

On Superstition and Tolerance

Pierre Bayle

The writings of the French Protestant scholar Pierre Bayle (1647- 1706) anticipated and inspired the philosophes, especially with respect to religion. These selections are from his Miscellaneous Thoughts on the Comet of 1680 (1682) and Philosophical Commentary on the Words of Jesus Christ, "Compel Them to Come In" (1686-1687).

Now let us undertake the task of considering whether or not the general agreement among ancients and moderns that comets are evil omens should bear much weight. Again I say, it is pure illusion to claim that a notion that has passed from one century to the next, from generation to generation, cannot be entirely false. If only we examine the causes of the establishment of certain opinions in the world about us, we readily see that nothing is less reasonable than such a claim. You will certainly grant me that it is easy to persuade the people of certain false opinions which are in accordance with the prejudices of childhood or the desires of the heart, as are all the so-called rules in regard to omens. That is all I ask, for that admission is enough to perpetuate such opinions forever; for except for a few philosophical minds, no one thinks of submitting to examination what is universally held to be true. We assume that the ancients once examined it and were sufficiently on their guard against error; and therefore we teach it in our turn to our children as infallible fact. If you remember, too, what I have said elsewhere about man's intellectual indolence and the pains that must be taken for thorough reconsideration, you will see that we will not say, with Minucius Felix, "Everything is uncertain in human affairs, but the more uncertain it is, the more reason to be astonished that some, disgusted with the exacting search for the truth, prefer rashly to embrace the first opinion that lies at hand, rather than take the time and the care that deep thought requires"; we should rather say, "The more uncertain everything is, the less reason we have to be astonished at such a solution." The author of the *Art of Thinking* observes very judiciously that most men decide to accept one notion rather than another because of certain superficial and extraneous traits which they consider to be more in conformity with truth than with falsehood and which are easily discernible; whereas solid and essential reasons which reveal truth are difficult to come by. Hence, since men are prone to follow the easier course, they almost always take the side on which these superficial traits are apparent.

It is a common occurrence to see people avoid marriage in the month of May, because it has been believed from time immemorial that May weddings bring

bad luck; and I have no doubt that this superstition, which came down to us from ancient Rome and was founded on the fact that the festival of evil spirits, or Lemuralia, was celebrated in May, will subsist among Christians until the end of time. For it will be kept alive in a family, if only it is remembered that some grandfather or uncle took such precautions. And the reasoning becomes invincible and all the more impressive when we see intelligent people observe the same practice. In fact many persons, not superstitious themselves, delay or speed up their marriage to avoid the month of May, because it is important that the belief should not be spread around that they have courted misfortune. In this society of ours, all precautions should be taken. A merchant can become truly unlucky just because people entertain the ridiculous idea that he is threatened with bad luck; for no one will be willing to extend him credit or associate in business with him. If anyone wanted to seek out all the reasons for popular misconceptions, it would be an unending task....

That man is a reasoning animal, we are all agreed; it is no less true that he almost never acts in accordance with his principles. He is well able, in speculative matters, to avoid drawing false conclusions, for in this field he sins much less through the ease with which he entertains false principles than through the false suppositions that he derives from them. But in questions of moral conduct, it is an entirely different matter. Almost never yielding to false principles and almost always retaining in his conscience ideas of natural equity, he nevertheless almost always concludes to the advantage of his unbridled desires. Tell me, please, how it happens that although there exists among men a prodigious diversity of opinion concerning the manner of serving God and living according to the laws of propriety, we see nonetheless that certain passions constantly hold sway in all countries and have done so through all ages; that ambition, avarice, envy, the desire for vengeance, indecency, all the crimes that satisfy these passions are everywhere apparent; that the Jew, the Mohammedan, the Turk, and the Moor, Christian and infidel, Indian and Tartar, continentals and islanders, noblemen and commoners, all these kinds of people who, in other respects, we might say have only their humanity in common, are so alike in respect to these passions that we would think they copy one another? How can all that be true unless we admit that the true principle of all our actions (I except those in whom the grace of the Holy Spirit is fully operative) is our temperament, our natural inclination to seek pleasure, the taste that we acquire for certain objects, the desire to please someone, a habit contracted in dealing with our friends, or some other disposition which arises from the depths of our natures, in whatever country we may be born, and with whatsoever knowledge our minds may be imbued?

That must be so, since the ancient heathen, overwhelmed with an unbelievable multitude of superstitions, perpetually busy appeasing the anger of their gods, terrified by an infinity of prodigies, imagining that the gods were dispensers of adversity and prosperity according to the lives that they had led, did not fail to commit all crimes imaginable. And if that were not so, how would it be possible that Christians, who know so clearly through a revelation upheld by so many miracles that they must renounce vice in order to be eternally happy and not to

be eternally damned; who have such excellent preachers to present to them in these matters the most vivid and pressing exhortations possible; who have all around them so many zealous and learned directors of conscience and so many books of devotion; how would it be possible, I say, that in the midst of all that, Christians could lead, as they do, the most sinful of lives? ...

The charge has sometimes been made against Christians that the principles of the Gospel are not suited to safeguarding the commonwealth, because they undermine courage and inspire horror for blood and all the violence of war...

Evangelical courage only makes us despise the insults of poverty, the persecution of tyrants, prisons, torture, and all the throes of martyrdom. It quite properly makes us brave with heroic patience the most inhuman rage of persecutors of the faith. It resigns us to the will of God in the most painful of maladies. In that consists the courage of the true Christian. That is enough, I confess, to convince infidels that our religion does not undermine courage and inspire cowardice. But that does not prevent them from being able to say with reason that if we take the word courage in its commonly accepted sense, the Gospel is not apt to foster it. It is understood that by a courageous man we mean a man who makes it a point of honor not to suffer the least insult, who avenges himself gloriously and at the peril of his life for the slightest offense given him; who loves war, seeks the most perilous occasions to dip his hands in the blood of enemies, who is ambitious and wants to shine above all other men. It would be completely nonsensical to say that the counsels and precepts of Jesus Christ inspire us with that spirit; for it is a notorious conviction among all who know the first elements of the Christian religion that it recommends above all else that we suffer insults, walk humbly, love our neighbor, seek peace, and render good for evil, and abstain from every semblance of violence. I defy all living men, no matter how expert they may be in the military arts, ever to make good soldiers of an army in which are found only men resolved to follow punctually all these maxims. The best that could be expected would be that they would not be afraid to die for their country and their God. But I leave it to those who know what war is to decide if that is sufficient to qualify as a good soldier and if men who want to succeed in that calling must not inflict all possible harm on the enemy, outguess him, take him by surprise, put him to the sword, bum his supplies, reduce him to starvation and destitution....

It may be said that if the principles of Christianity were truly followed, we would see no conqueror among Christians nor offensive war, and we would restrict ourselves to a defense against the invasions of infidels. That being so, how many nations in Europe would we see enjoying a profound peace for very long who because of that would be the least fit of all peoples in the world to wage war? It is therefore true that the spirit of our holy religion does not make us warlike: and yet there are no more warlike nations on the face of the earth than those which make a profession of Christianity....

We Christians daily improve upon the art of war by inventing an infinite number of machines to make sieges more deadly and horrible; and from us Christians

infidels learn to use better weapons. I know very well that we do not do that because we are Christians, but because we are more skillful than infidels: for if they were clever and valorous enough to wage war better than Christians they would do so without fail. Nevertheless I find here a very convincing argument to prove that in daily life we do not follow the principles of our religion, since I show that Christians employ all their knowledge and passions in improving upon the art of war, without the slightest hindrance from a knowledge of the Gospel in pursuing this cruel design.

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If a multiplicity of religions is harmful to the State, that is only because one religion will not tolerate the other but wants rather to swallow it up by dint of persecution. *Hinc prima mali labes*, that is where trouble begins. If each religion adopted the spirit of tolerance that I recommend, there would be the same concord in a state with ten religions as in a city in which different artisans and craftsmen mutually support one another. The most that could happen would be honest rivalry in outdoing one another in piety, good conduct and knowledge; each religion would take pride in proving its favored share of God's love by exhibiting a firmer attachment to moral conduct; all would boast of greater love for their country, if the sovereign protected them all and through his justice held them in balance. Such handsome emulation would give rise to innumerable blessings; consequently toleration is of all things the most conducive to the return of the golden age and the formation of a concert and harmony of a number of voices and instruments of different tones and notes as agreeable at the very least as the uniformity of a single voice. What then prevents this beautiful concert composed of such different voices and tones? It is only because one of two religions wants to exercise cruel tyranny over men's minds and force others to act against their conscience; because kings foment this unjust partiality and lend secular force to the furious and tumultuous desires of a populace of monks and clerics; in short the whole disorder springs not from toleration but from non-toleration....

It is impossible in our present condition to know with certainty whether or not what appears to us to be the truth (I am speaking of the particular truths of religion and not of the properties of numbers or the first principles of metaphysics or the demonstrations of geometry) is absolute truth; the best we can do is to be fully convinced that we hold to absolute truth, that we are right and other people are wrong, all very dubious indications of truth, since they can be found among pagans and the most damnable of heretics. It is therefore certain that there is no trustworthy indication which will enable us among our beliefs to distinguish the true from the false. This distinction cannot be deduced from evidence; for on the contrary everyone says that the truths of God's revealed word are profound mysteries which require us to surrender our intelligence in obedience to the Faith. This is not because of incomprehensibility, for what is more false and altogether incomprehensible than a squared circle, than an essentially vicious first principle, than God a father through carnal generation,

as Jupiter was among the pagans? Nor is it to satisfy our conscience, for a Papist is as satisfied with his religion, and a Turk and a Jew with theirs, as we are with ours. Nor is it because of the courage and zeal that belief inspires, for the falsest of religions have their martyrs, their incredible austerities, their spirit of proselytism which very often overcomes the charity of true believers, and their unshakable attachment to superstitious ceremonies. Nothing in short can assure a man of the distinction between truth and falsehood. Thus it is asking too much of him to hope that he can make this distinction. The best he can do is to judge certain questions under examination by their appearances, whether or not they seem true or false to him. He can then be asked to see to it that those that are true appear to him to be true; but whether he succeeds in this or whether the false seem to him to be true, he must follow his own persuasion....

This consideration, if it were carefully weighed and thoroughly meditated upon, would surely reveal the truth of what I am here claiming: which is that, in man's present condition, God is content to demand that he seek the truth as diligently as possible and when he thinks he has found it that he cherish it and make it the rule of his life. As everyone can see, this proves that we are obliged to have the same respect for presumptive as for real truth. Whence it follows that all the objections that can be brought to bear on the difficulty of examination disappear like idle phantoms, since each individual is surely capable of finding a meaning in what he reads or hears, and of feeling that that meaning is true; and thus his particular brand of truth is established. It is enough that every man consult sincerely and in good faith the light that God gives him and seize accordingly upon the idea that seems to him the most reasonable and the most conformable to God's will. In this way he is a true believer in respect to God, although through a flaw for which he cannot be blamed his thoughts may not be a faithful image of reality, just as a child is a true believer in taking for his father his mother's husband, of whom he is not the son. The important consideration is then to act virtuously; thus everyone should try as hard as he can to honor God through prompt obedience to moral precepts. In this respect, that is, in respect to the knowledge of our moral obligations, the light of revelation is so clear that few can mistake it if only they seek it in good faith....

Whence I conclude that ignorance founded on good faith is excusable in the most criminal of cases, such as robbery or adultery, and that thus ignorance in every domain is excusable, to the extent that a heretic of good faith or even an infidel will be punished by God only for evil acts that he has committed knowing well that they were evil. As for acts committed in all good conscience, a conscience, I say, that he has not himself maliciously stultified, I cannot be convinced that they constitute a crime....

Judging by our ideal of a man most accomplished in wisdom and justice, we believe that if, after leaving an order with his servants as he departed on a long journey he found upon his return that they understood it differently and that while they were all agreed that their master's will was their sole guide, they disagreed only on what that was, he would declare that they were all equally

respectful of his orders; but that some were more intelligent than others in their understanding of the real meaning of his instructions. Certainly, we would clearly and distinctly expect that to be his pronouncement; therefore Reason requires that God should declare likewise in regard to both true believers and conscientious heretics.