Montesquieu on Religion: A Continuum

from *The Persian Letters* to *The Spirit of the Laws*

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Western Civilization

Period F

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Charles Louis de Secondat, better known as the Baron of Montesquieu, was undoubtedly one of the greatest philosophers to have lived in the 18th century, contributing greatly to modern society through his ideas about government and politics; notably, he is known as one of the reference sources for the founding fathers of the United States, who depended heavily on his text *The Spirit of the Laws* to formulate the three-branch type of government present today.\(^1\) It is due to this heavy influence that he has become so studied and renowned in the English language; however, all other facets of him have gone unresearched, untouched, in comparison to the studies that have been done on *The Spirit of the Laws* in the pursuit of analysis of “the separation of powers.” It will be my goal today to step out of that all too common mould and elucidate on his much rarer known views on religion and how they play into his model of politics.

On one side of the spectrum, and early in his years, Montesquieu’s views on religion were rather negative. In his first work, *The Persian Letters*, he wrote several scathing remarks about the Catholic church with the clear intent of undermining and debasing it.\(^2\) However, his views change drastically thirty years later in *The Spirit of the Laws*; he devotes several chapters to how religion applies in political scenarios, with the presentation of a very utilitarian opinion—any sort of religion is appropriate for enforcing a state’s power and stability. This is contrary to the oft held view that the American forefathers themselves had; separation of religion and the state is not something that exists in a strict form; the little overlap that exists between state and religion must be embraced in order to ensure


the state’s survival. We find that his radical anti-Catholic views in *The Persian Letters* cannot be entirely reconciled with those in *The Spirit of the Laws*. The sentiment expressed in the *Letters* are most likely his own, personal qualms, while the opinions expressed in *The Spirit of the Laws* are simply utilitarian viewpoints. Surprisingly enough, this thread of utilitarianism connects all of Montesquieu’s works when it comes to religion, from his earliest to his latest works. Little is known about Montesquieu himself—he wrote next to nothing of his own personal life, and little is known about him as a person in general, so this view into his personal opinions is quite interesting.\(^3\) And while Montesquieu may have rallied against the Catholic church in general, he did not possess the inclination towards deism that many other philosophers of the Enlightenment possessed, nor did he believe atheism was capable of being a constructive state of mind.\(^4\)

*The Persian Letters* are scattered with fragments of derisive anti-Catholic comments, all throughout. His characters, Usbek and Rica, are able to write letters back and forth from their hometowns in Persia; their thin veil of Persian travelers in France enables Montesquieu to deliver his criticisms truthfully, yet subtly and without outright admission to his views. As early as Letter 29 (out of 161), Rica begins his indictment of the Catholic church, writing:

I can also assure you that there has never been a realm so prone to civil wars as that of Christ....

Whoever falls into the hands of these men is fortunate only if he has always prayed to God with little bits of wood in hand, has worn two bits of cloth attached to two ribbons, and has sometimes been in a province called Galicia! Otherwise, the poor devil is really in trouble.... It is useless for him to submit distinctions, for he will be in ashes before they even consider giving him a hearing....

Happy the land inhabited by the children of the prophets [Persia]! There these

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sad spectacles are unknown.\textsuperscript{5}

In Letter 46 he proposes the very progressive idea that a religion should act on behalf of man, and man’s respect for one another—according to Usbek, God would be more pleased with a simple peace between men as opposed to obedience to multitudinous silly principles.\textsuperscript{6}

In Letter 75, Usbek states, “Their religion is less a subject of sanctification than a subject for dispute, which is open to everyone. . . . they live in an ebb and flow which carries them constantly between belief and disbelief.”\textsuperscript{7}

Through these letters, as well as through indirect references to the Church and religion in between in the intervening letters, Montesquieu paints a negative picture of the Church, highlighting and accentuating the absurdity of the many practices for the Church was so well known, such as the Inquisition, the lack of trials for heretics, and the ritual of burning at the stake. The Catholic church simply seemed to ridiculous in his eyes, containing numerous levels of laws and bureaucracy, none of which functioned properly; Rica writes, “For you should know that the Christian religion is burdened with a multitude of practices very difficult to follow, and as it is judged harder to fulfill these duties than to have bishops to dispense with them, the latter course has been followed in the interest of public utility. . . . He has only to go to the bishop or the pope, who immediately grants dispensation.”\textsuperscript{8}

All of his ideas concerning religion flew in the face of commonly accepted knowledge, and \textit{The Persian Letters} are perhaps the first foray into true religious liberalism.\textsuperscript{9} His friend Père Desmolets, who gave the manuscript a read-through before it went to press, told Montesquieu frankly that there might be quite

\textsuperscript{5}Montesquieu, \textit{The Persian Letters} (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1999), 53-54.

\textsuperscript{6}Montesquieu, \textit{The Persian Letters}, 75.

\textsuperscript{7}Montesquieu, \textit{The Persian Letters}, 128.

\textsuperscript{8}Montesquieu, \textit{The Persian Letters}, 52.

the uproar surrounding the publishing of this book, as it was the first of its kind—\(^{10}\)it has been quoted before as the “first true book of the Enlightenment.” One can only speculate why his anti-Catholic views proved to be so pervasive in *The Persian Letters*; it may have been the fact that it was published anonymously, under another name, or simply the fact that Montesquieu was youthful and wanted to express his opinion in the most frank manner possible. As this thoughts on the matter are unknown, we are left to wonder what inspired him to write such a staunch anti-Catholic novel.

Despite the extreme anti-Catholic views that his characters express, Montesquieu also adds several recommendations as to how religions might be adapted and changed for the better, especially in terms of tolerance from one religion to the next—\(^{11}\). His intent in criticizing the Church is not to undermine all religion, but simply to narrate the absurdity of one specific system; throughout *The Persian Letters*, he demonstrates that religion has a social and moral need.\(^{12}\) Usbek writes in Letter 85, “Furthermore, since all religions contain precepts that are socially useful, it is well that they be zealously be observed; and what better is able to animate that zeal than a multiplicity of religions?”\(^{13}\) Montesquieu gladly supports the notion that religion can be used as a social construct to maintain peace and order within a people. These constructive viewpoints are what connect *The Persian Letters* to *The Spirit of the Laws* through those overarching utilitarian ideals.

Montesquieu begins the section on religion in *The Spirit of the Laws* rather sharply, stating, “I shall examine, therefore, the several religions of the world, in relation only to the

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\(^{11}\) Sanford Kessler, “Religion & Liberalism in Montesquieu’s Persian Letters,” 393.


\(^{13}\) Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters*, 143.
good they produce in civil society, whether I speak of that which has its root in heaven, or
of those which sprang from the earth.”

It is with this statement that we are sure that
Montesquieu has detached any possible personal opinions on the matter from his writing;
such a warning never accompanies The Persian Letters, and the academic style of The Spirit
of the Laws is another clear indicator that he has written not for sensation, and not for
personal expression, but purely for the analytical and pragmatic possibilities of religion,
linking back to the aforementioned ideals of utilitarianism. Initially he discusses the ideas
and works of Pierre Bayle, one of the leading thinkers that supported true atheism at the
time. He strongly refutes Bayles’ claims, stating, “It is a false way of reasoning against
religion to collect, in a large work, a long detail of the evils it has produced, if we do not
give at the same time an enumeration of the advantages which have flowed from it.”
This statement proves to us squarely that Montesquieu embraces religion,
in so far as using
its power as a bridle to constrain despotic rulers and to prevent man from reigning as a
“terrible animal”. Without religion, man is without morals and lacks appropriate judgment;
the social construct of religion, at the very least, keeps people chained in a system and
keeps them at bay from wreaking havoc across the universe. Montesquieu then proceeds
to delineate Christianity from Islam, assigning a moderate government to the Christians
(He writes, “The Christian religion is a stranger to mere despotic power. The mildness so
frequently recommended in the gospel is incompatible with the despotic rage with which
a prince punishes his subjects, and exercises himself in cruelty.”) while asserting that

the Muslims must have a despotic government, stemming from the fact that Islam “speaks only by the sword” and “acts still upon men with that destructive spirit with which it is founded.” This is a very curious point, and perhaps one of major contention, as it has been proven in history that those of Islam are no more radically violent than their counterpart, the Christians (compare the Crusades versus the progressive campaigns of the Ottoman Empire, for instance). It is outside the scope of this paper to discuss Montesquieu’s misconceptions, but it would seem that Montesquieu deferred a detailed study of the Islam at hand, possibly due to the religious atmosphere at the time, which would preclude a serious study of Islam by a Frenchman. The main crux of these chapters shines through, however, and that is there is an apt religion for every government; the two share relationships in power and social effect; the effect of the government and religion is to make people amenable to leadership, to make them “good citizens.”

The next book, Book 25, in The Spirit of the Laws deals plainly with the outside effects of religion and how government and religion are supposed to interact. Here Montesquieu proposes yet another idea— that of religious tolerance, for all religions equally, otherwise a vicious chain of religion oppressing religion arises. While seemingly innocuous in nature when read in today’s society, it was a striking statement that was contra-culture yet again; Montesquieu was advocating religious freedom and equality at a time where most monarchs chose how, when, and where all of their subjects prayed and gave respects daily. Montesquieu also puts forth the modern idea behind the separation of church and state—that

state laws have no proceeding over religious ones, as well as several other concepts that are key to a modern understand of how government and religion have become intertwined today. And finally, in Book 26, the conclusion to his study of religion and its applicability to the political scene, Montesquieu separates the civil law from the laws and procedures of religion—that is, no longer should the head of the state be the head of the religion, as can be seen in England or the Vatican. He writes, “One cannot decree by divine law what should be decreed by human law, nor can one regulate by human law what should be regulated by the divine.” With that stunning last ground-breaking idea, Montesquieu’s treatment of religion in *The Spirit of the Laws* is, for the most part, complete.

The Montesquieu writing to us in *The Spirit of the Laws* is considerably more mature, being published nearly thirty years later (the *Letters* were published in 1721, and *The Spirit of the Laws* in 1748.) The difference in age between these two Montesqueius, as well as the amount of deliberation put into each work, is clearly evident. The witty, almost retaliatory remarks against the Catholic church are nowhere to be found in *The Spirit of the Laws*, just as *The Persian Letters* contains no dry-cut analysis without a plot. When writing *The Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu had to walk a substantially finer line—everybody knew about his authorship, and there would be no delay to lay charges against if portions were deemed too radical; this is probably why he remains so centrist, never praising religions other than Catholicism even though they may have their proper virtue. The two works are from different time periods and written in different styles, yet they both share that common thread: the thread of utilitarian religion. Throughout both *The Persian Letters* and *The

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Spirit of the Laws, the religious message is clear: without religion, the government—and the people—will have a very tough time surviving life. In the Letters we were posed with the question as to what could be better that Catholicism—Montesquieu answered that an improved Christianity would suffice. In The Spirit of the Laws, Montesquieu tells us how that improved Christianity would help along the government to remain stable and in control—it would make the people good citizens.

It is throughout these two works, The Spirit of the Laws and in The Persian Letters, Montesquieu’s two finest achievements, that his message of utilitarian stands out. In both of these works, he is telling is that religion can always affect the government, and that religion has some place in the modern day society—no longer will the modern day society be one of the deists, nor one of the atheists, but rather a society where things will remain as they are, supported by Christianity and the force of those helpful factors. He was unlike many others in his time in proposing that a religion needed to be adopted, and that simple atheism would not suffice to keep people bound together out of their hearts, and out of their wills—without a religion, a government has a hard time turning its people in to justifiably moral people; without a religion, a government is nothing but a set of laws presiding over a people that lacks significant moral intervention. The implications of these two statements are far-reaching, affecting even us in the modern era. His ideas about the interconnection of religion and government would fly in the face of what many see as the progression of the ‘Godless age’, in which science has been seen to be replacing Christianity as a system of faith—despite the fact that atheism and any such faith without a God would severely lack the moral constraints and limits that Montesquieu has proved so important. It would not be an understatement that Montesquieu would be shocked at our modern day situation, with
many scientists openly taking a vow of atheism in pursuit of their work for science.

However, Montesquieu also exposes another facet of religious sentiment in that ultra-utilitarian regard. Religion is not so much born from divine providence as it is from the men that create and write the divine scripts, and it can be used for social purposes that better mankind. Without it, mankind in general would deteriorate to something describable as “a terrible animal.” Like any other tool, there are bad religions (in this case he gives an example of violent Muslims) which prove to be disastrous, or at the very least, oppressive, and good religions, which are well-tempered and will act as a great tool to keep a kingdom, or state, in line (specifically Montesquieu says that Christianity is the best way to proceed, but we have seen that the religious environment is such that he may have been coerced into publishing those statements; no doubt others can fill its place). Montesquieu was the forefather of religious liberalism, and openly endorsed the fact that it was a social construct, and openly proposed the fact that not any one religion was right—they are the best if they are all tolerated, all accepted and present at the same time.
Bibliography


