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Teaching by Contradictions: Montesquieu’s Subversion of Piety in *The Spirit of the Laws*

Timothy Brennan 

Abstract: Building on studies by Thomas L. Pangle and Robert C. Bartlett, this article contends that Montesquieu’s rhetorical moderation with respect to religion in *The Spirit of the Laws* serves a substantively radical project, that is, the gradual diminution of religious devotion through the spread of liberal-commercial civilization. Taking up the major passages of praise for religion in general and for Christianity in particular, I examine the strategy that allows Montesquieu to claim the mantle of moderation in spite of his radicalism on this crucial issue: allowing his prominently advertised positions to be undercut by his own historical observations and comparisons, and thus teaching by contradictions. I also argue that, notwithstanding his claim to be treating faith merely from a practical point of view, Montesquieu offers a theoretical challenge to revealed religion.

If Montesquieu stands for anything, he stands for moderation.¹ Toward the end of *The Spirit of the Laws* (*SL*), in fact, he claims to have written the

Timothy Brennan is a postdoctoral fellow in the Thomas Jefferson Center for Study of Core Texts and Ideas at the University of Texas at Austin, 158 W 21st St., Austin, Texas 78712, USA (timothy.brennan@austin.utexas.edu)

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¹See, e.g., Paul O. Carrese, *Democracy in Moderation: Montesquieu, Tocqueville, and Sustainable Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 22; Aurelian Craiutu, *A Virtue for Courageous Minds: Moderation in French Thought, 1748–1830* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 33; Alain Juppé, *Montesquieu: Le moderne* (Paris: Perrin/Grasset, 1999), 260; Dennis C. Rasmussen, *The Pragmatic Enlightenment: Recovering the Liberalism of Hume, Smith, Montesquieu, and Voltaire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 297; Diana J. Schaub, “Of Believers and Barbarians: Montesquieu’s Enlightened Toleration,” in *Early Modern Skepticism*

whole work “only to prove” that “the spirit of moderation should be that of the legislator” (29.1).² Thus, although he deems it “not a matter of indifference” that “the people be enlightened” (Preface), and although he praises the curing of “prejudices” (15.3, 20.1), strong arguments have been made that he strives to insulate religious faith from the crusading atheism of less restrained philosophers and intellectuals, in accordance with his master principle of moderation.

On this reading, Montesquieu holds that religious coercion is a deplorable kind of extremism, and that certain (extreme) religious doctrines are pernicious in their effects; but he recognizes that the promotion of irreligion is also a sort of foolish extremism. After all, he points out that religion in general protects freedom under monarchical government, curbs despotism, allows for the tempering of punishments, and encourages morals that are good for civic life. And he stresses that Christianity in particular serves the common good by educating people about their duties, by supporting the rights of natural defense, by fostering a sense of gratitude to the homeland, and above all by making political life more humane. Montesquieu therefore seems to reject both religious and antireligious extremism.

In Keegan Callanan's view, for instance, Montesquieu teaches that “religious faith in the supernatural—and not merely ‘natural religion’ or ‘the religion of reason’”—can “produce a complementary source of mores and habits conducive to the preservation of genuinely free and moderate states.”³ Likewise, Paul O. Carrese claims that Montesquieu insists “upon the mutual utility of religion and politics properly understood.”⁴ Sharon R. Krause says that Montesquieu “regards religion as a crucial check on sovereign power.”⁵ Rebecca E. Kingston argues that he places “great faith” in the ability of religion “to constrain the will of the despotic prince.”⁶

and the Origins of Toleration, ed. Alan Levine (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 1999), 243; Céline Spector, *Montesquieu: Pouvoirs, richesses, et sociétés* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2004), 197–99. Cf. Andrea Radasanu, “Montesquieu on Moderation, Monarchy, and Reform,” *History of Political Thought* 31, no. 2 (2010): 285–86.

² Parenthetical references in the main text are to the book, chapter, and (where necessary) page in *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. Anne M. Cohler, Basia C. Miller, and Harold S. Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

³ Keegan Callanan, *Montesquieu's Liberalism and the Problem of Universal Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 188. See also Juppé, *Montesquieu*, 249–50; Thomas L. Pangle, *Montesquieu's Philosophy of Liberalism: A Commentary on “The Spirit of the Laws”* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 252, 266.

⁴ Carrese, *Democracy in Moderation*, 130.

⁵ Sharon R. Krause, *Liberalism with Honor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 203n29.

⁶ Rebecca E. Kingston, “Montesquieu on Religion and the Question of Toleration,” in *Montesquieu's Science of Politics: Essays on “The Spirit of the Laws,”* ed. David W.

Ronald F. Thiemann compares Montesquieu's position to that of John Rawls in *Political Liberalism*: "religious laws can provide support for the general laws. . . even if they do not provide the ultimate warrant."⁷ Vickie B. Sullivan argues that Montesquieu believes Christianity in particular "can serve a nondespotic politics."⁸ Dennis C. Rasmussen suggests that Montesquieu "offers a generally positive assessment of the political effects of Christianity."⁹ And, according to Joshua Bandoch, *SL* shows that "Christianity softens harsh mores" and "fosters desirable values among rulers like gentleness and moderation."¹⁰

This article, by contrast, argues that Montesquieu's rhetorical moderation with respect to religion in general and Christianity in particular serves a substantively radical project, namely the diffusion of "the spirit of commerce" that "must reign alone and not be crossed by another" (5.6.48). To be sure, Montesquieu's moderation is not simply rhetorical: he favors moderate government, moderated punishments, and moderation in the pace of reforms, for example. But his prominent expressions of appreciation for the social-political effects of faith in *SL* are all contradicted elsewhere in the same work, sometimes in the same passage. Thus, in an especially revealing chapter, he suggests that his program of philosophic and commercial enlightenment is intended to bring nations to a condition of "half-heartedness" (*tiédeur*) with respect to religion (25.12).

The present article is partly a defense and elaboration of this interpretation of 25.12, an interpretation that has already been sketched by several scholars,¹¹ but that has come under fire from Callanan in particular. Callanan rejects the radically antireligious interpretation of 25.12 in large part because it "ignores

Carrithers, Michael A. Mosher, and Paul A. Rahe (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 386.

⁷Ronald F. Thiemann, "Montesquieu and the Future of Liberalism," in *Montesquieu and His Legacy*, ed. Rebecca E. Kingston (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 277.

⁸Vickie B. Sullivan, *Montesquieu and the Despotism of Europe: An Interpretation of "The Spirit of the Laws"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 85.

⁹Rasmussen, *Pragmatic Enlightenment*, 176.

¹⁰Joshua Bandoch, "Montesquieu's Selective Religious Intolerance in *Of the Spirit of the Laws*," *Political Studies* 64, no. 2 (2016): 356.

¹¹Thomas L. Pangle, *The Theological Basis of Liberal Modernity in Montesquieu's "Spirit of the Laws"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 102–3; Robert C. Bartlett, "On the Politics of Faith and Reason: The Project of Enlightenment in Pierre Bayle and Montesquieu," *Journal of Politics* 63, no. 1 (2001): 18; Radasanu, "Montesquieu on Moderation," 290. Cf. Clifford Orwin, "'For Which Human Nature Can Never Be Too Grateful': Montesquieu as the Heir of Christianity," in *Recovering Reason: Essays in Honor of Thomas L. Pangle*, ed. Timothy Burns (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), 27; Carrese, *Democracy in Moderation*, 130; Bandoch, "Selective Religious Intolerance," 363–64; Schaub, "Of Believers," 231–33.

or downplays Montesquieu's view that religion—including revealed religion—can and does confer considerable political benefits in Europe, even in politically free and moderate states.¹² Montesquieu “sees significant political advantages in traditional religion” and “does not welcome the eradication or enervation of religious belief.”¹³ Although I disagree with Callanan on this question, I believe he is right that those who regard Montesquieu as an enemy of religion have not adequately accounted for the major passages of praise for religion in *SL*. This article aims to remedy that problem.

Additionally, the article examines the rhetorical strategy that allows Montesquieu to claim the mantle of moderation in spite of his radicalism on this crucial issue: allowing his official positions to be undercut by his own historical observations and comparisons. Although scholars have commented helpfully on Montesquieu's rhetoric,¹⁴ this particular strategy has not been scrutinized, despite the fact that Montesquieu himself drew attention to it. In response to a critic of *SL* who had accused him of repeatedly contradicting himself, he suggested not only that some of his apparent contradictions were merely apparent, but also that there were genuine contradictions that he had already “seen.” In other words, these contradictions were not unintentional slips. In a “systematic” work, he explained, it is quite possible that some of the wheels “turn in opposite directions” but that they nonetheless “combine together for the proposed purpose.”¹⁵

Montesquieu's metaphor suggests not that every passage is consistent with every other—some wheels turn in opposite directions—but that every passage is meant to contribute to a general purpose. Reflecting on this image, Thomas L. Pangle suggests that “the greatest contradiction in *The Spirit of the Laws* is that between Montesquieu's apparent espousal of the virtuous republics of antiquity and his espousal of commercial England.”¹⁶ As Pangle shows, Montesquieu does present at least two very different peaks of political life. But it is not clear that this is a genuine contradiction rather than a reflection on different historical circumstances, as Callanan suggests.¹⁷ Callanan himself argues that “the two great cogs in the machine of Montesquieu's political philosophy” are liberalism and political particularism.¹⁸ But this too is problematic, since his argument is that Montesquieu's liberalism pulls in the same direction as his political particularism; it thus fails to explain Montesquieu's metaphor of wheels turning in

¹²Callanan, *Montesquieu's Liberalism*, 176–77.

¹³*Ibid.*, 178.

¹⁴E.g., Pangle, *Montesquieu's Philosophy*, 11–19; Callanan, *Montesquieu's Liberalism*, 196–99.

¹⁵Montesquieu, *My Thoughts*, trans. Henry C. Clark (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2012), #2092. This metaphor is highlighted also by Callanan, *Montesquieu's Liberalism*, 259; and Pangle, *Montesquieu's Philosophy*, 13.

¹⁶Pangle, *Montesquieu's Philosophy*, 19.

¹⁷Callanan, *Montesquieu's Liberalism*, 54.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 259.

opposite directions. By identifying a number of contradictions in the treatment of religion in *SL*, I offer a different interpretation of what Montesquieu had in mind.

Finally, I argue that Montesquieu's analysis of the social-political effects of religion is connected to his skepticism about the truth of Christianity in particular. Many scholars have commented on the coolly down-to-earth, pragmatic character of Montesquieu's inquiry into religion in *SL*.¹⁹ His declared position is that he examines the various religions merely as social-political influences, without any consideration of their truth or falsity. At the same time, somewhat jarringly, he presents himself as a believer for whom Christianity is "the greatest good men can give and receive" (24.1). In his *Defense of the Spirit of the Laws*, he says that the work in question has evidently been produced by "a writer who not only believes the Christian religion but loves it."²⁰

According to Callanan, Sullivan, and Bandoch, Montesquieu should be taken at his word—if not when he calls Christianity the greatest good, at least when he claims to be refraining from judgment about the truth of the various religions.²¹ But since the latter claim (strict neutrality concerning metaphysical truth) is in tension with the former (grateful affirmation of the religion of Christ), Pangle and Robert C. Bartlett have both suggested that the very willingness to engage in a detached cost-benefit analysis of Christianity—as just one among the great world religions—is a mark of Montesquieu's underlying skepticism.²² On Bartlett's reading, Montesquieu's program of liberalism and commerce is aimed ultimately at "distracting citizens from their awareness of, and hence from reflecting on, their mortality," in order to wean them away from religion as such.²³ And on Pangle's still more radical account, Montesquieu's deepest goal is to provide a refutation of Christianity *ad oculos*, by contributing to the perduring satisfaction of a secure, prosperous, and free civilization in which "God's voice gradually ceases to be heard by human beings."²⁴

But in either case, as Bartlett and Pangle both stress, Montesquieu would be presupposing the untruth of Christianity; his skepticism would be dogmatic.²⁵

¹⁹Bandoch, "Selective Religious Intolerance," 353–54; Bartlett, "Politics of Faith," 24; Callanan, *Montesquieu's Liberalism*, 195; Schaub, "Of Believers," 235; Sullivan, *Despotic Ideas*, 84–85.

²⁰Montesquieu, *Défense de l'Esprit des lois*, in *Ceuvres complètes de Montesquieu*, ed. Roger Cailliois, vol. 2 (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1951), 1128.

²¹Bandoch, "Selective Religious Intolerance," 353–54; Callanan, *Montesquieu's Liberalism*, 195; Sullivan, *Despotic Ideas*, 84–85.

²²Bartlett, "Politics of Faith," 24; Pangle, *Theological Basis*, 106–7. See also Schaub, "Of Believers," 235.

²³Bartlett, "Politics of Faith," 25. See also Radasanu, "Montesquieu on Moderation," 290; Pangle, *Montesquieu's Liberalism*, 256.

²⁴Pangle, *Theological Basis*, 103.

²⁵Pangle allows that Montesquieu recognizes the questionable character of this kind of atheism (*Theological Basis*, 5, 129), but he suggests that Montesquieu's refutation *ad oculos* is intended to place it on a firm footing.

Even on Pangle's reading, the theoretical challenge to Christianity rests on a centuries-long gambit whose outcome Montesquieu cannot possibly live to see, a strategy that can therefore scarcely ground his skepticism. Indeed, it is not altogether clear that the existence of a world in which religion had disappeared as a living force would decisively refute Christianity, since the Bible admits that faith can be stifled, especially by excessive concern for money (e.g., Matthew 6:24; Ezekiel 28:16).²⁶

As a supplement to the exegeses offered by Pangle and Bartlett, then, I argue that Montesquieu's inquiry into the effects of Christianity—its supposedly unparalleled contributions to the common good both of European societies and of the human race as a whole—is precisely what grounds his skepticism. Montesquieu looks at the world from the perspective of a pious believer, in whose eyes Christianity must (as God-given) be the greatest gift to humankind, and finds that the religion has failed to live up to that very high promise. Paradoxically, it is just when Montesquieu presents himself at his least detached and most pious that he poses his sharpest theoretical challenge to the Christian religion. But his skepticism rests on historical observations and comparisons, not predictions.

Part 1 begins by taking up Montesquieu's main defenses of religion in general—that it is (i) a bulwark of freedom under monarchy, (ii) a curb on despotism, (iii) a precondition for gentle punishments, and (iv) a necessary guarantor of good morals—and showing that each is contradicted in the text of *SL* itself. Part 2 examines his main defenses of Christianity in particular—that it has been (i) a salutary civic influence and (ii) responsible for a historical movement toward greater humanity—and shows that they, too, are contradicted. In light of these contradictions, part 3 argues that Montesquieu engages not merely in a practical inquiry into the effects of Christianity but also a theoretical inquiry into its truth: when he dons the garb of a pious Christian, he does so in order to put Christianity to a test (whether it has in fact proved to be a great good for humankind), one that it ultimately fails. I turn in part 4 to the much-discussed passage in which Montesquieu speaks of the surest way to “attack” a religion (25.12), arguing that he has in mind the weakening of religion as such, as both Pangle and Bartlett say, not merely the replacement of one religion by another, as Callanan maintains.

1. Montesquieu's Four Defenses of Religion

(i) As a Bulwark of Freedom under Monarchy

Montesquieu's first putative defense of religion in general is that it protects liberty under monarchical government. Monarchies are distinguished from despotisms by the existence of “intermediate, subordinate, and dependent

²⁶Cf. Pangle, *Theological Basis*, 6, 102–3, 108, 129.

powers" (2.4.17), and among those powers might be a strong clergy. Admittedly, Montesquieu insists far less on the importance of the clergy than on that of the nobility; ecclesiastical establishments are at most helpful auxiliaries, not indispensable bulwarks of freedom. Still, clerical authority is useful as an additional check on arbitrary power in monarchies, "especially in those tending to despotism," such as Spain and Portugal (2.4.18). Thus the weakening of the clergy in England seems to be a seriously dangerous mistake: because the English "have removed all the intermediate powers that formed their monarchy," they "would be one of the most enslaved peoples on earth" if they ever lost their liberty (2.4.18–19).

Yet, given Montesquieu's treatment of Spain, Portugal, and England elsewhere in *SL*, these examples hardly support the official connection between religion and freedom under monarchy. For his attitude toward the governments of Spain and Portugal turns out to be one of relentless disparagement, not to say outright hostility. Indeed, he depicts them as "tending to despotism" above all in their ecclesiastical zeal (e.g., 4.6, 25.13, 26.22). Conversely, he presents England as the very mirror of liberty, the state in which the executive is better constrained than anywhere else, and his prime example of a country where "laws rather than men" govern (11.5–6, 14.13.242).

This is not to imply that England is Montesquieu's only model, any more than that Spain and Portugal are his only anti-models.²⁷ Even with respect to monarchical France, however, Montesquieu nominates aristocratic honor rather than faith as the essential principle of citizenship. And, as Krause stresses, the code of honor "is secular, not religious."²⁸ Hence Montesquieu's assertion that it would be "ridiculous" to "cite the laws of religion to a courtier" (3.10.30), and his remark that honor "extends or limits" the duties that come from religion "according to its fancy" (4.2.33).

Nor is it clear that Montesquieu regards Catholic France as a genuine monarchy. He does not mention his own country in his discussions of the positive relation between religion and freedom under monarchy. He does, however, refer to the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre of 1572 in order to praise the sense of honor that impelled the Viscount of Orte to refuse Charles IX's order to murder the Huguenots (4.2.33). But that order, inspired precisely by religion, was of course not generally refused; the viscount was the noble exception. Likewise, Montesquieu illustrates the pernicious effects of the "idea of avenging the divinity" by the flaying of a Jew in medieval Provence (12.4.190), just as he illustrates the need for moderation in accusations by the scapegoating of Jews under the reign of Philip V (12.5.193). Thus he implicitly questions the relation between religion and liberty even in France. After all, *SL* was published in the shadow of Louis XIV's anti-

²⁷On this point, see Annelien de Dijn, "Was Montesquieu a Liberal Republican?," *Review of Politics* 76, no. 1 (2014): 21–41; Callanan, *Montesquieu's Liberalism*, 102–45; Carrese, *Democracy in Moderation*, 48.

²⁸Krause, *Liberalism with Honor*, 42.

Protestant Edict of Fontainebleau, which, as Clifford Orwin points out, "had differed from the Inquisition only in degree."²⁹

In fact Montesquieu's suggestion is that France's drift toward despotism is bound up with its religiosity. Under despotism, he says, "the prince is not assumed to be a man" (3.10.30).³⁰ The obedience of despotic subjects is gained not simply by threats and mechanical habituation: despotic education "is reduced to putting fear in the heart and *in teaching the spirit a few very simple religious principles*" (4.3.34, emphasis added). Thus when Montesquieu links the training of domesticated animals and the training of people under despotism, he nonetheless makes a distinction between the beasts, stamped with "two or three impulses [*mouvements*]," and the human subjects of despotism, indoctrinated with "two or three ideas [*idées*]" (5.14.59). In despotic states, "religion has *more* influence than in any other" (5.14.61, emphasis added).

Here Montesquieu confines himself to discussing "the astonishing respect they have for their prince" in Islamic countries, respect they "derive from religion" (5.14.61). He says nothing about French Catholics. Nonetheless, having first presented religion as a mainstay of freedom in monarchical states, he now depicts it as the key to the overwhelming fear required by despotism: "it is a fear added to a fear" (5.14.61). The fear that underlies despotism is not, then, simply fear of punishment by the government.³¹ After all, despotic governments as Montesquieu understands them are concerned with terrorizing mainly high-ranking officials and the upper classes, whereas the fear of God extends to all.

Montesquieu does not apply this insight explicitly to the French situation. But, as Sullivan notes, he does offer "particularly harsh" criticisms of the French Catholic Cardinal Richelieu, criticisms "which explicitly link the aims of this minister and author to despotism."³² Moreover, in a chapter placed discreetly in the middle of book 18, far away from Montesquieu's explicit references to the French government, he suddenly refers to a despotic ruler who claims to be linked by birth with the divinized sun. Because of this link, we are told, the "savages" of "Louisiana"—a name inspired by another sun king—obey the despot slavishly, despite their natural propensity for liberty. It is in this context that Montesquieu declares, "The prejudices of superstition are greater than all other prejudices" (18.18).

Now it is possible that he means to draw a line here between superstition and religion, and that he does not mean to implicate Christian Europe, the

²⁹Orwin, "Human Nature," 277.

³⁰"[Louis XIV's] glowing descriptions of kings as quasi-divine beings was . . . not at all unusual" (Paul W. Fox, "Louis XIV and the Theories of Absolutism and Divine Right," *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science* 26, no. 1 [1960]: 141). On the Roman and French context, see Sullivan, *Despotic Ideas*, 118–22.

³¹Cf. Sullivan, *Despotic Ideas*, 65.

³²*Ibid.*, 52.

connotations of “Louisiana” being purely accidental. But then it would be hard to explain his declaration in the Preface that he would consider himself “the happiest of mortals” if he could “make it so that men were able to cure themselves of their prejudices” (xliv). That is, if a prime objective of *SL* is the curing of prejudices, and if the prejudices of “superstition” are the very greatest, surely “superstition” has something to do with the political problem that hangs over the whole work, the problem of despotism in modern Europe, and not merely despotism in the American wilderness. This inference is supported by a notebook entry headed “DESPOTIC GOVERNMENTS,” which declares, “It is only by dint of philosophy that a sensible man can support them, and *by dint of prejudice* that a people can bear them.”³³ As Kingston has written, in ancien-régime France “the king was held to be directly appointed by and accountable to God. Called the Most Christian King, he was deemed by official doctrine to be a representative of God on earth and participated in the sacredness of the divine.”³⁴

Thus a question mark hangs over Montesquieu’s quarrel with Pierre Bayle. “M. Bayle,” he writes, “claims to have proven that it is better to be an atheist than an idolater; that is, in other terms, it is less dangerous to have no religion at all than to have a bad one.” Montesquieu vehemently disagrees: “From the idea that he [God] is not, follows the idea of our independence [*indépendance*] or, if we cannot have this idea, that of our rebellion [*révolte*]” (24.2.460). This certainly seems to be deprecation of Bayle.³⁵ But are the ideas of independence and rebellion really so destructive in comparison with the quintessentially despotic idea of divinely ordained submission?³⁶ Montesquieu himself, we have seen, praises the willingness to resist the orders of kings. And, soon after his apparent attack on Bayle, he notes that republicanism has taken root in northern Europe because of a certain “spirit of independence [*indépendance*] and liberty” (24.5). This “independence” is linked by Montesquieu with Protestantism; but it probably did not escape his attention that he had linked it with atheism only a few pages before. Indeed, as we will see, there are reasons to conclude that for Montesquieu the independence of Bayle’s society of atheists, whether monarchical or republican, would be healthier than the independence of Protestants.³⁷

³³Montesquieu, *Thoughts*, #885, emphasis added.

³⁴Kingston, “Montesquieu on Religion,” 382.

³⁵Callanan, *Montesquieu’s Liberalism*, 195; Schaub, “Of Believers,” 233; Bartlett, “Politics of Faith,” 14; Pangle, *Montesquieu’s Philosophy*, 252.

³⁶There is “considerable evidence,” notes Schaub in another context, that Montesquieu “does not disapprove” of the “independent streak” in human nature (“Of Believers,” 232). In every other instance in which Montesquieu speaks of “rebellion” (*révolte*) in *SL*, he refers to resistance to despots or potential despots (see 10.2, 12.12, 15.13, 21.22, 23.29, 30.11, 31.19).

³⁷See the section “Christianity as a Salutory Civic Influence” below.

(ii) As a Curb on Despotism

Still, if religion cannot reliably shore up freedom under monarchical governments, and is not even required to do so, perhaps it can at least moderate the behavior of despots. Montesquieu says that in a despotism religion is the "one thing with which one can sometimes counter the prince's will" (3.10.29–30). And, in his attack on Bayle's notorious argument that atheism is politically benign, he writes, "Even if it were useless for subjects to have a religion, it would not be useless for princes to have one and to whiten with foam the only bridle that can hold those who fear no human laws" (24.2.460).

Yet, with respect to the first of these claims, Montesquieu's own supporting example again undercuts his official position: "One will forsake one's father, even kill him, if the prince orders it, but one will not drink wine if the prince wants it and orders it" (3.10.30). In other words, whereas a true believer would not be willing to violate a religious stricture against consuming alcohol, if ordered to do so by a despot, the same believer might well be willing to denounce or even murder his father, under the same circumstances. This illustrates a problem that Montesquieu discusses elsewhere, with respect to the Tartars of Genghis Khan, "for whom it was a sin and even a capital crime to put a knife into the fire, to lean on a whip, to beat a horse with his bridle, or to break one bone with another," but who "believed there was no sin in violating faith, ravishing the goods of others, injuring a man, or killing" (24.14.468–69). The lesson Montesquieu draws is one that bears on virtually all religions: "laws that cause what is indifferent [*ce qui est indifférent*] to be regarded as necessary [*nécessaire*] have the drawback of causing what is necessary to be considered as indifferent" (24.14.469). By "what is indifferent," Montesquieu apparently means the very broad class of things that are morally or politically indifferent according to the lights of unassisted reason (consuming wine, putting a knife into fire, etc.), as distinct from the lights of revelation.³⁸ By "what is necessary," he apparently means the much smaller class of things that are morally or politically necessary according to the lights of unassisted reason (refraining from murder and fraud, etc.). Later he connects the problem to Christianity: the Frankish kings rigorously avoided sacrilegious acts, but "committed, both in anger and in cold blood, all sorts of crimes and injustices because they did not see the hand of the divinity so present in these crimes and these injustices" (31.2.673).

As for the supposedly intolerable risk of a despotic authority unconstrained by fear of God, this too is called into question. Indeed, just eight chapters after censuring Bayle's heedlessness to that risk, Montesquieu says that the various sects of ancient philosophy "could be considered as kinds of religion," and asserts that Stoic philosophy "alone" was capable of making "citizens,"

³⁸Compare Locke on "indifferent things" in *A Letter concerning Toleration* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1983), 39ff.

“great men,” and “great emperors” (24.10.465–66). With flabbergasting brashness, he claims that there “has never been one”—that is, a religion—“whose principles were more worthy of men and more appropriate for forming good men,” and hence that “if I could for a moment cease to think that I am a Christian, I would not be able to keep myself from numbering the destruction of Zeno’s sect among the misfortunes of human kind” (24.10.465–66).³⁹ And despite speaking of “the horror of atheism” in his confrontation with Bayle (24.2.460), his *Defense of the Spirit of the Laws* makes clear that these exemplary Stoic rulers “were atheists.”⁴⁰

Further, by the time he takes up Bayle on atheism, Montesquieu has already presented China as an unusually “mild or reasonable despotism,”⁴¹ and the Chinese rulers’ irreligiosity appears to be one of the principal causes of their reasonableness: “[A prince in China] will not feel, as our princes do, that if he governs badly, he will be less happy *in the next life*, less powerful and less rich in this one; he will know that, if his government is not good, he will lose his empire and his life” (8.21.128, emphasis added).⁴² The worldliness of Chinese despots contributes to their self-restraint. When Montesquieu discusses the importance of traditional “rites” in restraining China’s rulers, therefore, he explicitly attributes the efficacy of those rites to the fact that they are “in no way spiritual but are simply rules of common practice” (19.17).

(iii) *As a Precondition for Gentle Punishments*

Still, even if religion turns out not to be necessary for the moderation of despots, Montesquieu seems to affirm that it is a precondition for the moderation of criminal punishments. Without belief in the afterlife, he seems to suggest, criminal punishments must be severe. Thus he notes that “in Japan, as the dominant religion has almost no dogmas and proposes neither paradise nor hell, the laws, in order to supplement it, have been made with an extraordinary severity and have been executed with an

³⁹Elsewhere Montesquieu describes Marcus Aurelius’s reign as “happy and tranquil,” and Julian the Apostate is presented as a model ruler (*Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline*, trans. David Lowenthal [Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1965], 151, 161). The Christian emperor Justinian is presented as unusually harsh (*Considerations*, 191).

⁴⁰Montesquieu, *Défense*, 1136.

⁴¹Pangle, *Theological Basis*, 111.

⁴²On the reputation of Chinese leaders for atheism, see Locke: “Even the Jesuits themselves, the great encomiasts of the Chinese, do all to a man agree, and will convince us that the sect of the literati, or learned, keeping to the old religion of China, and the ruling party there, are all of them atheists” (John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* [London: Rivington, 1824], 1.4.8). Montesquieu’s own knowledge of China was drawn from the Jesuits.

extraordinary punctiliousness" (24.14.468).⁴³ And if this were generalizable, it would surely count for Montesquieu as a compelling reason to preserve and defend faith, since the tempering of criminal punishments is central to his entire project. The correct means of rendering criminal justice is "the one thing in the world that it is most important for men to know" (6.2.74).⁴⁴

But shortly after the above-mentioned passage on Japan, Montesquieu goes on to observe: "The religion of Confucius denies the immortality of the soul, and the sect of Zeno [the Stoic sect] does not believe in it. Who would say it? From their bad principles these two sects drew consequences that were not just, but were admirable for society" (24.19.473). No assertion is made that criminal punishments must be harsh in a society of Confucians or atheistic Stoics. Indeed, when Montesquieu praises the Christian teaching on the immortality of the soul, he praises it not as good generally but as good relative to other doctrines of immortality. And it is relatively good not because it allows for the tempering of criminal punishments but because it avoids the idea that in the next life the individual will have the same passions as before, an idea Montesquieu thinks has a tendency to inspire suicide (24.19.473).⁴⁵

Thus he encourages readers to wonder whether the severity of punishments in Japan⁴⁶ is truly necessary, or is actually a product of misguided legislation. Earlier in *SL* he gives a very different account of the harshness of Japanese criminal penalties, centering on the violence of the government, not the absence of any particular religious doctrine. "Souls that are everywhere frightened [*effarouchées*] and made more atrocious can be guided only by a greater atrocity," he explains. "This is the origin and spirit of the Japanese laws" (6.13.87). Accordingly, he advises the prudent reformer in a despotism not to preach Christianity but instead to reduce the severity of punishments as carefully and unobtrusively as possible.

Montesquieu's England, the monarchy where ecclesiastics are "unable to protect religion or to be protected by it" (19.27.331),⁴⁷ is certainly not consumed with thoughts of a future state. As he writes in his notebook, "No religion in England. . . . If someone speaks of religion, everyone begins to laugh."⁴⁸ The English, he says, have "at most an enlightened respect for religion."⁴⁹ Milton's poetry "only began to be admired in England once religion

⁴³See also Montesquieu, *Thoughts*, #591; Callanan, *Montesquieu's Liberalism*, 191–92.

⁴⁴See Sullivan, *Despotic Ideas*, 4–7.

⁴⁵He connects this idea to the doctrine that our bodies as we know them will be resurrected in the next life. The notion that Christianity neatly avoids the problem is doubtful.

⁴⁶Japan is linked with Spain at 20.14.347.

⁴⁷See Pangle, *Theological Basis*, 84–87.

⁴⁸Montesquieu, *Notes sur l'Angleterre*, in *Ceuvres complètes de Montesquieu*, ed. Roger Caillois, vol. 1 (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1949), 883.

⁴⁹Montesquieu, *Thoughts*, #854, emphasis added. Montesquieu refers here to the "English nation" as a whole, not simply English elites; cf. Callanan, *Montesquieu's Liberalism*, 192n55.

began to pass for fiction there."⁵⁰ And in *SL* he presents this atheistic country not as exceptionally severe but as exceptionally "gentle" (*douces*) in its laws and punishments (19.27.328; see also 6.17.92n). Conversely, he suggests that the very cruelest punishments are levied by governments that seek to avenge insults committed against God (12.4.190).⁵¹

(iv) *As a Necessary Guarantor of Morals*

But there remains a more straightforward case for the protection of piety as such, namely, that "religion, even a false one, is the best warrant men can have of the integrity [*probité*] of men" (24.8).⁵² Now this is not equivalent to a claim that morality vanishes in the absence of religion. Reputational concerns, for example, may be as generally effective as theological curbs. Hence Montesquieu argues in a manuscript chapter of *SL* that oaths are useful constraints even on atheists: "Perhaps I neither believe in nor fear divine vengeance. That may be. But it suffices that I fear men."⁵³ He reminds us in his Foreword that "in every country in the world morality is desired" (xli).

He suggests likewise that "good faith" (*la bonne foi*) (19.20) and "probité" (*probité*) (21.20.389) are outgrowths of commerce, even without religion. And religion itself can be a powerful impetus to injustice, inasmuch as it dissolves our salutary natural fears. Montesquieu notes that since Indians believe "the waters of the Ganges have a sanctifying virtue," many of them scorn death, secure in the conviction that when they die they will have their ashes thrown into the Ganges and go to "a region of delights"; in presenting an "accidental thing" as a path to heaven, the religion "uselessly loses the greatest spring there is among men" (24.14.469).⁵⁴

Still, Montesquieu does recognize the corrupting effect of commerce on morals, observing that commercial society produces "a certain feeling" opposed "to those moral virtues that make it so that one does not always discuss one's own interests alone and that one can neglect them for those of others" (20.2.339). Accordingly, Callanan has suggested that Montesquieu wants the spirit of commerce to be tempered by "other 'spirits' or moral influences,"⁵⁵ above all "the spirit of religion" (26.14.508). As Callanan points out, when Montesquieu speaks of "countries where one is affected only by the

⁵⁰Montesquieu, *Thoughts*, #1052; see also #1134.

⁵¹See also Montesquieu, *Thoughts*, #1140; Sullivan, *Despotic Ideas*, 101–2.

⁵²See also Montesquieu, *Considerations*, 27, 97–98.

⁵³Montesquieu, *Dossier de l'Esprit des lois*, in *Œuvres complètes*, 2:1017. This is one of Bayle's arguments.

⁵⁴If the reference to sin-cleansing water is insufficiently direct, the preceding chapter describes the Christian doctrine of redemption, which Montesquieu circumscribes as much as possible (24.13.468).

⁵⁵Callanan, *Montesquieu's Liberalism*, 193.

spirit of commerce" as countries in which even the minimal duties of humanity are subject to buying and selling, he adds a one-word footnote: "Holland" (20.2.338). So it seems that Holland is a sort of freakish outlier, a cautionary tale in the perils of unchecked commercialism.

And yet, earlier in *SL*, Montesquieu declares: "In order for the spirit of commerce to be maintained . . . this spirit must reign alone and not be crossed by another [*ne soit point croisé par un autre*]" (5.6.48). Presumably, of course, the spirit of commerce may reign over other "spirits" that cut in the same direction, such as the aforementioned "spirit of independence and liberty" that is alive and well in the countries of northern Europe (24.5). But, in order to be maintained, it must reign alone, without being "crossed" or checked by strongly countervailing influences: "all the laws must favor it" (5.6.48). Like Jehovah, the spirit of commerce is a jealous god.

Thus, in speaking in the plural of "countries" (*les pays*) that are affected "only" by "the spirit of commerce," Montesquieu does not err. England, for example, is at least as commercial as Holland; the "spirit of commerce and industry" (*l'esprit de commerce et d'industrie*) has been established there since the sixteenth century (23.29.456). But this means that England must be another country in which the spirit of commerce reigns unchallenged.

Sure enough, Montesquieu does not shy away from the moral corruption of England: the people there are filled with "hatred, envy, jealousy, and the ardor for enriching and distinguishing oneself" (19.27.325). Hence they should be regarded as "confederates more than fellow citizens" (19.27.332). They easily forget "the laws of friendship," seeking their advantage wherever the opportunity presents itself (19.27.326). Englishmen "throw themselves" into "debauchery" (19.27.332).⁵⁶

But Montesquieu suggests that, given a clear view of our true needs, this lowering of moral life is not equivalent to dehumanization. Notwithstanding "Plato's complaints" about the corrupting effects of commerce (20.1; see also 4.8.40), humans are "made" only "to preserve, feed, and clothe themselves, and to do all the things done in society" (24.11.466).⁵⁷ What has been described as corruption by classical and Christian thinkers is better understood as progress: "the laws of commerce perfect mores for the same reason that these same laws ruin mores" (20.1).

Montesquieu pointedly does not argue that England would be better off if its citizens were reined in by the spirit of religion. On the contrary, his strikingly Machiavellian suggestion is that a large degree of moral corruption, from the Christian perspective, is useful to the vigorous competition for

⁵⁶Montesquieu's account of England brings out the ways in which the spirit of independence can be understood to reinforce (rather than check) the regnant spirit of commerce.

⁵⁷"We are scarcely inclined to spiritual ideas" (*SL* 25.2.479). See also the nonspiritualized picture of human nature in 1.2, especially in light of Montesquieu's definition of prejudice in the Preface (xliv) as "what makes one unaware of oneself."

power characteristic of the sort of state that can secure our natural needs: “As each individual [in a free state], always independent, would largely follow his own caprices and his fantasies, he would often change parties; he would abandon one and leave all his friends in order to bind himself to another in which he would find all his enemies” (19.27.326). And his Mandevillian suggestion is that this corruption is equally useful to the wealth-generating forces of commerce. “Not all moral vices,” he reminds us, “are political vices” (19.11).

This is not to say that Montesquieu recommends commerce unqualifiedly to every nation. In 20.23 he mentions Poland as a country that, in its mid-eighteenth-century form, might gain considerably from a constriction of foreign trade. Poland’s commerce is centered on the export of grain and the import of luxuries, which benefits a handful of great lords while retarding the development of the rest of the economy, keeping the vast majority poor. But once Poland develops its arts and industries, it will be able to benefit from foreign trade, since it is only countries that have “nothing at home” that lose out from commerce (20.23.353). Indeed, Pangle points out that in this very chapter Montesquieu offers “a remarkable prediction of Japan’s future commercial advance,”⁵⁸ notwithstanding its ruthless exploitation by China and Holland in Montesquieu’s own time (see 20.9). Montesquieu goes on to suggest that the benefits of trade are potentially available to “all nations” (22.1).

2. Montesquieu’s Two Major Defenses of Christianity

(i) *As a Salutory Civic Influence*

In his *Defense of the Spirit of the Laws* Montesquieu claims that Christianity is “not subject to any examination,” given its divine character.⁵⁹ But in *SL* itself he does in fact examine it. We have already seen this with respect to the prohibition of “indifferent things,” and even more clearly in his discussion of various doctrines of the immortality of the soul, in which the Christian teaching is explicitly praised. But, in addition, Montesquieu offers a remarkable political defense of Christianity in his final response to Bayle:

He dares propose that a state formed by true Christians would not continue to exist. Why not? They would be citizens infinitely enlightened about their duties and having a very great zeal to perform them; they would sense very well [*très bien*] the rights of natural defense; the more they believed they owed to the religion, the more they would think they owed to the homeland [*patrie*]. (24.6.463–64)

Christianity, it seems, is a vital contributor to the common good.

⁵⁸Pangle, *Theological Basis*, 112.

⁵⁹Montesquieu, *Défense*, 1138.

Yet the first of these claims, that a state of true Christians would be "infinitely enlightened about their duties," is undercut by Montesquieu's own quiet avowal early in the work that it is "philosophers," not theologians or ecclesiastics, who inform people about the genuine "laws of morality" (1.1.5). This statement drew the ire of religious critics.⁶⁰ Nor was it an idle comment: *SL* goes on to call into question authoritative Christian teachings on luxury (7.4, 7.9, 19.5, 21.16), sacrilege (12.4), heresy (12.5, 12.17, 25.13), homosexuality (12.6), poverty (14.7), suicide (14.12), lending at interest (21.20, 22.19–22), charity (23.29), marriage (26.9), divorce (16.15–16), celibacy (23.21, 24.7, 25.4), chastity (19.5–6), proselytization (24.26), and toleration (25.10). In a few of these cases, conceivably, it might be argued that Montesquieu regards the authoritative teachings as corruptions of true Christianity; but the claim that true Christians would be "infinitely enlightened about their duties" requires that all such teachings be corruptions.

As for the second claim, that true Christians would "sense very well the rights of natural defense," Montesquieu later remarks that the Christians of Abyssinia (Ethiopia) neglect those rights precisely because of their piety: "The Abyssinians have a harsh fast of fifty days, which so weakens them that they cannot act for a long time; the Turks do not fail to attack them after this fast. To favor natural defense religion ought to put some limits on these practices" (26.7). True, he does initially attribute the absence of despotism in Ethiopia to the influence of Christianity, apparently somehow forgetting the existence of Christian despotisms in Europe (23.4.461). But, as Callanan points out, he suggests elsewhere that Ethiopian liberty has "pre-Christian roots."⁶¹ In any case, as Bartlett stresses, Montesquieu's teaching on natural defense "looks for its foundation, not to the Hebrew or Christian Bible, but to the original and natural condition of human beings in a 'state of nature' very different from the Garden of Eden."⁶² And certainly the Christian Bible does not teach, with Montesquieu, "that natural defense is of a higher order than all precepts" (26.7; cf. Matthew 5:38–39, 5:43–44, 22:37–39, 26:67; John 18:22).

Finally, notwithstanding his claim that true Christians would consider themselves deeply indebted to their "homeland" (*patrie*), Montesquieu famously (like Machiavelli before and Rousseau after him) observes that Christianity alienates people from the *patrie*, making souls "small" (4.4). There is, he observes, a serious "opposition" in the minds of monarchical Europeans between "the ties of religion and those of the world, a thing unknown among the ancients" (4.4). As Pangle helpfully glosses this passage, "The modern European monarchic soul . . . is trammled" by the conflict between the principles of Christianity and those of honor (the

⁶⁰Ibid., 1132–33. See also Pangle, *Theological Basis*, 20.

⁶¹Callanan, *Montesquieu's Liberalism*, 198; cf. Bandoch, "Selective Religious Intolerance," 356.

⁶²Bartlett, "Politics of Faith," 16.

education of “the world”).⁶³ Montesquieu attacks the Christian doctrine of predestination in particular—albeit under the guise of a “Mohammedan dogma”⁶⁴—precisely because it alienates rulers and ordinary citizens alike from the world as such: “The doctrine of a rigid destiny ruling all makes the magistrate a tranquil spectator; he thinks that god has already done everything and that he himself has nothing to do” (14.11.241). Thus he highlights the Christian historian Sozomen’s claim that changes in birth rates are entirely up to God’s providential design (23.21.448). Similarly, he laments the “laziness of the soul” that results “from this dogma of predestination,” saying that wherever such a dogma prevails, “the laws should arouse men made drowsy by the religion” (24.14.468). In sum, at the very moment when he seems to condemn Bayle for misunderstanding Christianity, he points his readers toward contradictory reflections.

(ii) *As a Humanizing Influence*

Still, there seems to be ample evidence that Montesquieu believes Christianity has played an essential role in making social and political life more humane. He associates the Christian religion with the liberation of women from segregation and polygamy (19.18, 24.3.461). Likewise, he makes the arresting claim that “we owe to Christianity both a certain political right in government and a certain right of nations in war, for which human nature can never be sufficiently grateful” (24.3.461–62).⁶⁵ And it was Christianity, he declares, that “abolished civil servitude in Europe” (15.8.252; see also 15.7).

Now in weighing up all this eye-catching praise, it must first be admitted that most of it is retrospective. “The great age of Christian achievements,” Orwin notes, “appears to lie in the past; the progress due to commerce is ongoing.”⁶⁶ If, for instance, Christianity “provided the impetus for the inclusion of women in society,” as Sullivan stresses, this was nonetheless “long ago.”⁶⁷ When Montesquieu extols the liberated character of contemporary French society, he says nothing about the influence of Christianity, and indeed “Christian teachings themselves would sternly condemn the integration of men and women in such a frivolous society, one that exalts temporal goods and tolerates—if not outright encourages—romantic liaisons.”⁶⁸ Besides, to the extent that Montesquieu praises Christianity for its influence on sexual relations, he praises it only in comparison with alternative Eastern religions.

⁶³Pangle, *Theological Basis*, 67.

⁶⁴Elsewhere Montesquieu treats Islam and Christianity as interchangeable in their otherworldliness (*Thoughts*, #1606).

⁶⁵See also *SL* 10.3; *Considerations*, 136–37; *Thoughts*, #551.

⁶⁶Orwin, “Human Nature,” 272.

⁶⁷Sullivan, *Despotic Ideas*, 91.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*

But if he does suggest that the rise of Christianity was at least a historical necessity for the relative freedom of women in Europe, he does not even concede this much with respect to the progressive humanization of international relations. To quote Sullivan again, "There is evidence in *The Spirit of the Laws* that . . . he regards the flourishing of commerce without the birth of Christ as having been a viable historical possibility."⁶⁹ After all, his explicit argument is that commerce fosters transnational cooperation: "The natural effect of commerce is to lead to peace" (20.2.338). Moreover, in a chapter revealingly titled "How Commerce in Europe Penetrated Barbarism" (21.20), Montesquieu attributes the shackling of commerce in Europe between the fall of Rome and the invention of letters of exchange above all to the influence of the Catholic Church and the teachings of the Scholastics.⁷⁰ The barbarism to which he refers is that of Christian Europe.⁷¹

By the same token, his tribute to Christianity for bringing into being "a certain political right in government" constitutes a fleeting and unsubstantiated departure from his dominant presentation of the origins of moderate government in Europe, a presentation that traces it to the pagans who overran Rome. Thus he gives credit for "the best kind of government men have been able to devise" not to Christianity but to the "corruption" of a kind of government cobbled together, willy-nilly, by heathens, the "Germanic nations who conquered the Roman Empire" (11.8.167–68; see also 11.6.165–66).

It is true that he attributes certain legal improvements in France to particular Christian kings, above all Louis IX (28.29). But he attributes Louis's abolition of judicial combat to the force of human reason rather than the spirit of Christianity: "Reason has a natural empire; it has even a tyrannical empire: one resists it, but this resistance is its triumph; yet a little time and one is forced to come back to it" (28.38.591). When it comes to the influence of Christian piety on the same king, Montesquieu is much less complimentary, noting that Louis "made such exaggerated laws against those who swore that the Pope felt obliged to caution him about it" (12.4.189n).

The aforementioned gratitude to Christianity for humanizing warfare is also dubious. "This right of nations, among ourselves," Montesquieu asserts, "has the result that victory leaves to the vanquished these great things: life, liberty, laws, goods, and always religion, when one does not blind oneself" (24.3.462). But this hardly accords with the Christian practices to which he elsewhere draws attention. The Spaniards' pillages in America constituted "one of the greatest wounds mankind has yet received," he writes (4.6.37). Spain "did what despotism itself does not do; it destroyed

⁶⁹Ibid., 211.

⁷⁰For useful discussions of the history, see Paul Cheney, *Revolutionary Commerce: Globalization and the French Monarchy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 60; Callanan, *Montesquieu's Liberalism*, 168–73.

⁷¹See also SL 25.13.492, 31.2.673; Sullivan, *Despotic Ideas*, 93.

the inhabitants" (8.18.125). "I would never finish," he declares, "if I wanted to tell all the good things they [the Spaniards] did not do, and all the evil ones they did" (10.4.142). And, as Orwin notes, "the blind zeal of the Spaniards to impose Catholicism on all the conquered peoples of the New World had not rested on an idiosyncratic interpretation of their duties as Christians."⁷²

Similarly, Montesquieu's claim that Christianity has inaugurated an age blessedly free of slavery is undercut by something he says almost in the same breath. "Aristotle wants to prove that there are slaves by nature," he observes; but "as all men are born equal, one must say that slavery is against nature" (15.7.252). The teaching that "all men are born equal," however, is justified by a distinctively modern state-of-nature teaching that conflicts with orthodox Christian anthropology (1.2, 8.3). Indeed, there seems to be an allusion to the primitive state of nature in Montesquieu's otherwise odd (and scarcely orthodox) remark that Christianity has "brought back" (*ramené*) the "age of Saturn," the epoch in which "there was neither master nor slave" (15.7.252).

Be that as it may, in discussing the historical emancipation of serfs in Europe, Montesquieu makes no mention of Christianity's contribution (11.8). And he implies that no particular religious inspiration was required for that emancipation when he stresses that, although slavery "may be founded on a natural reason" in certain climates, in Europe "even natural reasons reject it" (15.7.252).⁷³ The point is made still more acute by his argument, in the next chapter, that clear-eyed profit-seekers recognize the inefficiency of slave labor. Even in hot climates, the supposedly insuperable idleness that has provided an economic rationalization for slavery is in fact a product of bad laws: "Because the laws were badly made, lazy men appeared" (15.8.253). And such laws, Montesquieu makes clear, can be changed by enlightened statesmen—hence, for example, his chapter "A Means of Encouraging Industriousness" (14.9), where the indolence of southern Europeans and Irishmen under the influence of monastic Catholicism is in question (compare 14.7). The "spirit of commerce and industry" could thrive in England, he argues, only after the dissolution of the monasteries (23.29.456).

To be sure, his chief example of an enervating law is not the religion of Christ but that of Foë, the "legislator of the Indies" who "followed his feelings when he put men in an extremely passive state" and thereby "caused a thousand ills" (14.5). Yet, as Diana Schaub alerts us, the religion of Foë elsewhere functions as a stand-in for Christianity.⁷⁴ And Montesquieu shows no great confidence that slavery will be excluded from Christian Europe indefinitely. "Every day," he remarks, "one hears it said that it would be good if there were slaves among us" (15.9.253). As both Sullivan and Catherine

⁷²Orwin, "Human Nature," 277. See also Pangle, *Theological Basis*, 104.

⁷³Cf. Orwin, "Human Nature," 279.

⁷⁴Schaub, "Of Believers," 239–40, 241–42; Sullivan, *Despotic Ideas*, 251n23.

Volpillac-Augier have emphasized, his opposition to slavery put him at odds with the prevailing opinion of the period.⁷⁵ Servitude was endorsed by Grotius, Pufendorf, and Mably, among other Christian political theorists.⁷⁶

In any case, why had Europeans accepted slavery in other climes? Montesquieu provides one major explanation when he reports that it was the prospect of spreading Christianity that convinced Louis XIII to accept a law "making slaves of the Negroes in his colonies," a law that "pained" the king immensely (15.4). As Montesquieu has just said, at the end of the immediately preceding chapter, "Knowledge makes men gentle, and reason inclines toward humanity; *only* prejudices cause these to be renounced" (15.3.249, emphasis added; see also 10.4.142).⁷⁷

When Montesquieu writes that he will "leave it to be judged [*je laisse à juger*] how much better we have become" (10.3.139), he invites readers to judge for themselves. But given the evidence he provides about the bloody conquest of the Americas and the persistence of slavery, Christian Europe emerges as scarcely more humane than pagan antiquity. And to the limited extent that Europe has improved, on the evidence compiled in *SL* this progress must be attributed to the combination of historical accident, human reason, modern philosophy, and commerce.⁷⁸ Hence Montesquieu pays "homage" not to Christianity but to "our modern times, to contemporary reasoning, to the religion of the present day,⁷⁹ to our philosophy, and to our mores" (10.3.139).

3. Montesquieu's Theoretical Challenge to Christianity

In his *Defense of the Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu says that Christians owe their religion the "respect and love" befitting "a divine institution," not the critical "examination" appropriate to "human institutions." And yet, as he goes on to say in the same passage, precisely as a divine institution Christianity should "triumph over all" (*trionpher de toutes*) merely human institutions in any comparison of civic effects.⁸⁰ If it proved to fall short of that clear triumph, its claim to be a divine institution would be to that

⁷⁵Sullivan, *Despotic Ideas*, 259n27; Catherine Volpillac-Augier, *Montesquieu* (Paris: Gallimard, 2017), 201.

⁷⁶Volpillac-Augier, *Montesquieu*, 255–56.

⁷⁷Montesquieu provides a sampling of these prejudices, which are not exclusively religious, in his satirical chapter "On the Slavery of Negroes" (*SL* 15.5). Here he again presents Christianity as incompatible with slavery. Yet the context highlights the unorthodoxy of this interpretation.

⁷⁸"I believe that Montesquieu never, in *The Spirit of the Laws*, ascribes to Christianity the virtue of 'humanity'" (Pangle, *Theological Basis*, 172).

⁷⁹The ambiguity of this phrase is stressed by Pangle (*Theological Basis*, 105). Had Montesquieu meant the Christian religion, he might have said so.

⁸⁰Montesquieu, *Défense*, 1138.

extent called into question. Hence Montesquieu's strident insistence in his *Defense* that he has in fact established Christianity's great superiority.

Ironically, then, just when he presents himself at his least detached and most pious in *SL* Montesquieu poses his strongest theoretical challenge to the Christian religion. In presenting himself as a thankful believer who accepts that Christianity itself is "the greatest good men can give and receive," he implicitly sets the terms of an examination: if Christianity is indeed the gift of a loving God, surely it must prescribe or at least not impede "the best political laws and the best civil laws" (24.1), and thereby foster a dignified human happiness in the world as we know it. Here Montesquieu's method of teaching by contradictions reaches its culmination. "Remarkably," he writes in the midst of his paean to Christianity's effects, "the Christian religion, which seems [*semble*] to have no other object than the felicity of the other life, is also our happiness in this one!" (24.3.461).⁸¹

Montesquieu's official position certainly accords with pious gratitude: God in his beneficence does not force us to give up our individual or collective happiness in this life, to the limited extent that such happiness is attainable, for the sake of the much greater felicity promised in the other one. Yet insofar as his own historical analysis cuts in the opposite direction, a question mark is placed over Christianity's claim to be the one true religion; its claim to be "the greatest good men can give and receive" is rendered dubious in the one laboratory actually available for empirical tests (i.e., this world).

Admittedly, as Pangle points out, orthodox Christianity places far less weight on its own civic utility than on "the truth of, and human fidelity to, its dogmas concerning divinity."⁸² But the concern with utility is not simply absent from the orthodox perspective. Hence, for example, the great English churchman Bishop William Warburton's *Divine Legation of Moses*, a work apparently studied by Montesquieu, the core theme of which was precisely the utility of the various religions.⁸³ Indeed Saint Augustine himself, in a work cited by Montesquieu (26.6), had felt compelled to defend Christianity from the charge of being a positively corrupting civic influence.⁸⁴ Pangle

⁸¹In saying that Christianity merely "seems" to have this goal, I would submit, Montesquieu means to suggest that pure otherworldliness is humanly impossible. After all, even the supposedly world-denying Pascal affirms that "no one is happy, reasonable, virtuous, or loveable like a true Christian," and that "it is only the Christian religion that renders man both LOVEABLE and HAPPY" (*Pensées*, ed. Gérard Ferreyrolles and Philippe Sellier [Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 2000], #389, #680).

⁸²Pangle, *Theological Basis*, 107.

⁸³See Callanan, *Montesquieu's Liberalism*, 190–91.

⁸⁴Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, trans. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), bks. 1–5. Montesquieu also cites this work once in bk. 27 of *SL*. He thus cites Saint Augustine just enough to indicate that he has read him, a compliment he does not pay the author of the *Summa*, though his reference to the Scholastics who encouraged the shackling of commerce in Europe (21.20) should be noted.

rightly stresses that "biblical religion in its 'purity' cannot be reduced to what serves 'human interests.'" ⁸⁵ But it is hard to see how it could be conceived of as wholly disconnected from (or actively damaging to) those interests while still being accepted as God-given, particularly if, as Saint Thomas affirms, "human beings are by nature political animals." ⁸⁶

4. Montesquieu's Plan of Attack

Montesquieu therefore leaves his readers with no substantial reason to fear the dwindling of Christianity in Europe, and many reasons to welcome the idea of a post-Christian civilization. Where religion might otherwise reinforce the power of a despot, he does insist that it is useful to have independent religious texts and authorities that can frustrate that power (25.8). ⁸⁷ But presumably it would be better not to be faced with pious submission or cruelty in the first place. Thus, astonishingly for this supposed model of moderation, Montesquieu sees fit to indicate to his readers the most certain "way to attack a religion" (*attaquer une religion*) (25.12). ⁸⁸

But perhaps this is not quite so astonishing. Callanan has offered a powerful argument that Montesquieu's talk of "attack" is directed exclusively at the problem of how to convert people from one religion to another, not how to move them from religion to nonreligion. ⁸⁹ And his argument that Montesquieu's advice would have been understood first and foremost in the context of the disputes over inducements for conversion in eighteenth-century France is convincing. But *SL* is concerned with more than contemporaneous policy questions, as Callanan himself stresses elsewhere. ⁹⁰ And, in presenting what may well have been taken by most of his first readers simply as an argument for a particular ecclesiastical policy in France, Montesquieu provides a very far-reaching analysis, concluding with a rare "general rule":

One does not succeed in detaching [*détacher*] the soul from religion by filling it with this great object, by bringing it closer to the moment when it should find religion of greater importance [i.e., the moment of death]; a more certain way to attack a religion [*attaquer une religion*] is

⁸⁵Pangle, *Theological Basis*, 179n16.

⁸⁶Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's "Politics,"* trans. Richard J. Regan (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2007), 16.

⁸⁷Even here, however, he points to nonspiritual Confucianism as an exemplar (25.8). See also 24.7–14 and 24.16–18, where Montesquieu sketches a healthier kind of religion, without insisting that religion is necessary for the civic benefits he discusses.

⁸⁸See Bartlett, "Politics of Faith," 18; Pangle *Theological Basis*, 102–3; Orwin, "Human Nature," 277; Radasanu, "Montesquieu on Moderation," 290.

⁸⁹Callanan, *Montesquieu's Liberalism*, 179–86. See also Carrese, *Democracy in Moderation*, 130; Orwin, "Human Nature," 271; Bandoch, "Selective Religious Intolerance," 363–64; Schaub, "Of Believers," 231–33.

⁹⁰Callanan, *Montesquieu's Liberalism*, 10.

by favor, by the comforts of life, by the hope of fortune, not by what reminds one of it, but by what makes one forget [*oublie*] it; not by what makes one indignant, but what leads one to half-heartedness [*tiédeur*] when other passions act on our souls and when those that religion inspires are silent. General rule [*Règle générale*]: in the matter of changing religion [*en fait de changement de religion*], invitations are stronger than penalties. (25.12.489)

With respect to a policy that he is explicitly recommending, then, Montesquieu asserts that believers can be made to “forget” any or every religion; that their souls can be led toward “half-heartedness” concerning faith; and that certain passions can silence “those that religion inspires.” This is not what would be expected, to say the least, from someone concerned with moving believers from one Christian sect to another while preserving their piety.

Further, the specific means that Montesquieu recommends for effecting the transition—offering “the comforts of life” and the hope of worldly “fortune”—are the very offshoots of the liberal-commercial civilization he seeks to spread. Hence, if Montesquieu does mean to present piety as an essential ingredient in free political life, then his program is indicted by his own analysis; he supposedly forgets that the passions stimulated by liberalism and commerce also crowd out “those that religion inspires.” It seems more plausible that he is conscious of the threat to piety, and that his own method of “attack” is not to engage in public theological disputes but to steer believers gently on to a path of religious half-heartedness.⁹¹

Commerce is productive of this half-heartedness not only because it brings “other passions” to bear upon the soul, but also because it involves “communication among peoples,” communication that allows us to feel ever more keenly the contingency of our inherited beliefs. In Callanan’s view commerce cures “destructive prejudices,” but it need not act as a solvent upon faith.⁹² Yet if, as he himself suggests, people in commercialized countries come to see their religious convictions as opinions rather than transcendent truths—as “largely contingent” products of “circumscribed” horizons, not worthy of all that much confidence⁹³—their faith would indeed be weakened. And if commerce leads people to regard their inherited religious beliefs as “prejudices,” as Callanan also suggests,⁹⁴ then the effect would be even more radical. It is noteworthy that when Montesquieu declares it “not a matter of indifference” that “the people be enlightened [*éclairé*],” he speaks of his

⁹¹“One should pay great attention to the disputes of theologians, but as covertly as possible. The trouble one seems to take in pacifying them adds to their prestige” (Montesquieu, *Considerations*, 209).

⁹²Callanan, *Montesquieu’s Liberalism*, 219n34, 224–25.

⁹³*Ibid.*, 224.

⁹⁴*Ibid.*, 225.

concern with “prejudices” simply, not merely “destructive” ones (Preface; see also 15.3).⁹⁵

Conclusion

Montesquieu certainly had his radically antireligious followers. Diderot's coconspirator Jean le Rond d'Alembert called him a “benefactor of humanity.”⁹⁶ D'Holbach listed him (alongside Bayle) as an exemplar of supreme talent.⁹⁷ Voltaire said that while he was “almost always in error with the scholars [*savants*], because he was not a scholar,” he was “always right against the fanatics and promoters of slavery. Europe owes him eternal gratitude.”⁹⁸

In contrast to other philosophes, though, Montesquieu's mature rhetoric generally soothed ecclesiastical resistance rather than inflaming it. As he recognized, “Men must not be led by extreme means” (*Il ne faut point mener les hommes par les voies extremes*) (6.12.85).⁹⁹ Accordingly, as Carrese notes, he “had many defenders among clergy, and even bishops.”¹⁰⁰ And while *SL* was eventually added to the Index Librorum Prohibitorum, Montesquieu escaped serious sanction in his own lifetime.¹⁰¹ In 1861 the great French ecclesiastic Henri-Dominique Lacordaire described *SL* as “the finest defense of Christianity in the eighteenth century.”¹⁰²

⁹⁵Cf. *ibid.*, 202. Callanan also highlights and adroitly explicates a letter from Montesquieu to Bishop William Warburton, speculatively dated May 1754, in which Montesquieu warmly agrees with Warburton on the practical benefits of religiosity in England, albeit without specifying any (*ibid.*, 188–91). This is impressive evidence for Callanan's interpretation (but see *Thoughts*, #2022, where Montesquieu's attitude to Warburton is much cooler). The question is whether it outweighs the countervailing evidence.

⁹⁶D'Alembert, “Éloge de M. le Président de Montesquieu,” in *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.*, ed. Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert (University of Chicago: ARTFL Encyclopédie Project [Spring 2021 edition], ed. Robert Morrissey and Glenn Roe). D'Alembert went on to laud Montesquieu's “voluntary obscurity,” which allowed “important truths” to be “veiled” without being “lost.”

⁹⁷D'Holbach, *Système de la nature, ou, Des loix du monde physique du monde moral* (London, 1771), 1.14.

⁹⁸*The Works of Voltaire*, vol. 6, trans. William F. Fleming (New York: DuMont, 1901), 108.

⁹⁹The Cambridge edition translates this, mistakenly, as “Men must not be led to extremes.”

¹⁰⁰Carrese, *Democracy in Moderation*, 121. See also note 95 above.

¹⁰¹Volpilhac-Augier, *Montesquieu*, 267–69.

¹⁰²Lacordaire, “Discours de réception,” January 24, 1861, <http://www.academie-francaise.fr/discours-de-reception-de-henri-lacordaire>. See also Mark H. Waddicor,

Thus, in a time of extreme tension between skeptics and partisans of religious orthodoxy, Montesquieu managed to protect and make respectable the spread of liberalism and commerce, a program that was not simply neutral with respect to religious devotion. Through his method of teaching by contradictions, he exercised a kind of rhetorical moderation precisely because he had a radical end in view. His reputation as the great moderate of the Enlightenment thus masks as much as it reveals.

Montesquieu and the Philosophy of Natural Law (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1970), 180: "it does not seem wrong to call him a Christian."