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- Persian Letters - Letters -

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### *Usbek to Ibben in Smyrna*

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You ask me whether there are Jews in France ? [1] Be sure that wherever there is money, there are Jews. You ask me what they do here ? Precisely what they do in Persia ; nothing is more like an Asian Jew than a European Jew.

They evince among the Christians as among us an invincible obstinacy for their religion that goes as far as madness.

The Jewish religion is an old trunk which has produced two branches which have covered the entire earth : I refer to Muhammadanism and Christianity ; or rather it is a mother who has engendered two daughters who have afflicted on her a thousand wounds : for when it comes to religions, the closest ones are the greatest enemies. But whatever ill treatment she has received from them, she nevertheless takes pride in having begotten them ; she uses both of them to embrace the whole earth, while in another way her venerable age embraces all eras.

For this reason the Jews consider themselves as the source of all that is sacred and the origin of all religion. They regard us on the contrary as heretics who have changed the Law, or rather as rebel Jews.

Si the change had come about gradually, they believe they could easily have been seduced ; but inasmuch as it came about all at once, and in a violent manner, as they can mark the day and the hour of each of these births, [2] they are deeply shocked to find that we have ages, and hold firm to a religion that the earth itself did not precede.

They have never known in Europe a calm comparable to the one they are enjoying. [3] Christians are beginning to shed that spirit of intolerance [4] that animated agitated them ; the Spanish found themselves worse off for having expelled them, [5] and the French for having harrassed Christians whose faith differed somewhat from that of the prince. [6] They have realized that zeal for the advancement of the religion is different from the attachment one should have to it, and that it is not necessary, in order to love and observe it, to hate and persecute those who do not observe it.

It would be desirable for our Muslims to think as sensibly on this matter as the Christians, that we could once and for all make peace between Ali and Abu Bakr, [7] and leave it to God to decide on the merits of these holy prophets. I would like us to honor them through acts of veneration and respect, and not by vain preferences, and seek to merit their favor, whatever place God may have reserved for them, either at his right hand, or else under the footstool of his throne. [8]

*Paris this 18th day of the moon of Saphar 1714*

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[1] The question could be asked because many Jews probably feared being identified as such and practiced their faith clandestinely.

[2] One of the Jewish objections to Jesus was that his origin was known (John 7:27) ; Catholics similarly often argued the recent origins of Protestantism.

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[3] Since the edict of expulsion in 1394, renewed in 1615, Jews had in principle no right to live in the kingdom, but Jewish communities in Bordeaux and Bayonne possessed privileges that were not contested. Whereas the royal declaration of 8 March 1715 had decided that there would be no more Protestants in France, the Jewish presence, with restrictions, was tolerated in many places.

[4] In the seventeenth century the word *toleration* generally had a negative meaning : "Sufferance or indulgence that one has for what one cannot prevent" (*Académie*, 1694). Basnage de Beauval adds, in the third edition of Furetière (1703), "The word toleration contains within it a tacit condemnation of the thing tolerated". Little by little the word acquired a positive value ; already in 1718 the *Académie* gives the definition : "Condescension, indulgence for what one cannot prevent, or what one believes one should not prevent". Cf. *The Spirit of Law*, XXV, 10 : "On tolerance in matters of religion".

[5] The Jews had been expelled from Spain in 1492 by Isabelle de Castille.

[6] Another allusion to the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes (see letters 57 and 83).

[7] Reference to the schism between the Shiite followers of Ali and the Sunni followers of Abu Bakr

[8] The right hand of God is an image common to the Old and New Testaments, e.g. : "The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool" (Psalms 110:1) ; to Christians this place was reserved for Jesus.