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- Persian Letters - Letters -

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### *Rica to Ibben in Smyrna*

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The pope is the chief of the Christians ; he is an old idol who is worshipped out of habit. He used to be feared even by princes, [1] for he deposed them as easily as our magnificent sovereigns depose the kinds of Imeretia and Georgia, [2] but no one fears him any longer. [3] He claims to be the heir of one of the earliest Christians, who is called St. Peter : and it is certainly a rich legacy, for he has immense treasures, and a large country under his domination.

Bishops are men of the law who are subordinate to him, and have under his authority two very different functions. When they are assembled, [4] they like him make articles of faith. When they are separate, they have hardly any function than to dispense people from fulfilling the law. For you must know that the Christian religion is laden with endless very difficult practices ; and as they have deemed that it is less easy to accomplish these duties than to have bishops who dispense you from them, the latter option has been taken for public utility. Thus if you do not want to observe Ramadan, [5] if you do not want to submit to the formalities of marriage, [6] if you want to dissolve your vows, if you want to marry against the exclusions of the law ; sometimes even if you want to revoke your oath, you go to the bishop or to the pope, who at once supplies the necessary dispensation.

The bishops do not make articles of faith on their own initiative ; there is a limitless number of doctors, [7] most of them dervishes, who raise a thousand new questions among themselves about religion ; they are allowed to dispute at length, and the war lasts until a decision happens to end it.

Indeed I can assure you that there was never a realm where there were as many civil wars as in that of Christ.

Those who one day advance some new proposition are promptly called heretics. Every heresy has its name, which for those engaged in it serves as a rallying cry. But not just anyone can be a heretic ; it suffices to split the difference, and give a distinction [8] to those who are making the accusation of heresy ; and whatever the distinction, intelligible or not, it makes a black man white as snow, [9] and he can call himself orthodox.

What I am saying goes for France and Germany : for I have heard that in Spain and Italy there are certain dervishes who have a short fuse, and have a man burned like straw. [10] Happy is the man, when he falls into those fellows' hands, who has always prayed to God with little wooden beads in hand, [11] who wore on his person two pieces of cloth attached to two ribbons, [12] and who has sometimes been to a province called Galicia [13] : otherwise a poor devil is in a real jam. Were he to swear like a pagan that he is orthodox, they might well not be in agreement on the qualities, and burn him as a heretic. It would do him no good to offer his distinction : no distinction, he would be ashes before they had even thought of hearing him.

Other judges assume that an accused is innocent ; those always presume him guilty. In case of doubt their rule is to decide on the side of rigor, apparently because they believe men are evil. But on the other hand they think so well of them that they never judge them capable of lying, for they accept the testimony of mortal enemies, of women of ill repute, and of those who exercise an infamous profession. In their sentence they have a few kind words for those who are wearing a sulphur shirt, [14] and tell them that they are most chagrined to see them so ill clad ; that they are gentle, and abhor blood, [15] and are disconsolate for having condemned them. But as consolation they confiscate everything these wretches own for their own benefit. [16]

Happy the land where live the children of the prophets ; these sorry spectacles are unknown there. [17] The holy religion that the angels brought to it is defended by its very truth, which has no need of these violent means to sustain itself.

*Paris this 4th day of the moon of Chalval 1712*

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[1] Pope Innocent III (1198-1216) had obtained the feudal dependency of most of the European princes. In 1302, the bull *Unam sanctam* formally spelled out the submission of temporal authority to spiritual authority.

[2] Causasian realms, tributaries of the Turks and then the Persians, are described by Chardin (I, 251-252 ; II, 122 ss.).

[3] In its 1682 assembly, the French clergy limited the pope's power by declaring that it was limited to spiritual matters and that "kings and sovereigns are not subjected to any ecclesiastical power by order of God in temporal matters."

[4] Ecclesiastical councils.

[5] The Muslim month of fasting.

[6] By obtaining dispensation from the marriage bans.

[7] *I.e.*, theologians (the Sorbonne in particular).

[8] The *Dictionnaire de Trévoux* (1704) defines distinction, in philosophy, as "A different manner of understanding things. [...] *Philosophical distinctions* are often just quibbles and subterfuges" ; cf. the verb *distingo* : "An academic term, used to get out of an argument" (Furetière, 1694). The Casuists had mounted the notion of distinction into a system of "admirable subtleties" (Pascal *P*, p. 172).

[9] An Old Testament image : "though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow" (Isaiah 1:18).

[10] The Inquisition. "This tribunal takes cognizance of heresy, Judaism, Muhammadanism, sodomy, and polygamy" (Collier 1701). Montesquieu, like the entire eighteenth century (see in particular the article "Inquisition" in the *Encyclopédie*) is influenced by the "black legend" of (see letter 75).

[11] The rosary.

[12] The scapular : they are worn on the chest in a sign of devotion to the Virgin.

[13] Those who have made the pilgrimage to Saint Iago de Compostella.

[14] The article "Inquisition" of the *Encyclopédie* (by Jaucourt) also mentions the "sulfured shirts of the holy office" (t. VIII, p. 776), also called *san benitos* ; Voltaire mentions them as well in *Candide* (ch. VI).

[15] By delivering the condemned to the secular arm, the Inquisition pretended to remain true to the doctrine *Ecclesia abhorret a sanguine* (the Church abhors blood).

[16] See *L'Espion turc* : "The first thing that the holy Inquisitors do is perform a careful and devout search of the prisoner's possessions. If they find him rich, it takes no more than that to make him criminal ; and the good Fathers piously take care of disposing of what he has." (Jean Paul Marana, *L'Espion dans les cours des princes chrétiens*, vol. II, letter LXXIII, p. 239-240.)

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[17] The Persians are the most tolerant of all the Muhammadans (author's note). Chardin praises the Persians for "their toleration of religions they believe to be false, and which they hold to be abominable" (IV, 101-102) ; similarly, Muslims in general refuse violent methods for the conversion of infidels (VI, 313 ; cf. VI, 327).