

Reflections on Religion

François-Marie Arouet de Voltaire

More than any of the other philosophes, Voltaire has been identified as the archenemy of supernatural religion. These selections are principally from his Philosophical Dictionary, published in 1764. The next to last is a letter of 1770 to Frederick the Great, and the last, “*On the Presbyterians*,” is from his Letters Concerning the English Nation (1733), which contains his *famous* evocation of religious *tolerance at London’s Royal Exchange*.

THE ECCLESIASTICAL MINISTRY

The institution of religion exists only to keep mankind in order, and to make men merit the goodness of God by their virtue. Everything in a religion which does not tend toward this goal must be considered alien or dangerous.

Instruction, exhortation, threats of torments to come, promises of immortal beatitude, prayers, counsels, spiritual help, are the only means ecclesiastics may use to try to make men virtuous here below, and happy for eternity. All other means are repugnant to the liberty of reason, to the nature of the soul, to the unalterable rights of conscience, to the essence of religion, to that of the ecclesiastical ministry, and to the rights of the sovereign.

Virtue supposes liberty, as the carrying of a burden supposes active force. Under coercion there is no virtue, and without virtue there is no religion. Make a slave of me, and I shall be no better for it. The sovereign, even, has no right to use coercion to lead men to religion, which in its nature presupposes choice and liberty. My thought is subject to authority no more than is sickness or health.

In order to disentangle all the contradictions with which books on canon law have been filled, and to clarify our ideas on the ecclesiastical ministry, let us investigate, amid a thousand equivocations, what the Church really is.

The Church is the assembly of all the faithful summoned on certain days to pray in common, and at all times to do good actions.

The priests are persons established under the authority of the sovereign to direct these prayers and all religious worship.

A numerous Church could not exist without ecclesiastics; but these ecclesiastics are not the Church.

It is no less evident that if the ecclesiastics, who are part of civil society, have acquired rights which might trouble or destroy society, these rights should be suppressed.

It is still more evident that, if God has attached to the Church prerogatives or rights, neither these rights nor these prerogatives should belong exclusively either to the chief of the Church or to the ecclesiastics, because they are not the Church, just as the magistrates are not the sovereign, in either a democratic state or in a monarchy.

Finally, it is quite evident that it is our souls which are under the clergy's care, solely in spiritual matters.

Our soul acts internally. Internal acts are thought, volition, inclinations, acquiescence in certain truths. All these acts are above coercion, and are within the ecclesiastical minister's sphere only in so far as he must instruct, but never command.

The soul also acts externally. External actions are under the civil law. Here coercion may have a place; temporal or corporal penalties maintain the law by punishing those who infringe it.

Obedience to ecclesiastical order must consequently always be free and voluntary: no other should be possible. Submission to civil order, on the other hand, may be compulsory and compelled.

For the same reason, ecclesiastical punishments, always spiritual, reach only those here below who are convinced inwardly of their fault. Civil pains, on the contrary, accompanied by physical ill, have their physical effects, whether or no the guilty person recognizes their justice.

From this it results, obviously, that the authority of the clergy is and can be spiritual only; that the clergy should not have any temporal power; that no coercive force is proper to its ministry, which would be destroyed by force.

It follows from this further that the sovereign, careful not to suffer any partition of his authority, must permit no enterprise which puts the members of society in external and civil dependence on an ecclesiastical body.

Such are the incontestable principles of real canon law, of which the rules and decisions should be judged at all times by the eternal and immutable truths which are founded on natural law and the necessary order of society.

FANATICISM

Fanaticism is to superstition what delirium is to fever and rage to anger. The man visited by ecstasies and visions, who takes dreams for realities and his fancies for prophecies, is an enthusiast; the man who supports his madness with murder is a fanatic. Jean Diaz, in retreat at Nuremberg, was firmly convinced

that the Pope was the Antichrist of the Apocalypse, and that he bore the sign of the beast; he was merely an enthusiast; his brother, Bartholomew Diaz, who came from Rome to assassinate his brother out of piety, and who did in fact kill him for the love of God, was one of the most abominable fanatics ever raised up by superstition.

Polyeucte, who goes to the temple on a solemn holiday to knock over and smash the statues and ornaments, is a less dreadful but no less ridiculous fanatic than Diaz. The assassins of the Duke François de Guise, of William, Prince of Orange, of King Henri III, of King Henri IV, and of so many others, were fanatics sick with the same mania as Diaz'.

The most detestable example of fanaticism was that of the burghers of Paris who on St. Bartholomew's Night went about assassinating and butchering all their fellow citizens who did not go to mass, throwing them out of windows, cutting them in pieces.

There are coldblooded fanatics: such as judges who condemn to death those who have committed no other crime than failing to think like them; and these judges are all the more guilty, all the more deserving of the execration of mankind, since, unlike Clement, Châtel, Ravallac, Damiens, they were not suffering from an attack of insanity; surely they should have been able to listen to reason.

Once fanaticism has corrupted a mind, the malady is almost incurable. I have seen convulsionaries who, speaking of the miracles of Saint Pâris, gradually grew impassioned despite themselves: their eyes got inflamed, their limbs trembled, madness disfigured their faces, and they would have killed anyone who contradicted them.

The only remedy for this epidemic malady is the philosophical spirit which, spread gradually, at last tames men's habits and prevents the disease from starting; for, once the disease has made any progress, one must flee and wait for the air to clear itself. Laws and religion are not strong enough against the spiritual pest; religion, far from being healthy food for infected brains, turns to poison in them. These miserable men have forever in their minds the example of Ehud, who assassinated King Eglon; of Judith, who cut off Holofernes' head while she was sleeping with him; of Samuel, who chopped King Agag in pieces. They cannot see that these examples which were respectable in antiquity are abominable in the present; they borrow their frenzies from the very religion that condemns them.

Even the law is impotent against these attacks of rage; it is like reading a court decree to a raving maniac. These fellows are certain that the holy spirit with which they are filled is above the law, that their enthusiasm is the only law they must obey.

What can we say to a man who tells you that he would rather obey God than men, and that therefore he is sure to go to heaven for butchering you?

Ordinarily fanatics are guided by rascals, who put the dagger into their hands;

these latter resemble that Old Man of the Mountain who is supposed to have made imbeciles taste the joys of Paradise and who promised them an eternity of the pleasures of which he had given them a foretaste, on condition that they assassinated all those he would name to them. There is only one religion in the world that has never been sullied by fanaticism, that of the Chinese men of letters. The schools of philosophers were not only free from this pest, they were its remedy; for the effect of philosophy is to make the soul tranquil, and fanaticism is incompatible with tranquility. If our holy religion has so often been corrupted by this infernal delirium, it is the madness of men which is at fault.

RELIGION

Tonight I was in a meditative mood. I was absorbed in the contemplation of nature; I admired the immensity, the movements, the harmony of those infinite globes which the vulgar do not know how to admire.

I admired still more the intelligence which directs these vast forces. I said to myself: "One must be blind not to be dazzled by this spectacle; one must be stupid not to recognize the author of it; one must be mad not to worship Him. What tribute of worship should I render Him? Should not this tribute be the same in the whole of space, since it is the same supreme power which reigns equally in all space? Should not a thinking being who dwells in a star in the Milky Way offer Him the same homage as the thinking being on this little globe where we are? Light is uniform for the star Sirius and for us; moral philosophy must be uniform. If a sentient, thinking animal in Sirius is born of a tender father and mother who have been occupied with his happiness, he owes them as much love and care as we owe to our parents. If someone in the Milky Way sees a needy cripple, if he can help him, and if he does not do so, he is guilty in the sight of all globes. Everywhere the heart has the same duties: on the steps of the throne of God, if He has a throne; and in the depth of the abyss, if He is an abyss."

I was plunged in these ideas when one of those genii who throng the interplanetary spaces came down to me. I recognized this aerial creature as one who had appeared to me on another occasion, to teach me how different God's judgments were from our own, and how a good action is preferable to an argument.

He transported me into a desert, covered with piles of bones; and between these heaps of dead men there were walks of evergreen trees, and at the end of each walk there was a tall man of august mien, who regarded these sad remains with pity.

"Alas! my archangel," said I, "where have you brought me?"

"To desolation," he answered.

"And who are these fine patriarchs whom I see sad and motionless at the end of these green walks? They seem to be weeping over this countless crowd of dead."

"You shall know, poor human creature," answered the genie from the interplanetary spaces. "But first of all you must weep."

He began with the first pile. "These," he said, "are the twenty-three thousand Jews who danced before a calf, with the twenty-four thousand who were killed while lying with Midianitish women. The number of those massacred for such errors and offenses amounts to nearly three hundred thousand."

"In the other walks are the bones of the Christians slaughtered by each other in metaphysical quarrels. They are divided into several heaps of four centuries each. One heap would have mounted right to the sky, so they had to be divided."

"What!" I cried. "Brothers have treated their brothers like this, and I have the misfortune to be of this brotherhood!"

"Here," said the spirit, "are the twelve million Americans killed in their native land because they had not been baptized."

"My God! why did you not leave these frightful bones to dry in the hemisphere where their bodies were born, and where they were consigned to so many different deaths? Why assemble here all these abominable monuments to barbarism and fanaticism?"

"To instruct you."

"Since you wish to instruct me," I said to the genie, "tell me if there have been peoples other than the Christians and the Jews in whom zeal and religion wretchedly transformed into fanaticism have inspired so many horrible cruelties."

"Yes," he said. "The Mohammedans were sullied with the same inhumanities, but rarely; and when one asked amman, pity, of them and offered them tribute, they were merciful. As for the other nations, there has not been a single one, from the beginning of the world, which has ever made a purely religious war. Follow me now." I followed him.

A little beyond these piles of dead men, we found other piles; they were composed of sacks of gold and silver, and each had its label: "Substance of the heretics massacred in the eighteenth century, the seventeenth, and the sixteenth." And so on in going back: "Gold and silver of Americans slaughtered," etc., etc. And all these piles were surmounted with crosses, mitres, croziers, and triple crowns studded with precious stones.

"What, my genie! Do you mean that these dead were piled up for the sake of their wealth?"

"Yes, my son."

I wept. And when, by my grief, I was worthy of being led to the end of the green walks, he led me there.

"Contemplate," he said, "the heroes of humanity who were the world's benefactors, and who were all united in banishing from the world, as far as they were able,

violence and rapine. Question them.”

I ran to the first of the band. He had a crown on his head, and a little censer in his hand. I humbly asked him his name. “I am Numa Pompilius,” he said to me. “I succeeded a brigand, and I had to govern brigands. I taught them virtue and the worship of God, but after me they forgot both more than once. I forbade that there should be any image in the temples, because the Deity which animates nature cannot be represented. During my reign the Romans had neither wars nor seditions, and my religion did nothing but good. All the neighboring peoples came to honor me at my funeral; and a unique honor it was.”

I kissed his hand, and I went to the second. He was a fine old man about a hundred years old, clad in a white robe. He put his middle finger on his mouth, and with the other hand he cast some beans behind him. I recognized Pythagoras. He assured me he had never had a golden thigh, and that he had never been a cock; but that he had governed the Crotoniates with as much justice as Numa governed the Romans, almost at the same time; and that this justice was the rarest and most necessary thing in the world. I learned that the Pythagoreans examined their consciences twice a day. The honest people! How far we are from them! But we, who have been nothing but assassins for thirteen hundred years, we call these wise men arrogant.

In order to please Pythagoras, I did not say a word to him, and I passed on to Zoroaster, who was occupied in concentrating the celestial fire in the focus of a concave mirror, in the middle of a hall with a hundred doors which all led to wisdom. (Zoroaster’s precepts are called doors, and are a hundred in number.) Over the principal door I read these words which are the sum of all moral philosophy, and which cut short all the disputes of the casuists: “When in doubt if an action is good or bad, refrain.”

“Certainly,” I said to my genie, “the barbarians who immolated all these victims had never read these beautiful words.”

We then saw Zaleucus, Thales, Anaximander, and all the sages who had sought truth and practiced virtue.

When we came to Socrates, I recognized him very quickly by his flat nose. “Well,” I said to him, “so you are one of the Almighty’s confidants! All the inhabitants of Europe, except the Turks and the Tartars of the Crimea, who know nothing, pronounce your name with respect. It is revered, loved, this great name, to the point that people have wanted to know those of your persecutors. Melitus and Anitus are known because of you, just as Ravallac is known because of Henry IV; but I know only this name of Anitus. I do not know precisely who was the scoundrel who calumniated you, and who succeeded in having you condemned to drink hemlock.”

“Since my adventure,” replied Socrates, “I have never thought about that man, but seeing that you make me remember it, I pity him. He was a wicked priest who secretly conducted a business in hides, a trade reputed shameful among us.

He sent his two children to my school. The other disciples taunted them with having a father who was a currier, and they were obliged to leave. The irritated father did not rest until he had stirred up all the priests and all the sophists against me. They persuaded the council of five hundred that I was an impious fellow who did not believe that the Moon, Mercury, and Mars were gods. Indeed, I used to think, as I think now, that there is only one God, master of all nature. The judges handed me over to the poisoner of the republic. He cut short my life by a few days: I died peacefully at the age of seventy, and since that time I have led a happy life with all these great men whom you see, and of whom I am the least."

After enjoying some time in conversation with Socrates, I went forward with my guide into a grove situated above the thickets where all the sages of antiquity seemed to be tasting sweet repose.

I saw a man of gentle, simple countenance, who seemed to me to be about thirty-five years old. From afar he cast compassionate glances on these piles of whitened bones, across which I had had to pass to reach the sages' abode. I was astonished to find his feet swollen and bleeding, his hands likewise, his side pierced, and his ribs flayed with whip cuts. "Good Heavens!" I said to him, "is it possible for a just man, a sage, to be in this state? I have just seen one who was treated in a very hateful way, but there is no comparison between his torture and yours. Wicked priests and wicked judges poisoned him. Were priests and judges your torturers?"

He answered with much courtesy: "Yes."

"And who were these monsters?"

"They were hypocrites."

"Ah! that says everything. I understand by this single word that they must have condemned you to death. Had you proved to them then, as Socrates did, that the Moon was not a goddess, and that Mercury was not a god?"

"No, these planets were not in question. My compatriots did not know what a planet is; they were all arrant ignoramuses. Their superstitions were quite different from those of the Greeks."

"You wanted to teach them a new religion, then?" "Not at all. I said to them simply: 'Love God with all your heart and your fellow creature as yourself, for that is man's whole duty.' Judge if this precept is not as old as the universe; judge if I brought them a new religion. I did not stop telling them that I had come not to destroy the law but to fulfill it. I observed all their rites; circumcised as they all were, baptized as were the most zealous among them. Like them I paid the Corban; I observed the Passover as they did, eating, standing up, a lamb cooked with lettuce. I and my friends went to pray in the temple; my friends even frequented this temple after my death. In a word, I fulfilled all their laws without a single exception."

“What! these wretches could not even reproach you with swerving from their laws?”

“No, not possibly.”

“Why then did they reduce you to the condition in which I now see you?”

“What do you expect me to say! They were very arrogant and selfish. They saw that I knew them for what they were; they knew that I was making the citizens acquainted with them; they were the stronger; they took away my life: and people like them will always do as much, if they can, to anyone who does them too much justice.”

“But did you say nothing, do nothing that could serve them as a pretext?”

“To the wicked everything serves as pretext.”

“Did you not say once that you were come not to bring peace, but a sword?”

“It is a copyist’s error. I told them that I brought peace and not a sword. I never wrote anything; what I said may have been changed without evil intention.”

“You therefore contributed in no way by your speeches, badly reported, badly interpreted, to these frightful piles of bones which I saw on my road in coming to consult you?”

“It is with horror only that I have seen those who have made themselves guilty of these murders.”

“And these monuments of power and wealth, of pride and avarice, these treasures, these ornaments, these signs of grandeur, which I have seen piled up on the road while I was seeking wisdom, do they come from you?”

“That is impossible. I and my followers lived in poverty and meanness: my grandeur was in virtue only.”

I was about to beg him to be so good as to tell me just who he was. My guide warned me to do nothing of the sort. He told me that I was not made to understand these sublime mysteries. But I did implore him to tell me in what true religion consisted.

“Have I not already told you? Love God and your fellow creature as yourself.”

“What! If one loves God, one can eat meat on Friday?”

“I always ate what was given me, for I was too poor to give anyone food.”

“In loving God, in being just, should one not be rather cautious not to confide all the adventures of one’s life to an unknown being?”

“That was always my practice.”

“Can I not, by doing good, dispense with making a pilgrimage to St. James of Compostella?”

“I have never been in that region.”

“Is it necessary for me to imprison myself in a retreat with fools?”

“As for me, I was always making little journeys from town to town.”

“Is it necessary for me to take sides either for the Greek Church or the Latin?”

“When I was in the world, I never differentiated between the Jew and the Samaritan.”

“Well, if that is so, I take you for my only master.” Then he made me a sign with his head which filled me with consolation. The vision disappeared, and a clear conscience stayed with me.

SECT

Every sect, of every kind, is a rallying point for doubt and error. Scotist, Thomist, Realist, Nominalist, Papist, Calvinist, Molinist, and Jansenist are only pseudonyms.

There are no sects in geometry. One does not speak of a Euclidean, an Archimedean. When the truth is evident, it is impossible for parties and factions to arise. There has never been a dispute as to whether there is daylight at noon. The branch of astronomy which determines the course of the stars and the return of eclipses being once known, there is no dispute among astronomers.

In England one does not say: “I am a Newtonian, a Lockian, a Halleyan.” Why? Those who have read cannot refuse their assent to the truths taught by these three great men. The more Newton is revered, the less do people style themselves Newtonians; this word supposes that there are anti-Newtonians in England. Maybe we still have a few Cartesians in France, but only because Descartes’ system is a tissue of erroneous and ridiculous speculations.

It is the same with the small number of matters of fact which are well established. The records of the Tower of London having been authentically gathered by Rymer, there are no Rymerians, because it occurs to no one to assail this collection. In it one finds neither contradictions, absurdities, nor prodigies; nothing which revolts the reason, nothing, consequently, which sectarians strive to maintain or upset by absurd arguments. Everyone agrees, therefore, that Rymer’s records are worthy of belief

You are a Mohammedan; therefore there are people who are not; therefore you might well be wrong.

What would be the true religion if Christianity did not exist? The religion in which there were no sects, the religion in which all minds were necessarily in agreement.

Well, to what dogma do all minds agree? To the worship of a God, and to honesty. All the philosophers of the world who have had a religion have said in all ages: "There is a God, and one must be just." There, then, is the universal religion established in all ages and throughout mankind. The point in which they all agree is therefore true, and the systems through which they differ are therefore false.

"My sect is the best," says a Brahmin to me. But, my friend, if your sect is good, it is necessary; for if it were not absolutely necessary you would admit to me that it was useless. If it is absolutely necessary, it is for all men. How, then, can it be that all men have not what is absolutely necessary to them? How is it possible for the rest of the world to laugh at you and your Brahma?

When Zoroaster, Hermes, Orpheus, Minos, and all the great men say: "Let us worship God, and let us be just," nobody laughs. But everyone hisses the man who claims that one cannot please God unless one is holding a cow's tail when one dies; or the man who wants one to have the end of one's prepuce cut off; or the man who consecrates crocodiles and onions; or the man who attaches eternal salvation to dead men's bones carried under one's shirt, or to a plenary indulgence which may be bought at Rome for two and a half sous.

Whence comes this universal competition in hisses and derision from one end of the world to the other? It is clear that the things at which everyone sneers are not very evidently true. What would we say of one of Sejanus's secretaries who dedicated to Petronius a bombastic book entitled: "The Truths of the Sibylline Oracles, Proved by the Facts"?

This secretary proves to you, first, that it was necessary for God to send on earth several sibyls one after the other; for He had no other means of teaching mankind. It is demonstrated that God spoke to these sibyls, for the word sibyl signifies God's counsel. They had to live a long time, for persons to whom God speaks should have this privilege, at the very least. They were twelve in number, for this number is sacred. They had certainly predicted all the events in the world, for Tarquinius Superbus bought three of their books from an old woman for a hundred crowns. "What incredulous fellow," adds the secretary, "will dare deny all these obvious facts which happened in a corner in the sight of the whole world? Who can deny the fulfillment of their prophecies? Has not Virgil himself quoted the predictions of the sibyls? If we have no first editions of the Sibylline Books, written at a time when people did not know how to read or write, have we not authentic copies? Impiety must be silent before such proofs." Thus did Houttevillus speak to Sejanus. He hoped to have a position as augur which would be worth an income of fifty thousand francs, and he had nothing.

"What my sect teaches is obscure, I admit it," says a fanatic; and it is because of this obscurity that it must be believed; for the sect itself says it is full of obscurities. My sect is extravagant, therefore it is divine; for how should what appears so mad have been embraced by so many peoples, if it were not divine?" It is precisely like the Koran, which the Sunnites say has an angel's face and

an animal's snout. Be not scandalized by the animal's snout, and worship the angel's face. Thus speaks this mad fellow. But a fanatic of another sect answers: "It is you who are the animal, and I who am the angel."

Well, who shall judge the case? Who shall decide between these two fanatics? Why, the reasonable, impartial man who is learned in a knowledge that is not that of words; the man free from prejudice and the lover of truth and justice—in short, the man who is not the foolish animal, and who does not think he is the angel.

Sect and error are synonymous. You are a Peripatetic and I a Platonist; we are therefore both wrong; for you combat Plato only because his fantasies have revolted you, while I am alienated from Aristotle only because it seems to me that he does not know what he is talking about. If one or the other had demonstrated the truth, there would be a sect no longer. To declare oneself for the opinion of one or the other is to take sides in a civil war. There are no sects in mathematics, in experimental physics. A man who examines the relations between a cone and a sphere is not of the sect of Archimedes: he who sees that the square of the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle is equal to the square of the two other sides is not of the sect of Pythagoras.

When you say that the blood circulates, that the air is heavy, that the sun's rays are pencils of seven refrangible rays, you are not either of the sect of Harvey, or the sect of Torricelli, or the sect of Newton; you merely agree with the truth as demonstrated by them, and the entire world will always be of your opinion.

This is the character of truth: it is of all time, it is for all men, it has only to show itself to be recognized, and one cannot argue against it. A long dispute means that both parties are wrong.

SUPERSTITION

The superstitious man is to the rogue what the slave is to the tyrant. Further, the superstitious man is governed by the fanatic and becomes a fanatic. Superstition born in paganism, and adopted by Judaism, invested the Christian Church from the earliest times. All the fathers of the Church, without exception, believed in the power of magic. The Church always condemned magic, but she always believed in it: she did not excommunicate sorcerers as madmen who were mistaken, but as men who were really in communication with the devil.

Today one half of Europe thinks that the other half has long been and still is superstitious. The Protestants regard the relics, the indulgences, the mortifications, the prayers for the dead, the holy water, and almost all the rites of the Roman Church, as evidences of superstitious dementia. Superstition, according to them, consists in taking useless practices for necessary practices. Among the

Roman Catholics there are some more enlightened than their ancestors, who have renounced many of these usages formerly considered sacred; and they defend themselves against the others who have retained them, by saying: "They are unimportant, and what is merely unimportant cannot be an evil."

It is difficult to set the limits of superstition. A Frenchman traveling in Italy finds almost everything superstitious, and he is right. The Archbishop of Canterbury maintains that the Archbishop of Paris is superstitious; the Presbyterians direct the same reproach against His Grace of Canterbury, and are in their turn treated as superstitious by the Quakers, who are the most superstitious of all in the eyes of other Christians.

In Christian societies, therefore, no one agrees as to what superstition is. The sect which seems to be the least attacked by this malady of the intelligence is that which has the fewest rites. But if, with few ceremonies, it is still strongly attached to an absurd belief, this absurd belief is equivalent alone to all the superstitious practices observed from the time of Simon the magician to that of Father Gauffridi.

It is therefore clear that it is the fundamentals of the religion of one sect which are considered as superstition by another sect.

The Moslems accuse all Christian societies of it, and are themselves accused. Who will judge this great matter? Will it be reason? But each sect claims to have reason on its side. It will therefore be force which will judge, while awaiting the time when reason can penetrate a sufficient number of heads to disarm force.

Up to what point can statecraft permit superstition to be destroyed? This is a very thorny question. It is like asking to what depth should one make an incision in a dropsical person, who may die under the operation. It is a matter for the doctor's discretion.

Can there exist a people free from all superstitious prejudices? This is equivalent to asking: Can there exist a nation of philosophers? It is said that there is no superstition in the magistracy of China. It is probable that some day none will remain in the magistracy of a few towns of Europe.

Then the magistrates will stop the superstition of the people from being dangerous. These magistrates' example will not enlighten the mob, but the leading citizens of the middle class will hold the mob in check. There is perhaps not a single riot, a single religious outrage in which the middle classes were not once involved; because these same middle classes were then the mob. But reason and time will have changed them. Their softened manners will soften those of the lowest and most savage populace. We have had striking examples of this in more than one country. In a word, less superstition, less fanaticism; and less fanaticism, less misery.

TOLERANCE

What is tolerance? It is the natural attribute of humanity. We are all formed of weakness and error: let us pardon reciprocally each other's folly. That is the first law of nature.

It is clear that the individual who persecutes a man, his brother, because he is not of the same opinion, is a monster. There is no difficulty here. But the government! But the magistrates! But the princes! How do they treat those whose religion is other than theirs? If they are powerful foreigners, it is certain that a prince will make an alliance with them. François I, most Christian, will unite with Mussulmans against Charles V, most Catholic. François I will give money to the Lutherans of Germany to support them in their revolt against the Emperor; but, in accordance with custom, he will start by having Lutherans burned at home. For political reasons he pays them in Saxony; for political reasons he burns them in Paris. But what happens? Persecutions make proselytes. Soon France will be full of new Protestants. At first they will let themselves be hanged, later they in their turn will hang. There will be civil wars, then will come St. Bartholomew's Eve, and this corner of the world will be worse than all that the ancients and moderns have ever told of hell.

Madmen, who have never been able to worship the God who made you! Miscreants, whom the examples of the learned Chinese, the Parsees, and all the sages have never been able to lead! Monsters, who need superstitions as crows' gizzards need carrion! It has been said before, and it must be said again: if you have two religions in your land, the two will cut each other's throats; but if you have thirty religions, they will dwell in peace. Look at the Great Turk. He governs Guebres, Banians, Greek Christians, Nestorians, Romans. The first who tried to stir up tumult would be impaled; and everyone is at peace.

Of all religions, the Christian is without doubt the one which should inspire tolerance most, although up to now the Christians have been the most intolerant of all men. The Christian Church was divided in its cradle, and was divided even in the persecutions which it sometimes endured under the first emperors. Often the martyr was regarded as an apostate by his brethren, and the Carpocratian Christian expired beneath the sword of the Roman executioners, excommunicated by the Ebionite Christian, while the Ebionite was anathema to the Sabellian.

This horrible discord, which has lasted for so many centuries, is a very striking lesson that we should pardon each other's errors. Discord is the great ill of mankind, and tolerance is the only remedy for it.

There is nobody who does not agree with this truth, whether he meditates soberly in his study, or peaceably examines the truth with his friends. Why then do the same men who in private advocate indulgence, kindness, and justice, vise in public with so much fury against these virtues? Why? Can it be that their own interest is their god, and that they sacrifice everything to this monster which they worship?

I possess a dignity and a power founded on ignorance and credulity; I walk on the heads of the men who lie prostrate at my feet; if they should rise and look me in the face, I am lost; I must bind them to the ground, therefore, with iron chains. Thus have reasoned the men whom centuries of bigotry have made powerful. They have other powerful men beneath them, and these have still others, who all enrich themselves with the spoils of the poor, grow fat on their blood, and laugh at their stupidity. They all detest tolerance, as partisans grown rich at the public expense fear to render their accounts, and as tyrants dread the word liberty. And then, to crown everything, they hire fanatics to cry at the top of their voices: "Respect my master's absurdities, tremble, pay, and keep your mouths shut."

It is thus that a great part of the world was long treated; but today when so many sects make a balance of power, what course shall we take with them? Every sect, as one knows, is a ground of error; there are no sects of geometers, algebraists, arithmeticians, because all the propositions of geometry, algebra, and arithmetic are true. In every other field of knowledge one may be deceived. What Thomist or Scotist theologian would dare say seriously that he is sure of his case?

If it were permitted to reason consistently in religious matters, it would be clear that we all ought to become Jews, because Jesus Christ our Savior was born a Jew, lived a Jew, died a Jew, and said expressly that he was accomplishing, that he was fulfilling the Jewish religion. But it is clearer still that we ought to be tolerant of one another, because we are all weak, inconsistent, liable to fickleness and error. Shall a reed laid low in the mud by the wind say to a fellow reed fallen in the opposite direction: "Crawl! as I crawl, wretch, or I shall petition that you be torn up by the roots and burned"?

TO FREDERICK WILLIAM, PRINCE OF PRUSSIA

Monseigneur, the royal family of Prussia has excellent reasons for not wishing the annihilation of the soul. It has more right than anyone to immortality.

It is very true that we do not know any too well what the soul is: no one has ever seen it. All that we do know is that the eternal Lord of nature has given us the power of thinking, and of distinguishing virtue. It is not proved that this faculty survives our death: but the contrary is not proved either. It is possible, doubtless, that God has given thought to a particle to which, after we are no more, He will still give the power of thought: there is no inconsistency in this idea.

In the midst of all the doubts which we have discussed for four thousand years in four thousand ways, the safest course is to do nothing against one's conscience. With this secret, we can enjoy life and have nothing to fear from death.

There are some charlatans who admit no doubts. We know nothing of first principles. It is surely very presumptuous to define God, the angels, spirits, and to pretend to know precisely why God made the world, when we do not know why we can move our arms at our pleasure.

Doubt is not a pleasant condition, but certainty is an absurd one.

What is most repellent in the *System of Nature* [of Holbach]—after the recipe to make eels from flour—is the audacity with which it decides that there is no God, without even having tried to prove the impossibility. There is some eloquence in the book: but much more rant, and no sort of proof. It is a pernicious work, alike for princes and people:

“Si *Dieu* n’existait pas, *il faudrait l’inventer*.” [If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him.]

But all nature cries aloud that He does exist: that there is a supreme intelligence, an immense power, an admirable order, and everything teaches us our own dependence on it.

From the depth of our profound ignorance, let us do our best: this is what I think, and what I have always thought, amid all the misery and follies inseparable from seventy-seven years of life.

Your Royal Highness has a noble career before you. I wish you, and dare prophesy for you, a happiness worthy of yourself and of your heart. I knew you when you were a child, monseigneur: I visited you in your sick room when you had smallpox: I feared for your life. Your father honored me with much goodness: you condescend to shower on me the same favors which are the honor of my old age, and the consolation of those sufferings which must shortly end it. I am, with deep respect, etc.

ON THE PRESBYTERIANS

The Church of England is confined almost to the kingdom whence it received its name, and to Ireland, for Presbyterianism is the established religion in Scotland. This Presbyterianism is directly the same with Calvinism as it was established in France and is now professed at Geneva. As the priests of this sect receive but very inconsiderable stipends from their churches, and consequently cannot emulate the splendid luxury of bishops, they exclaim very naturally against honors which they can never attain to. Figure to yourself the haughty Diogenes, trampling under foot the pride of Plato. The Scotch Presbyterians are not very unlike that proud though tattered reasoner. Diogenes did not use Alexander half so impertinently as these treated King Charles the Second; for when they took up arms in his cause, in opposition to Oliver, who had deceived them, they forced that poor monarch to undergo the hearing of three or four sermons every day; would not suffer him to play, reduced him to a state of penitence and

mortification; so that Charles soon grew sick of these pedants, and accordingly eloped from them with as much joy as a youth does from school.

A Church of England minister appears as another Cato in presence of a juvenile, sprightly French graduate, who bawls for a whole morning together in the divinity schools, and hums a song in chorus with ladies in the evening: But this Cato is a very spark when before a Scotch Presbyterian. The latter affects a serious gait, puts on a sour look, wears a vastly broad-brimmed hat, and a long cloak over a very short coat; preaches through the nose, and gives the name of the whore of Babylon to all churches where the ministers are so fortunate as to enjoy an annual revenue of five or six thousand pounds, and where the people are weak enough to suffer this and to give them the titles of my lord, your lordship, or your eminence.

These gentlemen, who have also some churches in England, introduced there the mode of grave and severe exhortations. To them is owing the sanctification of Sunday in the three kingdoms. People are there forbid to work or take any recreation on that day, in which the severity is twice as great as that of the Romish church. No operas, plays or concerts are allowed in London on Sundays; and even cards are so expressly forbid, that none but persons of quality and those we call the genteel play on that day; the rest of the nation go either to church, to the tavern, or to see their mistresses.

Though the Episcopal and Presbyterian sects are the two prevailing ones in Great Britain, yet all others are very welcome to come and settle in it, and live very sociably together, though most of their preachers hate one another almost as cordially as a Jansenist damns a Jesuit.

Take a view of the Royal Exchange in London, a place more venerable than many courts of justice, where the representatives of all nations meet for the benefit of mankind. There the Jew, the Mahometan, and the Christian transact together as though they all professed the same religion, and give the name of Infidel to none but bankrupts. There the Presbyterian confides in the Anabaptist, and the Churchman depends on the Quaker's word. At the breaking up of this pacific and free assembly, some withdraw to the synagogue, and others to take a glass. This man goes and is baptized in a great tub, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost: That man has his son's foreskin cut off, whilst a set of Hebrew words (quite unintelligible to him) are mumbled over his child. Others retire to their churches, and there wait for the inspiration of heaven with their hats on, and all are satisfied.

If one religion only were allowed in England, the government would very possibly become arbitrary; if there were but two, the people would cut one another's throats; but as there are such a multitude, they all live happy and in peace.