that the Jesuits feared what the MEP had to say against them.¹¹⁰ With proceedings in the Sorbonne in full swing when the king decided to prohibit further discussion, the Jesuits saw an opportunity to ask him to prevent the Faculty of Theology from continuing its deliberations, appealing to his desire for order to neutralise the danger of the increasingly likely censure.¹¹¹ On 3 September 1700, the king told Noailles that La Chaise had complained to him of the tumult in the Sorbonne, ‘which could have had consequences and provoke new troubles in matters of faith and doctrine’. The cardinal, however, ‘spoke very well to the king’ and persuaded him that it was opportune for the faculty to continue debating the censure.¹¹²

By mid-September 1700, Louis’s intention was for the Sorbonne to proceed, but in a wider context of obedient silence from both sides. This was a vain hope. The issues at stake in the Sorbonne continued to be the subject of polemics up to and following the promulgation of the censure on 18 October. Indeed, both sides of the dispute could now accuse the other of an additional misdemeanour – disobeying the king’s orders to lay down their quills.¹¹³ The Jesuits and the MEP continued to publish, using the loophole that they could do so outside France; Tiberge noted that ‘we are given the freedom to support things as vigorously as we can in Rome’.¹¹⁴ Nevertheless, they also reined in their more enthusiastic polemicists. In May 1702 a letter by Charles-Marín Labbé (1648–1723) of the MEP appeared, criticising a declaration in favour of the Jesuit position that had been solicited by the Beijing missionaries from the Kangxi emperor; the Jesuits countered with a refutation of Labbé in early June, to which the MEP responded with a *Prayer for the Church of China*.¹¹⁵ The Jesuit polemicist Jacques-Philippe Lallemant (1660–1748) was ready to print a counter-attack when La Chaise decided that enough was enough and ordered him to keep silent.¹¹⁶ Similarly, in 1704 Brisacier and Tiberge wrote to Artus de Lionne in Rome with regret that they were unable to publish everything they wished:

You must not forget that the prohibition the king had us enforce against writing or printing anything in France on this subject still stands, and that despite the very strong desires we have had on various occasions to complain openly about everything we witnessed, it was always thought that it was still better to remain obedient.¹¹⁷

¹⁰⁹ AN, K/1374, no. 13.

¹¹⁰ AMEP, A/14, p. 552 (Tiberge to Charmot, 20 Sept. 1700).

¹¹¹ *Gazette d’Amsterdam*, 20 Sept. 1700; *Mercurie historique et politique*, Oct. 1700, 424–5.

¹¹² Ledieu, *Mémoires & Journal*, II, 132–3, 137–8.

¹¹³ Heath, ‘Gender, Rumor, and Religious Polemic’, 626–7.

¹¹⁴ AMEP, A/14, p. 552 (Tiberge to Charmot, 20 Sept. 1700). According to *Esprit des cours* (Oct. 1700, 355), the MEP maintained silence in France but not Rome.

¹¹⁵ Charles-Marín Labbé, *Lettre de M. Marin Labbé, nommé par le S. Siege Eveque de Tilopolis, et Coadjuteur au Vicariat Apostolique de la Cochinchine, au Pape...* (Antwerp, 1702); *Prière pour l’Eglise de la Chine* (s.l., [1702]).

¹¹⁶ AN, M/243, no. 2, fo. 166r.

¹¹⁷ AMEP, A/16, p. 783 (Brisacier and Tiberge to Lionne, 3 Nov. 1704).

Silence on the Chinese Rites Controversy was nevertheless hard to enforce in France while the decision was still pending in Rome. In November 1700, the election of Clement XI (perceived as friendly to the Jesuits) delayed the conclusion of an affair that had seemed on the point of being decided by Innocent XII.¹¹⁸ In the first year of the new pontificate, there was concern among the MEP that the long-awaited verdict was slipping out of grasp as delay piled on delay.¹¹⁹ Louis XIV therefore potentially had another role to play if he could be solicited to demand a speedy decision from the pope. In April 1701, Brisacier feared that the king seemed far less invested in the Chinese Rites Controversy than he had been in the Quietist affair, meaning that there was little hope he would demand its conclusion via his representative in Rome (who was once again the cardinal de Forbin-Janson following the sudden death of the prince de Monaco in January 1701).¹²⁰ However, this seemed to have changed by June, when Louis ordered Forbin-Janson to ask the pope to bring the Chinese affair to an end.¹²¹ Noailles asked Maintenon what the king had resolved, 'but that is very secret'.¹²² Forbin-Janson told Charlot that he had indeed received an order from the king to press Clement to reach a decision as soon as possible, but his correspondence with the king shows that he was under instructions not to speak for one or the other party, instead emphasising that it was necessary to end the controversy to stop the ceaseless flow of scandalous writings.¹²³ Although Forbin-Janson remained neutral on the substance of the controversy, it was still perceived to be in the interests of the Jesuits to draw out the discussions in Rome and to delay or even avoid a final verdict that would probably invalidate the decree of Alexander VII; as such, Louis's pushing for a decision could be seen as tacitly supportive of the MEP.¹²⁴

Although it was reported that Louis XIV's recommendation for a rapid decision had made an impression on Clement XI, the months continued to go by without any substantial developments.¹²⁵ The pope explained to Forbin-Janson that the summer heat and other business meant that the Holy Office could only meet to consider the issue every fifteen days, although he hoped that the verdict would be concluded soon.¹²⁶ Clement was clearly aware that Louis wanted a decision; in 1701, when seeking the king's protection for the legate he was sending to China, Charles-Thomas Maillard de Tournon (1668–1710), the pope assured Louis that this would not cause further delays in the resolution of the Chinese Rites Controversy.¹²⁷

Once again, however, there was a surprising reversal of the royal attitude to the controversy. The following year, Louis XIV supported an entirely contradictory initiative.

¹¹⁸ Vuillart, *Lettres*, 398 (9 Dec. 1700).

¹¹⁹ AMEP, A/207, pp. 305, 315 (Charlot to Brisacier, 31 May, 1 June 1701).

¹²⁰ AMEP, A/15, p. 215 (Brisacier to Charlot, 25 April 1701).

¹²¹ In 1699 Louis XIV had stated that the decision to judge the affair quickly or to delay judgement should rest entirely with the pope: AAE, 109CP/402, fo. 55v (Louis XIV to Bouillon, 10 Aug. 1699).

¹²² AMEP, A/15, p. 259 (Brisacier to Charlot, 14 June 1701).

¹²³ AMEP, A/207, p. 365 (Charlot to Brisacier, 28 June 1701); AAE, 109CP/419, fos. 227v, 264v–265r (Forbin-Janson to Louis XIV, 28 June, 5 July 1701).

¹²⁴ AMEP, A/15, p. 285 (Brisacier to Charlot, 26 July 1701).

¹²⁵ AMEP, A/207, p. 449 (Charlot to Brisacier, 23 Aug. 1701).

¹²⁶ AAE, 109CP/419, fo. 265r–v (Forbin-Janson to Louis XIV, 5 July 1701).

¹²⁷ Louis therefore accorded his protection 'with pleasure': AAE, 109CP/424, fos. 243v–244r (Louis XIV to Forbin-Janson, 30 Dec. 1701).

In September 1702, La Chaise circulated a letter to the French episcopate 'by order of the king'.¹²⁸ According to this letter, there was a rumour that the French church was impatient with the pope's procrastination as it was impeding the conversion of Protestants, who were apparently scandalised by the notion that the Catholic church had tolerated idolatry in China for a century.¹²⁹ La Chaise's letter challenged this notion, seeing it as a malicious attempt to deprive the Holy See of the freedom to render a 'judgement advantageous to religion'. He pressed French prelates to deny that the French church wanted a speedy resolution of the Chinese Rites Controversy; on the contrary, the pope should take his time over a decision of such consequence.¹³⁰ Some bishops responded positively, notably Fénelon, who thought that the pope should not be rushed on a topic that required long study of Chinese language and customs.¹³¹ Others seemed somewhat sceptical; Fabio Brûlart de Sillery (1655–1714), bishop of Soissons, doubted that any French bishop would dare to blame the pope for the delay in judging the affair, and did not know of any who made a connection to the conversion of Huguenots.¹³²

La Chaise did not send his letter to every French prelate; he knew that some were so opposed to the Jesuits that soliciting their support was a waste of time. On 4 October, Bossuet wrote to Noailles that the letter had 'fallen into my hands', and he thought Noailles and the MEP should be aware of it.¹³³ Sillery also sent a copy to Noailles, saying he found it somewhat extraordinary that the king's confessor was encouraging French bishops take sides in an affair deferred to the Holy See.¹³⁴ Indeed, the MEP quickly produced a set of critical notes that presented La Chaise's action as an abuse of his position:

It is a rather new, quite surprising undertaking, and one that could have strange consequences, for a king's confessor to use, whenever he pleases, the credit that his position gives him to write circular letters on his own initiative to the clergy of France, and thereby engage the prelates to give him responses in line with his intentions and useful for his purposes.¹³⁵

In January 1703, Bossuet supped with Archbishop Le Tellier of Reims, who reported that the pope had disapproved of La Chaise's manoeuvres, noting that he would have consulted the bishops himself if necessary.¹³⁶

¹²⁸This letter disproves Saint-Simon's opinion that La Chaise did not want to enter 'trop avant' in the Chinese Rites Controversy: *Mémoires*, xvii, 45–8.

¹²⁹Louis XIV had expressed this opinion a few years earlier: AAE, 109CP/402, fo. 159v (Louis XIV to Bouillon, 12 Nov. 1699).

¹³⁰BnF, MS latin 16,981, fos. 115r–118r; AN, K/1375, nos. 41, 43. A marginal note on no. 43 indicates that 'cette lettre circulaire fut écrite par ordre du Roy'.

¹³¹François de Salignac de La Mothe Fénelon, *Œuvres complètes de Fénelon, archevêque de Cambrai* (10 vols., Paris, 1848–52), vii, 557–9 (Fénelon to La Chaise, Sept. 1702); BnF, MS Arsenal 6,318, fos. 236r–239v; BnF, MS latin 16,980, fos. 128r–131r.

¹³²BnF, MS latin 16,981, fos. 119r–120r (Sillery to La Chaise, 22 Sept. 1702).

¹³³Bossuet, *Œuvres*, xxvii, 279 (Bossuet to Noailles, 4 Oct. 1702).

¹³⁴BnF, MS latin 16,981, fos. 121r–122v (Sillery to Noailles, 24 Sept. 1702).

¹³⁵AN, K/1375, no. 43, 4–14; BnF, MS latin 16,980, fos. 39r–42v; AMEP, A/15, pp. 774–80.

¹³⁶Ledieu, *Mémoires*, ii, 373–4 (18 Jan. 1703).

What is interesting is that La Chaise's letter was written with the king's approval. This means that, having pressed Clement XI for a quick verdict on the Chinese rites in mid-1701, Louis was supporting Jesuit initiatives to delay the papal decision only a year later. This apparent volte-face suggests that the king was still subject to the conflicting influences of Maintenon and Noailles on the one hand and La Chaise on the other. In the end, though, he seemed to wash his hands of the whole affair. In September 1704, the MEP feared that the Jesuits would obtain a letter from the king to impede the conclusion of the affair, but Maintenon assured them that Louis had decided not to involve himself anymore in the Chinese Rites Controversy.¹³⁷

A decree condemning the Jesuit approach to the Chinese rites was finally approved in November 1704, but Clement XI decided not to publish it in Europe until his legate had implemented it in China. One figure who was desperate to know the verdict was Artus de Lionne. After arriving back from China in 1702, he was presented by Noailles to Louis XIV. In a long audience on 14 November, Lionne perhaps spoke to the king of the rites controversy, in which he was an inveterate opponent of the Jesuits.¹³⁸ He spent his subsequent journey to Rome, where he arrived in March 1703, 'speaking disadvantageously' of the Jesuits; once there, he published 'offensive writings' against the Society of Jesus. He would become embroiled in controversy when he claimed in 1705 that Clement had communicated to him the contents of the 1704 decree, which he then passed on to Noailles and Louis XIV. This was criticised by the Jesuits, who accused Lionne of lying and stated that he had no right to treat of such a secret matter.¹³⁹ Despite the entreaties of the MEP, Noailles and Maintenon, Louis was unwilling to intercede in Lionne's favour when he agitated for the decree to be made public. Noailles told Brisacier that 'the king will stick to the neutrality and silence to which he has retreated until the end, believing that in doing so he has made us a rather great sacrifice'.¹⁴⁰ A week later, Brisacier told Lionne that 'Madame de Maintenon made it very clear to us that, despite our pleas, it was impractical to bring the king into your designs and that she did not see that there was anything else to do but to arm ourselves with great patience'.¹⁴¹

Louis XIV had relinquished any notion of intervening in the Chinese Rites Controversy. He apparently thought the MEP should be grateful for the fact that he had maintained neutrality rather than helping the Jesuits. What he clearly wanted was an end to the discussion of the Chinese rites in France. Following another papal decree in 1710 confirming the condemnation of the rites, Louis ordered the Jesuits to obey.¹⁴² At the same time, silence continued to be enjoined on all sides. In October 1711, Pontchartrain wrote to the Dominican provincial to remind him 'that His Majesty wishes that nothing be printed on the Chinese affairs, and that he even expressly

¹³⁷ AMEP, A/16, pp. 719–20 (Brisacier and Tiberge to Lionne, 13 Sept. 1704).

¹³⁸ Two Jesuits were also present during the audience: *Gazette d'Amsterdam* (30 Nov. 1702).

¹³⁹ AN, K/1375, nos. 62, 65; BnF, MS Arsenal 6318, fos. 215r–221v (Lionne to the Jesuits, 29 June 1706); Claudia von Collani, 'Artus de Lionne, M.E.P., et la Chine', in *Actes du VII^e colloque international de Sinologie de Chantilly, 8–10 septembre 1992: Echanges culturels et religieux, entre la Chine et l'Occident*, ed. Edward J. Malatesta et al. (Paris, 1995), 77–8.

¹⁴⁰ AMEP, A/17, p. 275 (Brisacier and Tiberge to Lionne, 14 Sept. 1705).

¹⁴¹ AMEP, A/17, p. 279 (Brisacier and Tiberge to Lionne, 20 Sept. 1705).

¹⁴² AMEP, A/212, p. 17 (Maigrot to Brisacier, 17 Jan. 1711).

forbids it. I am convinced that you will have no trouble following His Majesty's intentions in this regard very precisely.' The provincial would be held personally responsible for any infractions.¹⁴³ Over a decade after he had initially imposed silence in September 1700, Louis XIV's most consistent policy regarding the Chinese Rites Controversy continued to be to prohibit any discussion of it.

Conclusion

Louis XIV's response to the Chinese Rites Controversy did not demonstrate the unwavering decisiveness that might be expected from the paragon of absolute kingship. The common impression of the Sun King in his later decades is of a monarch obstinate in his pursuit of what he deemed to be the interests of religion. But his dogged attempts to crush Quietism and Jansenism – not to mention the Protestant Huguenots – should not lead us to assume that he was always completely certain in matters of religion. The Chinese Rites Controversy offers a very different picture. Louis's initial instinct was to support the Jesuits, but he did not stick to this position and quickly gave up this approach when lobbied by Maintenon and Noailles in July 1699, ultimately leaving the issue to the Holy See without making much effort to influence the verdict. The king's vacillation is evident in the decisions on whether to allow the Sorbonne to proceed with the censure in 1700 and whether to press Clement XI for a quicker decision in 1701–2. The contradictory influences of Maintenon and Noailles, who supported the MEP, and La Chaise, who supported the Jesuits, are equally apparent here. Nevertheless, Louis was not beholden to either party. His responses to their appeals were generally non-committal. It is hard to discern any interest on his part in the Chinese Rites Controversy, which was probably little more than an irritation and certainly ranked far behind major issues such as the Spanish succession in terms of his priorities. Rather than taking an active interest in the intricacies of Confucian rituals, Louis viewed the dispute as a source of unseemly disorder within the French church, leading him to try to muffle it through a ban on publication.

The most consistent royal protector of the Jesuits in the Chinese Rites Controversy was not Louis XIV but the crown of Portugal. Pedro II (r. 1667–1706) intervened firmly on the Jesuit side in 1699, the same year Louis vacillated.¹⁴⁴ Even after the papal pronouncements against the rites in 1704, 1710 and 1715, Pedro's successor João V (r. 1706–50) continued to represent to Clement XI the danger of total ruin in which the China mission had been placed.¹⁴⁵ This unambiguous position reflected Portugal's consistent opposition to papal attempts to undermine the *Padroado*.¹⁴⁶ Louis XIV's stance, by contrast, was complicated by the fact that the intensification of the controversy in the 1690s pitted against each other the two groups of missionaries whose work in China he had supported – the vicars apostolic drawn from the MEP and the French

¹⁴³ AMEP, A/18, p. 55 (Pontchartrain to R. P. l'Hermite and vice versa, 20, 23 and 28 Oct. 1711).

¹⁴⁴ AN, K/1374, no. 9; *Esprit des cours* (Dec. 1699), 768–69; [Jean Dez] *Lettre à Monsieur ** touchant les honneurs que les Chinois rendent au Philosophe Confucius & à leurs Ancêtres* (s.l., 1700), 112–15; [Noël Alexandre], *Conformité des cérémonies chinoises avec l'idolâtrie grecque et romaine ...* (Cologne, 1700), 193–200.

¹⁴⁵ Etienneble, *Les Jésuites en Chine*, 266–8 (memorial from Dom André de Melo de Castro to Clement XI, 21 Aug. 1709); *Journal de Verdun* (July 1711), 25; BnF, MS latin 16,980, fos. 64r–65v (João V to Clement XI, 12 Aug. 1715).

¹⁴⁶ AN, K/1374, no. 7 (*Mémoire concernant les Missions Etrangères*, 1703).

Jesuit mission. Whereas a victory for the Jesuits in the Chinese Rites Controversy would clearly have been to the advantage of the Portuguese, the French had interests on both sides.¹⁴⁷ This conundrum, reinforced by the fact that Louis was surrounded by family members and trusted counsellors on religious matters who nudged him in different directions, helps to explain the king of France's inconsistent approach and lack of strong support for either side. Although historians have often noted the Sun King's patronage of the mathematicians in China, they have rarely discussed the fact that his protection faltered at the point when the Jesuits needed it most.

Louis XIV's interventions in the Chinese Rites Controversy thus show just how confused and malleable his ecclesiastical policy could be, even in the final decades of the reign when he is normally thought of as pursuing religious objectives with tremendously dogmatic self-assurance – crushing the Huguenots in the 1680s, pressurising Innocent XII to condemn Fénelon and Quietism in the 1690s, and attempting to destroy Jansenism once and for all in the 1700s.¹⁴⁸ In the case of the rites controversy, examination of the king's communication with Rome displays his lack of willingness to follow his initial instinct to support the Jesuits. To be sure, this controversy was probably less of a priority for Louis XIV given that it concerned practices in a distant land rather than the presence of heretics within France. Nevertheless, it also directly implicated the French Jesuit mission that he had done much to support. What is particularly interesting is that the evidence reveals not a king who took counsel and then decided clearly, but someone who at this point in his reign was easily influenced by different factions in his immediate circle, leading to confusing reversals in policy. Perhaps Louis's sister-in-law Elisabeth Charlotte of the Palatinate (1652–1722) was right in her characteristically caustic assessment that it was 'amazing how simple the great man is when it comes to religion ... The reason is that he has never read anything about religion, nor the Bible either, and just goes along believing whatever he is told.'¹⁴⁹

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¹⁴⁷ Supporters of the MEP could not understand why Louis XIV did not offer fuller support to the vicars apostolic, given that their cause in the Chinese Rites Controversy challenged Portuguese pretensions to be 'the absolute masters of the Chinese missions': AAE, 109CP/396, fo. 56r–v (letter of 16 June 1699); Antoine Arnauld, *Œuvres de Messire Antoine Arnauld, docteur de la maison et société de Sorbonne* (43 vols., Paris, 1775–83), III, 732 (Arnauld to Louis du Vaucel, 1692).

¹⁴⁸ Bergin, *The Politics of Religion*.

¹⁴⁹ Quoted in Bryant, *Queen of Versailles*, 210.

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