

POLITICAL MOBILIZATIONS OF ECSTATIC EXPERIENCES IN LATE NINETEENTH-CENTURY CATHOLIC FRANCE: THE CASE OF DOCTOR ANTOINE IMBERT-GOURBEYRE AND HIS “STIGMATISÉES” (1868–73)

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Religious ecstasy,¹ intended as a mystical union with God, is by definition an individual and subjective experience, unutterable or at least barely communicable to others. Human words alone cannot adequately convey and describe such strong and deep occurrences, affecting both the spiritual and physical sphere, and surely they are insufficient to persuade others of the truthfulness and reality of this extraordinary experience. Nevertheless, ecstasies are not isolated atoms, living apart from the world, without any human relationships; on the contrary, they always belong to a human community (a family, a parish, a village, a monastery) and necessarily participate in a social dimension. For this reason, their mystical experiences go beyond the simple personal sphere and acquire public relevance, creating, in a certain mediated way, a link between God and their respective communities and even expressing, or receiving, some political significance. In this way, ecstasy ceases to be only a personal relationship between two (God and the ecstatic) and becomes a sort of “triangle,” the public community influencing and being influenced at the same time by mystical experiences and their supernatural contents. We may wonder how and why this shift from the individual to the collective dimension occurs, to what extent it affects and influences the social perception of religious ecstasy, and more specifically if and how political utilizations distort its peculiar mystical character. My article aims precisely at exploring this public treatment of ecstatic experiences in a Catholic context, by focusing on the case of French legitimists’

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1 For an initial approach to the concept, from the theological but also a cultural point of view, see the relative entries in *Dictionnaire de Théologie catholique* 5/2 (1924): 1871–1896; *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* 4 (1961): 2045–2189; *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* 3 (1995): 573–575.



exploitation of some stigmatized women and their political prophecies in the 1870s.

1. *“La politique du miracle”² in France between Catholic intransigentism and legitimism*

Throughout the nineteenth century, and especially in its second half, Catholic France witnessed a remarkable proliferation of supernatural phenomena. Marian apparitions (in 1830 to Catherine Labouré, in 1846 at La Salette, in 1858 at Lourdes, just to mention the most important ones),³ visions and many miraculous events, often accompanied and integrated by prophecies, revelations, apocalyptic premonitions, contributed to inflame popular devotion and fostered mass mobilization in favor of religion and the Catholic Church. Against the political reality generated by the French Revolution, indifferent or hostile to religion, against the secularized and “apostate” societies, which refused to follow the teaching of the Church and rejected any mixture of the temporal and spiritual power, and against the rationalist negation of the supernatural dimension itself, intransigent Catholics⁴ emphasized and interpreted these irruptions of the divine in the human sphere as providential rebukes and announcements of a forthcoming regeneration of French society. According to them, this regeneration could consist only in the integral restoration of that intimate relationship between Church and society, politics and religion, which was guaranteed by the medieval model of a hierocratic *societas christiana*, subordinated to papal and ecclesiastical direction in all its expressions.⁵

- 2 Monsignor Roulet de la Bouillerie, Bishop Coadjutor of Bordeaux, employed this expression in a public discourse in Bordeaux on March 25, 1874, in order to qualify Catholic supernatural policy as opposed to that of the French Republican government. See Jacques Gadille, *La pensée et l'action politiques des évêques français au début de la IIIe République (1870–1883)* vol. I (Paris: Hachette, 1967), 64; Jean-Marie Mayeur, “Mgr Dupanloup et Louis Veuillot devant les prophéties contemporaines en 1874,” *Revue d'histoire de la spiritualité* 48 (1972): 201
- 3 See Jacques Marx, *Le péché de la France. Surnaturel et politique au XIXe siècle* (Bruxelles: Editions du Centre d'action laïque, 2005), especially 208–243, 307–313 and 322–332. A detailed census of Marian apparitions in nineteenth-century France is provided by Philippe Boutry and Joachim Boufflet, *Un signe dans le ciel. Les apparitions de la Vierge* (Paris: Grasset, 1997). For a general overview of supernatural manifestations in France during this period, see Thomas A. Kselman, *Miracles and Prophecies in Nineteenth-Century France* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1984).
- 4 For a definition of intransigent Catholicism, with special regard to France, see Jean-Marie Mayeur, “Catholicisme intransigeant, catholicisme social, démocratie chrétienne,” *Annales. Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 27/2 (1972): 484–489.
- 5 On this medieval ideology, largely made up and unhistorical, see Giovanni Miccoli, “Chiesa e società in Italia tra Ottocento e Novecento: il mito della cristianità,” in G. Miccoli, *Fra*



This supernatural anxiety became particularly intense and feverish after 1871.⁶ The crushing defeat of France in the war against Prussia and the subsequent revolt of the Paris Commune, with its anti-religious violence (Archbishop of Paris Darboy and many ecclesiastics were shot by the communards; some churches were devastated and profaned), were seen as a divine punishment. France, the “firstborn daughter of the Church” (*fille aînée de l’Eglise*)⁷, was severely struck for having betrayed its supernatural mission, generated the impious Revolution and abandoned the cause of papal temporal power, which was definitively overthrown in September 1870. However, the great political instability of that period also represented a strong reason for hope for intransigent monarchist Catholics. Indeed, the sudden and unexpected collapse of the Second Empire opened a vacuum of power that was not sufficiently filled by the precarious and provisional institutions of the newborn Third Republic. During the first post-war general elections, on February 1871, the monarchist front (although divided between *Légitimistes* and *Orléanistes*) obtained an important success and gained two-thirds of the seats in the *Assemblée nationale*.⁸ Most of Catholic clergy and believers strongly sustained the claims of the legitimist pretender Henri of Artois (Bourbon), Count of Chambord, whose figure was marked by a sort of supernatural predestination. Conceived only two months before the assassination (in February 1820) of his father, Duke of Berry, last male representative of

mito della cristianità e secolarizzazione (Casale Monferrato: Marietti, 1985), 21–92; Daniele Menozzi, “Tra riforma e restaurazione. Dalla crisi della società cristiana al mito della cristianità medievale (1758–1848),” in *Storia d’Italia. Annali IX*, ed. Giorgio Chittolini and Giovanni Miccoli (Torino: Einaudi, 1968), 765–806; Daniele Menozzi, *La chiesa cattolica e la secolarizzazione* (Torino: Einaudi, 1993), 34–55 and 136–144.

6 See Kselman, *Miracles and Prophecies*, 113–140.

7 On this expression, see the exhaustive analysis of René Rémond, “La fille aînée de l’Eglise,” in *Les lieux de mémoire*, ed. Pierre Nora, vol. III/3 (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), especially 556–579, where he highlights how, from 1789, “en face de la fille aînée de l’Eglise se dresse une autre France, qui fait dater son baptême de la Révolution et qui oppose à la religion de Reims l’épopée révolutionnaire.”

8 See Augustin Debidour, *L’Eglise catholique et l’Etat sous la troisième République (1870–1906)*, vol. I (Paris: Alcan, 1906), 25–28; Edouard Lecanuet, *L’Eglise de France sous la troisième République. Les dernières années du pontificat de Pie IX, 1870–1878* (Paris: Alcan, 1931), 92–94; Gadille, *La pensée*, vol. I, 214–218; François Broche, *La IIIe République, 1870–1895. De Thiers à Casimir-Périer* (Paris: Pygmalion-Watelet, 2001), 84–88. Debidour remarks that monarchists’ electoral representation was “peu proportionnée à leur importance numérique et à leur influence réelle dans la nation” (Debidour, *L’Eglise*, 25) and it was effectively reduced in the by-elections of July 1871. For the monarchist sympathies of the French episcopate, see Gadille, *La pensée*, vol. I, 294–298. On French legitimism in 1871, see Robert R. Locke, *French Legitimist and the Politics of Moral Order in the Early Third Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), especially 3–4 and 10–53. A general overview of this delicate moment in Jacques Chastenet, *Histoire de la Troisième République*, vol. I (Paris: Hachette, 1952) 50–119; Jean-Marie Mayeur, *Les débuts de la IIIe République, 1871–1898* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), 9–31; Broche, *La IIIe République*, 83–101.

the French Bourbon family who could ascend the throne, the birth of this unexpected heir was preceded and followed by as much expectation and apprehension as rarely happened in the history of the dynasty, and it was charged with an evident providential meaning. In his *Méditations poétiques*, for example, Alphonse de Lamartine celebrated that moment with these emphatic verses: “Il est né, *l’enfant du miracle*, | Héritier du sang d’un martyr [Louis XVI]! | Il est né d’un tardif oracle, | Il est né d’un dernier soupir!”.⁹ Thanks to these premises and because of his firm Catholic principles and his innate hostility to the French Revolution and all its symbols and values, Chambord appeared to be the ideal candidate for the new sacred monarchy to be restored in France. Moreover, his Catholic supporters were certain that his accession to the throne of Saint Louis would not only save France from its political perdition, but also start the process of building a new European Christianity and restore the pope in the full possession of his temporal rights, according to the conviction that “God writes history through the actions of France” (the so-called *gesta Dei per Francos*).¹⁰

Not surprisingly, in the early 1870s the possibility of this monarchical restoration alimeted (and took force from) a multitude of prophecies and visions. These predicted the return of a Great Monarch (*Grand Monarque*),¹¹ now identified with Chambord, and the arrival of a Great Pope (*Grand Pape*), and foresaw political convulsions and apocalyptic punishments. It was a massive supernatural and prophetic “invasion,” which found great resonance and dissemination in the intransigent press (in the most important Parisian Catholic newspaper *L’Univers*, as well as in the Roman Jesuit review *La Civiltà Cattolica*)¹² and in a flood of apologetic writings, such as the anonymous

9 *La naissance du duc de Bordeaux — Ode* (1822), in Alphonse Lamartine, *Œuvres complètes de Lamartine publiées ou inédites*, vol. I (Paris: chez l’auteur, 1862), 151–155. In 1860, the poet himself explained the ode in this way: “La naissance de cet enfant parut une vengeance du ciel contre l’assassin [of his father], une bénédiction miraculeuse du sang des Bourbons” (here: 156). On this aspect of Chambord’s biography, see Marvin L. Brown, *The Comte de Chambord. The Third Republic’s Uncompromising King* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1967), 3–4; Christine Buzon, *Henri V, comte de Chambord, ou le «fier suicide» de la Royauté* (Paris: Michel, 1987) 24–30; Daniel Montplaisir, *Le comte de Chambord. Dernier roi de France* (Paris: Perrin, 2008), 37–52. Also see the interesting considerations on the legitimist exaltation of Chambord’s providential role in Stéphane Rials, *Révolution et contre-révolution au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Albatros, 1987), 220–230.

10 See Rémond, *La fille aînée*, 559. Chambord himself and his partisans repeatedly and publicly declared the essential link between Bourbon and papal restorations (see e.g. his letter-manifesto of May 8, 1871, in Monplaisir, *Le comte de Chambord*, 418–420), as highlighted, among others, by Joseph Brugerette, *Le prêtre français et la société contemporaine*, vol. II (Paris: Lethielleux, 1935), 123–124.

11 On this subject, see Paul Airiau, “Le Grand Monarque dans le catholicisme français du XIXe–XXe siècles,” *Politica hermetica* 14 (2000): 66–95.

12 See e.g. Jules Morel, “Des Prophéties modernes,” *L’Univers*, Avril 9, 1872 (with marked legitimist emphasis); [Raffaële Ballerini], “Nei mali presenti conforti ai cattolici,” *La Civiltà*



pamphlet, *Le grand pape et le grand roi*, reedited many times after 1871, or the successful catalogs of ancient and modern prophecies compiled by two priests, Jean-Marie Curicque and Emmanuel-Augustin Chabauty.¹³ This wave of messianic expectations, concerning both the collective salvation of a defeated and confused France and the triumph of the Church, resulted in an intensified devotional practice and in frequent mass pilgrimages to Marian shrines and sanctuaries. Led by their bishops and often accompanied by groups of legitimist deputies, thousands of French believers visited Lourdes, La Salette, Pontmain, Auray, Chartres, Paray-le-Monial, and Notre-Dame de Pitié (Vendée) in 1871–1873, trying to expiate the sins of France and often combining devotion with political faith in Chambord's monarchist cause.¹⁴

Ecstatic experiences played an important role in this circumstance, particular attention being paid to mystical predictions.¹⁵ According to traditional Catholic theologians, the gift of prophecy is a “grace granted by grace” (*grata gratiae data*)¹⁶ and not an exclusive prerogative of mystics. Nevertheless, the

Cattolica serie viii, vol. IV (1871): 513–529; [R. Ballerini], “I vaticinii e i nostri tempi,” *La Civiltà Cattolica* serie viii, vol. VI (1872): especially 291–309. Some hints on the apocalyptic tendencies of the Roman Jesuit review in this period can be found in Daniele Menozzi, *Sacro Cuore. Un culto tra devozione interiore e restaurazione cristiana della società* (Roma: Viella, 2001), 121 and 124. The attitude of *L'Univers* editor-in-chief Louis Veuillot on this matter has been analyzed in Mayeur, *Mgr Dupanloup*, 201–203.

- 13 See Jean-Marie Curicque, *Voix prophétiques, ou signes, apparitions et prédictions modernes touchant les grands événements du XIXe siècle et l'approche de la fin des temps*, (Paris: Palmé, 1872); Emmanuel-Augustin Chabauty, *Lettre sur les prophéties modernes et concordance de toutes les prédictions jusqu'au règne de Henri V inclusivement* (Poitiers: Oudin, 1872). On these authors, respectively Hilaire Multon, «Faire la politique du miracle». L'abbé Jean-Marie Curicque (diocèse de Metz, 1827–1892), restaurateur de sites religieux et compilateur de prophéties,” *Chrétiens et sociétés* 12 (2005): 59–70; H. Multon, “Un prophète millénariste: Emmanuel-Augustin Chabauty, chanoine de Poitiers (1827–1914),” *Revue d'histoire de l'Église de France* 85 (1999): 315–331.
- 14 On pilgrimages and devotional revival, see Brugerette, *Le prêtre*, vol. II, 7–13; Gadille, *L'action*, vol. I, 229–237; P. Pierrard, “L'âge d'or des pèlerinages nationaux français (1871–1874),” in *Les chemins de Dieu. Histoire des pèlerinages chrétiens des origines à nos jours* (Paris: Hachette, 1982), 319–332; Kselman, *Miracles and Prophecies*, 113–121 and 125–126. On the case of Paray-le-Monial, see especially Philippe Boutry and Michel Cinquin, *Deux pèlerinages au XIXe siècle. Ars et Paray-le-Monial* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1980), 179–196 and 206–214.
- 15 See Joachim Boufflet, “Avant-propos,” in *La stigmatisation* by Antoine Imbert-Gourbeyre (Grenoble: Millon, 1996), 8–9; J. Boufflet, “Les stigmates, gage de l'Amour divin? La relation des stigmatisés au signe,” in *Stigmates*, ed. Dominique de Courcelles (Paris: Ed. de L'Herne, 2001), 152–154; Jacques Maitre, “Introduction. Les mystiques visionnaires,” *Dictionnaire du monde religieux dans la France contemporaine* 10 (2001): xxxvii–xxxviii; Marx, *Le péché*, 340–350.
- 16 See e.g., Prospero Lambertini [Benedict XIV], *De servorum Dei beatificatione et beatorum canonizatione*, vol. III (Romae, 1748), 687; Giovanni Battista Scaramelli, *Direttorio mistico, indirizzato a' direttori di quelle anime, che Iddio conduce per la via della contemplazione* (Venezia, 1754), 44. These authoritative works were both republished and translated several times throughout the nineteenth century.



value and credibility of their premonitions appeared notably strengthened by the fame of sanctity that surrounded their figures and by the extraordinary signs they performed or bore etched in their bodies. Hierognosis (the capacity to recognize sacred or blessed objects), stigmata, miraculous communions and other epiphenomena of ecstatic experiences appeared as tangible proofs of a preferential and privileged relationship with God, and contributed to legitimize the truthfulness of the mystics' prophetic spirit.¹⁷ As Louise Lachapelle states, "at the popular level, spiritual beliefs were made tangible through physical evidence of the supernatural."¹⁸ How could a man enduring physically the sufferings of Christ be wrong? How could a man burning with divine love be deceived about future events? For this reason, prophetic mystics were pointed to as a "sign that will be contradicted" (*signum cui contradicetur*; Luke, 2, 34), that is to say, as a concrete, physical challenge against modern society and its natural, but also political order. On the other hand, freethinkers and rationalist intellectuals absolutely denied the alleged supernatural character of ecstatic corporal experiences, attributing them to mere psychical causes, and offhandedly dismissed all the related prophecies as results of imagination or fraud.

2. "*Radicalisme de l'affirmation:*" *Imbert–Gourbeyre's struggle in defense of the supernatural*

It was to refute such argumentations that French doctor Antoine Imbert–Gourbeyre (1818–1912) decided to enter the public debate, publishing in 1873 a book in two volumes entitled *Les stigmatisées*. Born into a provincial bourgeois family and married into the local aristocracy, he was a renowned physician and professor at the important *Ecole de médecine* of Clermont–Ferrand.¹⁹ "Excellent man and perfect Catholic," as famous journalist Louis Veuillot defined him once,²⁰ Imbert was an all–round conservative, absolutely impenetrable to any innovation in his traditional and paternalistic concepts of family and social relationships, in his political opinions, as well as in his scientific ideas. Politically, he followed the steps of the majority of French Catholics: after having supported Louis Napoleon Bonaparte's coup d'état of December 2, 1851, appreciated as a providential intervention against

17 For a detailed analysis, at once historical and scientific, of these epiphenomena, see Herbert Thurston, *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism*, ed. Joseph Hugh Crehan (London: Burns and Oates, 1952). On stigmata, see Joachim Boufflet, *Les stigmatisés* (Paris: Cerf, 1996), especially 89–91.

18 Louise Lachapelle, "Between Miracle and Sickness: Louise Lateau and the Experience of Stigmata and Ecstasy," *Configurations* 12 (2004): 79.

19 Some biographical information about Imbert in Boufflet, "Avant–propos," 9–10.

20 Veuillot's letter to Adolphe Dechamps, March 14, 1869, in Louis Veuillot, *Œuvres complètes de Louis Veuillot. Correspondance*, vol. XXIV (Paris: Lethielleux, 1932), 110.

democratic and parliamentary anarchy,²¹ he became increasingly distrustful of the imperial government because of its anti-papal Italian policy, and after the defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, he embraced Chambord's legitimist cause without hesitation.

In October 1868, during a trip to Belgium, Imbert met Louise Lateau (1850–83) for the first time and almost casually. Lateau was a young and unassuming girl who in the last few months had been experiencing ecstasies and stigmatizations.²² Bleeding wounds appeared every Friday in her hands, feet and chest (sometimes around her forehead too) and were followed by a long ecstatic loss of consciousness, during which she relived the moments and pains of the Passion of Christ. Moved and fascinated by Louise's devotion and humility and by the extraordinary phenomena she endured, Imbert took a growing interest in her case, which was studied in the meantime by a specific medico-ecclesiastical committee. Belgian physicians and theologians carefully examined the *stigmatisée de Bois-d'Haine* (as she was called from the name of her village), trying to define both the religious nature and medical origin of her mystical experiences, but it was not possible to find an agreement between Catholic and lay specialists and a fiery debate dragged on for years on the subject at the *Académie royale de Médecine* of Brussels.²³ For his part, Imbert had no doubts: from his first visit to Louise, he was sure of the supernatural (and divine) character of her stigmata and ecstasies.

However, Louise's stigmata caused not only heated scientific debates, but also skeptical reactions in the anticlerical and rationalist milieu, which took the opportunity to renew its attack against Catholic credulous superstition and ignorance. Encouraged by Veuillot,²⁴ Imbert decided to undertake

21 "Les évènements du 2 décembre sont tout providentiels. [...] nous devons remercier la Providence qui nous a préservés de la grande jacquerie de 1852, en rétablissant l'autorité sous sa véritable forme; la forme, une, despotique ou monarchique, et en nous libérant d'un parlementarisme essentiellement révolutionnaire;" Imbert's letter to Charles de Montalembert, December 18, 1851, in Archives départementales de la Côte-d'Or, *Fonds Montalembert*, 345/22.

22 The most recent contributions about Louise Lateau are the articles collected in "Louise Lateau." Special number of *Haynau. Revue d'histoire religieuse du comté et de la province de Hainaut* 3 (1992); Eugène Collard and Jeanne-Marie Dehoux, *La petite couturière de Bois-d'Haine. Louise Lateau (1850–1883)* (Mons: Œuvres de diffusion, 1996); Lachapelle, "Miracle and Sickness;" Eugène Collard, "Louise Lateau," *Dictionnaire d'histoire et géographie ecclésiastiques* 30 (2010): 811–813; Gabor Klaniczay, "Louise Lateau et les stigmatisées du XIXème siècle entre directeurs spirituels, dévots, psychologues et médecins," *Archivio italiano per la storia della pietà* 26 (2013): 279–319. A detailed description of the first encounter between Imbert and the girl in Antoine Imbert-Gourbeyre, *Les stigmatisées*, vol. I (Paris: Palmé, 1873), 1–7 and 24–46.

23 All this debate has been retraced, with detailed bibliographical references, in Lachapelle, "Miracle and Sickness," 87–100.

24 As it appears from Veuillot's letter to his sister Elise, September 19, 1868, in Veuillot, *Œuvres*, vol. XXIV, 61–62.

a project conceived some time before and write a book extensively explaining and justifying the supernatural origin of stigmata.²⁵ As he clarified in the *Préface*, his principal aim was “défendre scientifiquement le miracle de la stigmatisation” and “réfuter la thèse rationaliste sur la stigmatisation.”²⁶ Imbert intended to demonstrate that stigmata could neither be medically explained as symptoms of any physical or nervous disease (hemorrhage, catalepsy, hysteria, magnetic influence), as proposed by the first psychiatric studies on hysteria,²⁷ nor attributed to an overexcited imagination, as Maury, Renan, Littré and other rationalist and positivist intellectuals claimed.²⁸ Imbert tried to build up his argumentation both on medical and historical objective data, analyzing those miraculous “facts” Maury, Renan, Littré repulsed instead as “non-facts:” “le principe essential de la science est avant tout de ne pas faire abstraction des faits. [...] Il serait par trop commode de supprimer les faits, sous le prétexte qu'ils sont surnaturels. Dans cette question d'extase, le rationalisme manque aux principes essentiels de la science.”²⁹ Despite his general declarations of objectivity, Imbert's approach to the issue was nevertheless conditioned by the firm belief that, in matter of miracles and other supernatural phenomena, good Catholics had to take a militant stance, opposing their own “radicalisme de l'affirmation” to rationalists' “radicalisme de la négation” and leaving aside “ce *prudenterisme*, cet esprit de concession et de timidité” that were products of Jansenism and alimented the deplorable “rationalisme *catholique*.” Consequently, it was “toujours facile de démontrer le miracle sur le terrain scientifique, à la condition d'y apporter du bon sens et de la bonne foi.”³⁰

The latent contradiction between Imbert's scientific and religious principles clearly emerged in his relationship with a second stigmatic woman, the Italian Palma Matarelli (1825–88), from the small town of Oria, in Puglia.

25 Actually, Imbert's first public intervention on the subject was a letter sent to *L'Univers* (December 1, 1871) to defend Louise's mystical experiences against the mockeries of the rationalist newspaper *Le Siècle*.

26 Imbert, *Les stigmatisées*, vol. I, xiii.

27 On the anticlerical utilization of these studies, see Jan Goldstein, “The Hysteria Diagnosis and the Politics of Anticlericalism in Late Nineteenth-Century France,” *Journal of Modern History* 54 (1982): 234–237.

28 Imbert focused his criticism especially on Maury's theories considering them as the most representative expressions of the so-called *thèse rationaliste*; see Imbert, *Les stigmatisées*, vol. II, 191–259, where he quoted Alfred Maury, *La magie et l'astrologie dans l'antiquité et au moyen âge, ou Étude sur les superstitions païennes, qui se sont perpétuées jusqu'à nos jours* (Paris: Didier, 1864, 3rd edition). Imbert once defined Maury, Renan and Littré as the “trois coryphées de la libre pensée,” united by their common collaboration with the *Journal des Débats* and membership in the prestigious *Institut de France*; see his letter in *L'Univers*, June 8, 1872.

29 Imbert, *Les stigmatisées*, vol. II, 229.

30 Imbert, *Les stigmatisées*, vol. I, xi–xiii; italics original.

When he learned that Palma claimed to be in spiritual contact with Louise and with “les grandes âmes [...] par lesquelles [Dieu] entend restaurer la pauvre Europe démoralisée par l’impiété, y replanter la foi, et consolider la vérité de la passion de Jésus-Christ,”³¹ and that she was said to perform extraordinary prodigies, Imbert decided to meet her. He arrived in Puglia in late October 1871. There, he was literally stunned by a swirl of incredible phenomena: stigmata, angelic communions, inexplicable hyperthermia leaving burns on clothes, secretions of strange saliva from the palate, bilocation, a smell of sanctity. Everything happening at Oria seemed to be supernatural, everything seemed to be miraculous in the eyes of Imbert. In this situation, he refused to submit these facts to scientific verification, sacrificing his medical competence to his faith. For example, when Palma stated that her inexplicable saliva came directly from the heart through a particular vein, he passively accepted this explanation, although physically untenable, “attendu que l’ordre naturel est ici complètement renversé;”³² and in a subsequent occasion, when he tried to measure Palma’s body temperature during an attack of her mystical hyperthermia (without recording any significant alteration), he felt the need to justify his scientific scruples, as they were quite disrespectful toward religion.³³ Thus, while claiming to belong “à la science aussi bien que MM. Maury, Renan et Littré,”³⁴ effectively Imbert treated medical science as the *ancilla theologiae*,³⁵ legitimizing the idea that “la médecine doit entretenir des rapports serrés avec la théologie et n’est dame en son rang que si elle est la servante de la reine.”³⁶ In this way, although his intention was to base his reasoning on incontrovertible elements and employ modern science to prove the supernatural, actually his efforts ended up unmasking the limits and fragilities of modern science itself in front of religion.

This peculiar scientific approach also affected Imbert’s concept of ecstatic experiences. As Joachim Boufflet points out, he faced the matter, in which he had no particular expertise, more as a physician than as a theologian.³⁷ Indeed, stigmatization, not religious ecstasy was the true center of his

31 As Palma’s spiritual director wrote to Louise’s in April 1871, letter quoted in Imbert, *Les stigmatisées*, vol. II, 4.

32 Imbert, *Les stigmatisées*, vol. II, 12.

33 “Je faisais cet expérience par acquit de conscience scientifique; mais, je dois le dire, j’étais un peu honteux au fond de moi-même de mesurer ce feu divin à pareil instrument;” Imbert, *Les stigmatisées*, vol. II, 43. Another useless attempt to measure her divine fire is described here, vol. II, 52.

34 Imbert, *Les stigmatisées*, vol. II, 229.

35 “La médecine ne peut être que la servante de la théologie, *ancilla*;” Antoine Imbert-Gourbeyre, “La stigmatisation et les libres-penseurs,” *L’Univers*, January 6, 1876.

36 Veillot’s letter to Prosper Guéranger, October 19, 1871, on Imbert’s account, in Veillot, *Œuvres*, vol. XXV, 8.

37 See Boufflet, “Avant-propos,” 15–16.

interests. Thus, instead of analyzing stigmata as physical epiphenomenon of a more complex and intimate experience, he reversed the relationship between the terms, considering ecstasy as “l'accident, le fait accessoire” and stigmatization as “le phénomène essentiel et fundamental.” Consequently, he did not hesitate to assert that “l'extase accompagne ordinairement la stigmatization,” confusing the central dimension of ecstasy (the experience of God) with the extraordinary, but secondary graces that were consequences of it (stigmata and other miraculous signs).³⁸ In his effort to scientifically prove its supernatural character, Imbert reduced ecstasy to a mere phenomenology of external prodigies, clearly observable and analyzable, and showed himself incapable of entering into the spiritual, intimate dimension that underlay and justify those visible signs. This hidden dimension, which was not positively verifiable, did not interest the French doctor, since it was useless for his personal struggle against the rationalist negation of the supernatural.

3. *Ecstasies and political prophetism: Louise Lateau, Palma Matarelli and Julie Jahenny*

Imbert visited Louise Lateau four times between 1868 and 1871, but it was only during the last visit, in October 1871, that he questioned her about the French political situation. As we have seen, the moment was particularly significant: after the defeat and collapse of the Second Empire, the Italian occupation of Rome and the revolutionary Commune, the expectations for a monarchical restoration were growing stronger. Imbert had learned that Louise seemed to have experienced the recent misfortunes of the Church on her body, suffering in an exceptionally painful way during the Lent of 1871, when sacrilegious acts were carried out in Rome and Paris. As her spiritual director Father Séraphin declared to a Catholic newspaper, she personally paid for the collective sins of the time, expiating, as a new *figura Christi*, “les nombreuses abominations qui avaient lieu en Italie et en France.”³⁹ Encouraged by these facts, Imbert decided to test her prophetic spirit about present circumstances. Thus, during her ecstasy of October 13, 1871, he first asked Louise to pray for the pope, and she smiled; then for Chambord, and a faint smile appeared on her face; finally, for France, his “malheureuse patrie,” and this time Louise did not move a muscle, that was interpreted as a bad omen, as a sign of God’s dissatisfaction toward this nation.⁴⁰ No further prediction could be obtained from the Belgian girl. Despite this meager outcome, Im-

38 Quotations respectively from Imbert, *Les stigmatisées*, vol. I, 219–220 and 237.

39 Imbert, *Les stigmatisées*, vol. I, 179–181 (footnote).

40 Imbert, *Les stigmatisées*, vol. I, 121–122.

bert did not give up and, some weeks later, he turned his political solicitations to Palma. Indeed, she was not only a “machine à miracles,”⁴¹ but also a consummate prophetess, much more available than Louise, and Imbert did not lose the opportunity to learn about the future destiny of France. She predicted the return of Napoleon III “sous la figure de Lucifer” and his violent death, foreseeing great evils for France, but also the final triumph of religion. Questioned about Chambord (or better, about Henri V, as his supporters defined him with his monarchical title) Palma answered: “J’espère qu’il reviendra, [...] mais pas encore, pas encore — et en même temps elle faisait du bras une geste très-significatif, comme pour en reculer l’époque, elle ajouta: — il faut que Paris soit purifié.”⁴²

Imbert returned home with the resolute persuasion that Palma was “un instrument de Dieu” and he was so firmly convinced by her prophetic spirit that he immediately wrote a letter to none other than Chambord himself. The doctor described in detail the “faits surnaturels dont j’ai été témoin” and the political prophecies he had received in Belgium and Italy, underlining that “ils sont favorables à nos espérances et concernent personnellement le roi très-chrétien que la France catholique appelle de tous ses vœux.”⁴³ However, after having been submitted to the judgment of Veillot, this letter was never sent to the Bourbon pretender and remained hidden among Veillot’s private papers. Although the real reasons for this choice are unknown, it may be attributed to Veillot’s growing skepticism about Palma. He had been informed that Pius IX was diffident toward her mystical experiences (“Le pape n’est point *palmaïste*”) and some reliable witnesses (such as Mademoiselle Mauroy, “une sainte fille et de grand sens simple”) reported ambivalent impressions from Oria, so that the journalist feared his friend could fall “dans une fondrière” (in a crevasse) and perhaps compromise his reputation in front of the future king.⁴⁴ In any event, Imbert’s letter clearly expressed his belief that divine prophecies, revealed by mystical intermediaries, could positively influence and strengthen not only Chambord’s faith but also his political action, legitimizing it with the mark of God’s favor.

This belief also affected the public sphere: not only Imbert, but also others legitimist publicists worked actively to broadcast Louise’s and Palma’s prophecies to the French and European public, sometimes exaggerating them. Thus, at the beginning of 1872 *La Semaine religieuse de Tour-*

41 Imbert’s letter to Veillot, November 3, 1871, in Archives de l’Institut catholique de Paris. *Fonds Louis Veillot*, 19/n (from now: AICP, *Veillot*).

42 Respectively Imbert, *Les stigmatisées*, I, iii–iv and vol. II, 87–88.

43 Imbert’s letter to Chambord, November 3, 1871, in AICP, *Veillot*, 19/n.

44 All the quotations from Veillot’s letter to Imbert, June 10, 1872, in Veillot, *Œuvres*, vol. XXV, 71–72; italics original. On Veillot’s radical legitimism in this period, see Pierre Pierrard, *Louis Veillot* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1998), 175–179.

nai, official organ of the Belgian diocese to which Louise Lateau belonged, published a letter from Rome about Palma's political revelations. As it was reported, the Italian ecstatic foresaw "pour la France une série de malheurs plus grands et plus terribles que ceux par lesquels ce malheureux pays vient de passer," because, as she explained, "Dieu est irrité contre ce gouvernement protestant, spécialement contre M. Thiers, qui laisse debout dans Paris la statue de Voltaire."⁴⁵ In this way, the French Republican government and its president were both condemned. From the legitimist point of view, this discrediting reference to Adolphe Thiers was meaningful, because he was deservedly considered a longstanding enemy of the Bourbon monarchy (to whose downfall he actively contributed in July 1830) and one of the main opponents to the Chambordist cause,⁴⁶ while his enemies often blamed his early Voltairian ideas. Some weeks later, *L'Univers* also intervened on the issue publishing a letter of its Roman correspondent, who reported a long and detailed prophecy by Palma. She foresaw that after a bloody European war, during which Italian and Spanish monarchies would be reversed, Paris punished again and Germany defeated, "Henri de France [Chambord], acclamé par le peuple, règnera, et Pie IX rentrera à Rome pour y jouir des premiers jours du triomphe de l'Eglise." It was the apotheosis of ultramontane and legitimist hopes, to which the correspondent accompanied the exaltation of "les humbles qui n'ambitionnent pas les biens de ce monde" and who receive from God the ability to predict the future. Their clairvoyance was placed in opposition to the blindness of Thiers, King Victor–Emmanuel and Bismarck, who "ne savent quel revers ou quel succès leur apportera la journée de demain."⁴⁷ This article produced a great sensation, but its revelations proved so exaggerated and inaccurate that the editorial staff was forced to partially rectify them.⁴⁸ Imbert himself, quoting the full article in the second volume of *Les stigmatisées*, disposed of this prophecy as wrong about the date, "embelli" and altered.⁴⁹

The abovementioned *abbé* Curicque dwelled for long on the cases of Louise and Palma in the fifth, notably augmented edition of his book, *Voix prophétiques*.⁵⁰ He was especially interested in the former. While admitting that the Belgian stigmatic had not yet shown particular propensity to prophetism, Curicque nevertheless supposed that the tremors she felt during

45 This letter, dated Decembre 20, 1871, was also published in *L'Univers*, February 7, 1872, and in Imbert, *Les stigmatisées*, vol. II, 80–83; quotations here: 81–82.

46 See Chastenet, *Histoire de la Troisième*, 112–113.

47 *L'Univers*, March 17, 1872.

48 See *L'Univers*, Avril 18, 1872.

49 Imbert, *Les stigmatisées*, vol. II, 87.

50 See Curicque *Voix prophétiques*, vol. I, 442–496.

her ecstasies on hearing the word “France” could be “le reflet de la colère divine justement irritée contre l’obstination de la masse du peuple français dans l’irréligion ou l’indifférence et le respect humain.”⁵¹ Actually, the *abbé* was sure that Louise’s mystical experiences concerned France in a special way (not by chance her name recalled one of so many glorious French kings) and they represented an eloquent admonishment for this nation, which had to abandon “le chemin sacrilège de la Révolution” and regain “croyance à l’autel et au trône de [ses] pères,” because “le secret de [son] salut est renfermé dans les replis de la blanche oriflamme de saint Louis et de Louis XVI.”⁵² In this subtle way, Curicque called into question the fundamental symbol of the Bourbon monarchy (the royal white flag with lilies), never mentioned by Louise during her ecstasies, but which was in those years at the heart of French political debate, because Chambord firmly refused to accept the crown offered to him by monarchist deputies if destitute of the flag of his ancestors.

As for Imbert, he proved to be more cautious in public than in private. In the *Préface* to the second edition of *Les stigmatisées*,⁵³ he toned down the radicalism of some of his judgments. He admitted that ecstatic prophecies were not infallible, only the Church was, and that mystics could sometimes misunderstand or distort the divine revelations they received, because of the fallibility of their human nature. Nevertheless, Imbert did not question the prophetic gift of the two stigmatic girls in any serious way and he continued instead to highly praise their mystical skills. Moreover, he kept his readers up to date on the evolution of the situations at Oria and Bois-d’Haine and he promptly informed them when Louise started to pray for France during her ecstasies in 1873, almost as if it were a supernatural sign of favor toward Chambord’s monarchical restoration, never so close to be realized as in that year.⁵⁴

Imbert’s precautions were not without reason, at least in regard to Palma. Since December 1869, indeed, the Roman Congregation of the Holy Office began to investigate her case and an inquisitorial process for *affettata santità* (simulated holiness) was opened against her, the pope himself following the whole story very closely.⁵⁵ In June 1872, an inquiry expressly conducted at

51 Curicque *Voix prophétiques*, vol. I, 496.

52 Ibid.

53 See Imbert, *Les stigmatisées*, vol. I, iv–vi.

54 Imbert, *Les stigmatisées*, vol. I, xiv.

55 On this case, Xavier Barbier de Montault, *Œuvres complètes de Mgr X. Barbier de Montault*, vol. V (Paris: Vivès, 1892), 197–199; Hilaire Multon, “Catholicisme intransigeant et culture prophétique: l’apport des archives du Saint-Office et de l’Index,” *Revue historique* 621 (2002): 118–124; Francesco Castelli, “Per una definizione del modello di processo penale del Sant’Uffizio: il procedimento inquisitoriale per affettata santità su Palma Matterelli di Oria (1869–1878),” in *Suavis laborum memoria. Chiesa, Papato e Curia Romana tra storia e teologia*, ed. Paul van Geest and Roberto Regoli (Città del Vaticano: Archivio segreto



Oria by Father Luigi Ferrari came to the conclusion that “in tutto quello che si dice di Palma vi è illusione, fanatismo, inganno, forse per parte del demonio,” so that Pius IX and the cardinals of the Congregation decided to isolate her and block all information, preventing “il progresso del fanatismo ed illusione.”⁵⁶ This resolution produced a severe backlash on Imbert’s book. In October 1873, Cardinal Patrizi, secretary of the Holy Office, addressed a letter to the French doctor, urging him to withdraw from the market all the remaining copies of his book and not to publish anything else on the case of Palma, since the Congregation argued that “nothing supernatural or extraordinary could be found in that woman.”⁵⁷ Imbert, as an obedient Catholic, accepted and fulfilled all the Roman prescriptions, even suffering a considerable economic loss, but he remained intimately persuaded of the correctness of his judgments and of the merit of his book. In his opinion, indeed, Roman criticism on Palma was produced only by “un prudentisme illusoire, inexplicable et inapplicable dans l’espèce” and he interpreted the informal censure he underwent as “une émanation du libéralisme catholique,”⁵⁸ that is to say, a sort of political reprisal against his intransigent positions.

Despite this failure, Imbert remained strongly interested in stigmatic prophetesses; moreover, having become a real authority on the subject, he started to be consulted by those bishops who found similar cases in their dioceses. The case of a Breton peasant girl, Marie-Julie Jahenny (1850–1941), particularly caught his attention.⁵⁹ She had been experiencing Marian apparitions, stigmatizations and ecstasies since 1873, during which time she prophesized the triumph of the Church and the restoration of French Bourbon monarchy. Imbert, questioned by the bishop of Nantes Fournier, visited Julie for the first time in September 1873 and, also in this case, he was immediately certain that there was no deceit in her mystical experiences: “Il n’y a pas de fraude à La Fraudais [Julie’s small village]” was his witty answer to the prelate.⁶⁰ Over the course of more than twenty years, Imbert met Julie fifteen times, observing her ecstasies, analyzing her extraordinary

vaticano, 2013): 29–42. Multon appropriately includes Palma’s mystical experiences in the context of coeval power struggles within the diocese of Oria (Multon, “Catholicisme,” 120); the ecclesiastical process dragged on until 1878 and beyond, but we do not know its definitive outcome for lack of documentation.

56 Castelli, “Per una definizione,” 36 and 38.

57 “Ad Palmam enim Matarelli quod attinet non desunt huic Supremae Congregationi argumenta ad astruendum nihil supernaturali et extraordinari in eadem muliere reperiri,” copy of Patrizi’s letter, October 11, 1873, in AICP, *Veillot*, 19/n.

58 Imbert’s letter to Veillot, without date, but probably 1874, in aicp, *Veillot*, 19/n.

59 A rich apologetic bibliography exists on her behalf, well exemplified by the works of Pierre Roberdel or Henri Bourcier. For an objective analysis of her case, see Herbert Thurston, *Surprising Mystics*, ed. Joseph Hugh Crehan (London: Burns and Oates, 1955), 156–166.

60 Boufflet, “Avant-propos,” 13.





signs and carefully collecting her legitimist and temporalist predictions.⁶¹ With the intention of publicizing all that material, still circulating nowadays in some nostalgic legitimist circles, the French doctor wrote a book of prophecies (divided in eighteen chapters) and a biography of Julie,⁶² but these works remained unpublished. However, his yearning for political prophetism was not yet satisfied and in the late 1870s Imbert continued searching everywhere supernatural evidence of a forthcoming, radical transformation of French society. His restless inquietude clearly emerged from a letter he addressed to Veillot in November 1877, concerning a new stigmatized girl he had found, and her revelations:

Dans la nuit du 2 au 3 septembre [1877], Notre Seigneur lui [to the stigmatic] annonçait la mort de M. Thiers près de 24 heures à l'avance.

La Sainte Vierge lui a prédit qu'il y aurait de grands troubles après les élections, que par des miracles de providence tout sera sauvé au moment où l'on croira tout perdu. Cela doit durer trois mois; retour du roi légitime qui régnera 27 ans, après quoi nouveaux troubles et fin des temps. Cette prophétie est d'autant plus authentique que je la tiens du confesseur même: on verra plus tard si elle a de la valeur: ce que je ne garantis pas.

Cette nouvelle stigmatisée est *naturellement* extatique. [...]

Je vous raconte ces *choses de l'autre monde*, comme *diversion des choses d'ici-bas qui me paraissent fort lugubres* et en parfaite concordance avec ma prophétie.⁶³

In the meantime, the golden age for monarchist expectations and political prophetism was passing in France: Bourbon restoration, almost certain in summer 1873, failed because Chambord stubbornly refused to accept the tricolor flag,⁶⁴ while the Third Republic reinforced its institutions and gained consensus. Ten years later legitimist hopes were definitively swept

61 See e.g., what she revealed in December 1877: "La Sainte Vierge me montre la couronne de Pie IX, sur laquelle son nom est écrit en lettres d'or. Elle me dit: Allons, mes enfants, voilà donc ce côté fini. Mon Fils voulait que sa volonté fût accomplie. [...] Maintenant, pour que vous ne soyez pas effrayés, voilà la couronne du roi Henry V, le roi du miracle, le sauveur de la France. Voilà l'offrande de ce roi, choisi dès sa naissance pour rapporter en France le lys et le drapeau blanc;" Pierre Roberdel, *Marie-Julie Jahenny, la stigmatisée de Blain, 1850–1941* (Montsûrs: Résiac, 1971) 199.

62 See respectively Marie-Julie Jahenny, *Les prophéties de La Fraudais*, ed. Pierre Roberdel (Montsûrs: Résiac, 1985), 93; Roberdel, *Marie-Julie*, 18.

63 Imbert's letter to Veillot, November 10, 1877, in AICP, *Veillot*, 19/n; italics are mine. The identity of this young mystic is unknown: in his letter, Imbert calls her as "ma jeune fille," but it seems unrealistic that she could be his own daughter.

64 On this decision and its consequences, see Chastenet *Histoire de la Troisième*: 156–166; René de La Croix, duc de Castries, *Le grand refus du comte de Chambord. La légitimité et les tentatives de restauration de 1830 à 1886* (Paris: Hachette, 1970), 150–297; Jacques Martin, "Le Saint-Siège et la tentative de restauration de la monarchie en France en 1873,"



away by Chambord's death without male heirs (1883). Discouraging signs came also from Rome, where Pius IX, impressed by the cases of Palma and some other false "visionnaires,"⁶⁵ became increasingly diffident toward supernatural prophecies. Receiving Monsignor Barbier de Montault in August 1875, the pope asked him to report in France that he "désapprouve formellement toutes ces visions, qui sont diaboliques et propres à égarer les fidèles. Il y a beaucoup de visionnaires en ce moment. Qu'on ne s'y laisse donc pas prendre. Que les ecclésiastiques soient sur leurs gardes et que les journaux prémunissent contre le danger."⁶⁶ There was no more space for Imbert's political speculations and he preferred to concentrate energies on his public struggle for the supernatural, immersing himself in the scientific debate of the time and opposing especially the medical explanation of stigmatic and ecstatic experiences as hysterical phenomena sustained by Jean-Martin Charcot and the Parisian *Ecole de la Salpêtrière*.⁶⁷

4. *Some conclusions*

Approaching ecstatic experiences, despite his declared anti-rationalist purposes, Imbert seemed to remain imprisoned in an essentially positivistic perspective. In his effort to scientifically demonstrate the existence of a supernatural dimension, he accepted to stand on the same ground as rationalist critics (Maury, Renan, Littré) and opposed supernatural "facts" to their natural "facts." He thus renounced the otherness and irreducibility of mystical phenomena, subjecting them to the same scientific criteria that govern the observation and definition of natural phenomena. Steeped,

Archivum historiae pontificiae 11 (1973): 289–322 (about Roman attitude and reactions); Rials, *Révolution*, 231–239; Montplaisir, *Le comte de Chambord*, chap. X–XII.

- 65 On this subject, see Multon, "Catholicisme;" Hilaire Multon, "Prophétesses et prophéties dans la seconde moitié du pontificat de Pie IX (1859–1878). Entre défense du pouvoir temporel et Apocalypse hétérodoxe," *Dimensioni e problemi della ricerca storica* 5/1 (2003): 131–160.
- 66 Barbier de Montault, *Œuvres*, 199. During this audience, the pope recalled explicitly the case of Imbert's censure. On Pius IX's cautious attitude toward supernatural visions, see Giacomo Martina, *Pio IX (1867–1878)* (Roma: EPUG, 1990), 482–483 and 528–529.
- 67 See Imbert, "La stigmatization;" Imbert, *La stigmatisation, l'extase divine et les miracles de Lourdes. Réponse aux libres-penseurs*, vol. II (Clermont-Ferrand: Bellet, 1894); Imbert, "Réponse à quelques critiques sur la stigmatisation," *L'Univers*, August 30, September 3 and 7, 1895. On his participation to the debate, see Cristina Mazzoni, *Saint Hysteria. Neurosis, Mysticism, and Gender in European Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 25–27, 37 and 43–44; on Charcot and the Salpêtrière in this period, see Goldstein, *Hysteria Diagnosis*; Mark S. Micale, "The Salpêtrière in the Age of Charcot. An Institutional Perspective on Medical History in the Late Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Contemporary History* 20 (1985): 703–731.

despite himself, in the positivist culture of his time, Imbert actually chose to consider ecstasy as a simple natural phenomenon and consequently he tried to identify the tangible symptoms he could objectively quantify and measure. As he wrote many years after *Les stigmatisées*, “l’extase divine ne s’extériorise pas seulement par la parole, mais encore par divers accidents matériels, parfaitement *accessibles à nos sens*.”⁶⁸ Words (i.e. “science infuse et esprit prophétique”) and material accidents (i.e. miracles, extraordinary prodigies): Imbert reduced religious ecstasy to these external signs, paying no particular attention to its intimate and most specific dimension. In his unwilling positivistic approach to ecstatic experiences, the French doctor utilized expressions such as “maladie extraordinaire” or “maladie des cinq plaies”⁶⁹ to define stigmatization and the particular condition of stigmatics; religious ecstasy was nothing else for him than a psychophysical alteration, differing from other natural diseases due only to an unique but fundamental point: its supernatural origin.

Moreover, it is important to remember that Imbert did not consider ecstasy as a phenomenon in itself, but only as an instrument by which he could obtain evidences for his demonstration: in a word, ecstasy was a means, not a cognitive goal. From this point of view, ecstasies were nothing more than passive channels connecting the human and the divine dimension, windows through which the supernatural could burst into the natural, proving its own existence and pouring on human societies its load of signs, apocalyptic visions, political prophecies. “Louise n’est qu’un *instrument*, et c’est Dieu qui la manœuvre;” “Palma est un *instrument* de Dieu; c’est une véritable *machine* à miracles;” Palma and Louise were “*purs instruments* des opérations divines:”⁷⁰ on this point, Imbert’s terminology sounded quite explicit.

So overburdened and confused with its miraculous epiphenomena, ecstasy appeared completely instrumentalized and disfigured by Imbert’s presentation; more than a spiritual experience, it was a source of polemic and apologetic devices. In this way, the personal relationship between ecstasies and God was turned into an overexposed public space, highly sensible to collective expectations. The conditioning was certainly reciprocal and bi-directional: ecstatic visionaries influenced their audience through extraordinary signs and prophecies, but at the same time, they were influenced by the socio-political environment and by the exigencies it expressed. Many of them promptly responded to the incitements and solicitations of spiritual

68 Imbert *La stigmatization*, vol. II, 323; italics are mine.

69 See e.g., Imbert, *Les stigmatisées*, vol. I, 34, 197 and 227–9.

70 Respectively Imbert, *Les stigmatisées*, vol. I, 229; Imbert’s letter to Veuillot, November 3, 1871, in AICP, *Veuillot*, 19/n; Imbert, *Les stigmatisées*, vol. II, 60; italics are mine.

directors, ecclesiastic authorities or other important visitors, often surpassing their requests and expectations. This was the case of Palma, for example, as Imbert candidly admitted: “Non seulement elle répondait avec précision à mes questions; mais elle allait au-delà et me donnait une foule des détails et d’explications que je ne lui aurais pas même demandés.”⁷¹ For the doctor there was nothing strange or suspicious in Palma’s loquacity, because if she was really a divine instrument, as he believed, it was absolutely natural and also dutiful, that she divulged in full detail what God had revealed to her. Thus, publicity eventually became a central element in Imbert’s concept of religious ecstasy.

Imbert’s approach to ecstatic experiences essentially depended on his incapacity to accept coeval socio-political conditions. As most of the intransigent Catholics, he could not admit that God let impiety, rationalism and naturalism triumph, the pope be deprived of his rights, societies and governments collectively apostatize from religious truths and refuse their monarchical traditions. Because historical events of that period repeatedly disappointed his expectations, he refused to objectively deal with political reality and preferred to yearn for a radical regeneration, an apocalyptic catharsis that would restore an integral *societas christiana*. Such a demanding certainty had to be continually nourished and sustained by incontrovertible proofs and heavenly signs; for this reason, Imbert frequently questioned ecstatic prophetism and searched for a confirmation of his intransigent and legitimist hopes, since he was absolutely confident in the truthfulness of visions accompanying supernatural prodigies, such as stigmatization.⁷² Thus, demonstration of the supernatural and validation of political prophecies became two sides of the same coin. Indeed, as in a sort of mathematical demonstration, if Louise, Palma and Julie were true stigmatics, therefore they had to be true prophetesses too. By claiming to have demonstrated the former part of this “equation,” Imbert was consequently sure also of the latter and did not hesitate to stimulate the prophetic spirit of these women, attributing the utmost importance to every syllable and gesture interpretable in a political way. Thus, Imbert and intransigent Catholics tried to use these mystical prophecies as supernatural “weapons,” at the same time instruments of self-conviction and of mass mobilization, to be employed in a struggle against modernity for which human political tools alone proved insufficient. Even after the bitter failure of their political projects, even after the death of Chambord, even after Catholic *Raillielement* to French Third Re-

71 Imbert, *Les stigmatisées*, vol. II, 60.

72 “Convinced as he was that the bestowal of bleeding stigmata was the supreme mark of the Divine predilection for the souls who were thus privileged, he often manifests a surprising credulity, putting faith in all that was told him concerning them and all that he heard from their own lips;” Thurston, *Surprising Mystics*, 156.



public (strongly encouraged by Pope Leo XIII in early 1890s), these prophecies kept playing a central role in some intransigent legitimist circles, representing a means of escape from reality, an alternative always living and potential, an eternal promise of socio-political redemption guaranteed by its own supernatural origin. As Imbert explicitly confessed to Veillot in 1877, “ces choses de l’autre monde [sont] comme [une] diversion des choses d’ici-bas, qui me paraissent fort lugubres.”

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*Abstract***POLITICAL MOBILIZATIONS OF ECSTATIC EXPERIENCES
IN LATE NINETEENTH-CENTURY CATHOLIC FRANCE:
THE CASE OF DOCTOR ANTOINE IMBERT-GOURBEYRE
AND HIS “STIGMATISÉES” (1868–73)**

This article explores how intransigent Catholics used ecstatic experiences, in particular ecstatic prophetism, in late nineteenth-century France. The main protagonist of the events related here is Antoine Imbert-Gourbeyre, physician, intransigent Catholic and monarchical legitimist. From the 1870s, he started a widespread public campaign to scientifically defend the supernatural against anticlerical and rationalist criticism. In the precarious situation following the proclamation of the French Third Republic and the Paris Commune, Imbert's struggle for the supernatural merged with Catholic legitimists' hopes for Bourbon monarchical restoration and for a general socio-political regeneration culminating in the return to a medieval *societas christiana*. In this context, pro-monarchist political prophecies revealed by some ecstatic and stigmatic women were exploited to foster popular mass mobilization. Imbert worked actively to encourage, broadcast and scientifically legitimize these prophecies, instrumentalizing ecstatic experiences and subordinating their spiritual dimension to political purposes.

KEYWORDS: Antoine Imbert-Gourbeyre; feminine mystic; French legitimism; Henri Count of Chambord; intransigent Catholicism; Louise Lateau; Marie-Julie Jahenny; Palma Matarelli; political prophetism; religious ecstasy; stigmatization.

