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- Persian Letters - Letters -

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*Rica to Usbek in ****

The other day I was in a house where there was a circle of all sorts of people ; I found the conversation occupied by two old women, who had worked all morning in a vain effort of rejuvenating themselves. You must admit, said one of them, that men today are very different from those we saw in our youth : they were polite, gracious, and obliging, but now I find them unbearably blunt. Everything has changed, said then a man who seemed crippled by gout ; the times are not what they were forty years ago ; everyone was healthy, we walked, we were gay, we were always ready to laugh and danse ; today everyone is unbearably sad. A moment later the conversation turned toward politics : By Jove, said an old lord, the state isn't governed any more ; find me today a minister like Monsieur Colbert. I saw this Monsieur Colbert often [1] ; he was a friend of mine ; he always had my pensions paid before anyone else's. What good order there was in the finances ! Everyone was well off ; but today I am ruined. Monsieur, a churchman then said, you are talking there about the most miraculous times of our invincible monarch : is there anything as great as what he was doing then to destroy heresy ? [2] And do you count for nothing the abolition of duels ? [3] said contentedly another man who had not yet spoken. The remark is judicious, someone whispered to me : that man is charmed at the edict, and observes it so well that six months ago he allowed himself to be roundly caned to avoid violating it.

It seems to me, Usbek, that we never judge things except by an inner application we make to ourselves. I am not surprised that Negroes depict the devil in bright white and their gods black as coal, that the Venus of certain peoples has dug that hang down to her thighs, and in short that all idolaters have represented their gods with a human face, [4] and transferred to them all their own inclinations. It has well been said that if triangles created a god, they would give him three sides. [5]

My dear Usbek, when I see men who creep on an atom, [6] that is to say the earth, which is nothing but a point in the universe, offer themselves directly as models for Providence, I do not know how to reconcile such extravagance with such meanness.

Paris this 14th day of the moon of Saphar 1714

[1] Colbert died in 1683.

[2] One of numerous allusions in *Persian Letters* to the anti-Protestant campaign and the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes (1685) ; see letters 22 and 83.

[3] Notably in an edict against duels in 1679.

[4] This includes Christianity : representative art was forbidden in Islam.

[5] A manifest echo of Spinoza : "I believe that the triangle, were it endowed with speech, would say [...] that God is eminently triangular, and the circle, that the nature of God is eminently circular. Similarly, no matter what being would affirm of God its own attributes, would make himself

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resemble God and any other manner of being would to it appear ugly." (*Opera posthuma*, 1677, *Epistola LVI*; *Ruvres*, Paris, La Pléiade, 1954, p. 1302.)

[6] The relative smallness of our planet was a theme of Pascal's *Pensées* and Fontenelle's *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* (1686). Voltaire made frequent use of such comparisons and epithets (he calls it a "heap of mud" [*un amas de boue*] in *Micromégas*, 1752).