

“If there is a God ...”

Baron de Montesquieu

In his Persian Letters, published in 1721, Charles de Secondat, baron de la Brède et de Montesquieu (1689-1755), offers a penetrating critique of French life through imagined letters home from two Persians traveling in France. The following selections are from Letters 83 and 85.

If there is a God, my dear Rhedi, he must necessarily be just; for if he were not, he would be the most wicked and imperfect of all beings.

Justice is a true relation between two things: this relation is always the same, no matter who examines it, whether it be God, or an angel, or lastly, man himself

It is true that men do not always perceive these relations; often even when they do perceive them, they turn away from them, and their self-interest is what they perceive most clearly. Justice cries aloud, but her voice can hardly be heard above the tumult of the passions.

Men can commit unjust acts because it is to their advantage to do so and because they prefer their own contentment to that of others. They always act from selfish motives: no man is evil gratuitously: there must be a determining cause, and that cause is always selfishness.

But God cannot possibly commit an unjust act: once we assume that he perceives what is just he must of necessity act accordingly, for since he is self-sufficient and in need of nothing, he would otherwise be the most wicked of beings, since he has no selfish interests.

Thus if there were no God, we would still be obliged to venerate justice, that is, we should do everything possible to resemble that being of whom we have such an exalted notion and who, if he exists, would necessarily be just. Free though we might be from the yoke of religion, we should never be free from the bonds of equity.

That, Rhedi, is what makes me think that justice is eternal and does not depend on human conventions. And if it did depend on them, that would be a terrible fact that we should hide from ourselves.

We are surrounded by men stronger than we are: they can harm us in a thousand different ways; three times out of four, they can do it with impunity. What a relief for us to know that there is in the hearts of all men an inner principle fighting in our behalf and protecting us from their attempts.

Without that principle, we could live only in a state of constant alarm; we would walk among men as among lions; and we could never be assured for a moment of our goods, our honor, or our lives.

These thoughts always stir me up against those theologians who represent God as a being who makes tyrannical use of his power; who make him do things that we would not do for fear of offending him; who burden him with all the imperfections that he punishes us for: and represent him, quite contradictorily, sometimes as an evil being, sometimes as a being who hates evil and punishes it.

When a man looks within himself, what a satisfaction it is for him to find that his heart is just! This pleasure, no matter how austere, should delight him: he sees himself as far above those lacking in this quality as he is above tigers and bears. Yes, Rhedi, if I were always sure of following inviolably the justice that I perceive, I would consider myself the first among men.

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You know, Mirza, that a number of ministers of Shah-Soliman had formed the project of forcing all the Armenians in Persia to leave the realm or become Mohammedans, with the idea that our empire would be polluted as long as it kept these infidels in our midst.

That would have meant the end of the grandeur of Persia, if blind devotion had been heeded on this occasion.

It is not known why the project failed. Neither those who proposed it nor those who rejected it knew what the consequences thereof would have been: chance played the part of reason and policy and saved the empire from a risk greater than it could have run from the loss of a battle and the capture of two cities.

By proscribing the Armenians, the ministers were on the verge of destroying in a single day all the merchants and nearly all the artisans of the kingdom. I am sure that the great Shah-Abbas would have preferred to cut off his two arms rather than sign such an order, and that by sending to the Mogul and other kings of India his most industrious subjects, he would have believed he was giving away half of his States.

The persecutions that our zealous Mohammedans have inflicted upon the Parsees obliged a multitude of them to flee into India and deprived Persia of a population devoted to agriculture which alone was capable by dint of labor to overcome the sterility of our soil.

Religious devotees had only to make a second attempt and ruin industry; as a result of which the empire would have toppled, and with it, as a matter of course, the very religion that they had sought to strengthen.

All prejudice aside, I do not know, Mirza, if it is not a good thing to have several religions in a State.

It is notable that those who adhere to tolerated religions ordinarily render

more useful services to their country than do those who are members of the dominant religion, because, since they are kept from honored positions and can gain distinction only through opulence, they are led to acquire wealth by their toil and embrace the most arduous of society's tasks.

Besides, since all religions entertain socially useful precepts, it is good to have them zealously observed. And what is more apt than a multiplicity of religions to inspire zeal?

Rival religions grant each other nothing. Their jealousy is shared by their individual members: all are on their guard and are afraid of doing things that would dishonor their sect and expose it to the contempt and unpardonable censure of the opposite sect.

It has also always been observed that the introduction of a new sect into a State has been the surest means of correcting the abuses of the older sect.

In vain we say that it is not in the interests of the prince to tolerate several religions within his State: even if all the sects in the world should happen to be brought together, no harm would result, because there is not one of them which does not prescribe obedience and preach submission.

I confess that histories are replete with religious wars: but on close examination, it is apparent that they were caused, not by a multiplicity of religions, but by the spirit of intolerance that ran rife in the religion that considered itself dominant.

The cause was that spirit of proselytism which the Jews took over from the Egyptians and which passed from them, like a common epidemic disease, to Mohammedans and Christians.

It was indeed a kind of madness, the progress of which can be looked upon only as a total eclipse of human reason.

For even if it were not inhuman to afflict the consciences of other peoples, even if there were none of the evil results that are counted by the thousands, it would be madness even to consider it. The man who wants to make me change my religion surely does so only because he would not change his, even if forced: he thinks it strange, then, that I do not do something he would not do himself perhaps for the whole world.