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- Persian Letters - Letters -

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Usbek to Rhedi in Venice

I must confess to you that I have not observed among the Christians that intimate persuasion of their religion that is found among Muslims ; it is a long way among them from profession to belief, from belief to conviction, and from conviction to practice. Religion is less a subject of sanctification than a subject of disputes that belongs to everyone : men of the court, men of war, even women rise up against churchmen, and ask them to prove to them what they are determined not to believe. It is not that they have made up their minds through reason, and taken the trouble to examine the truth or falseness of this religion they reject ; they are rebels who have felt the yoke and shaken it off before they knowing it. So it is that they are not more firm in their unbelief than in their faith ; they live in an ebb and flow that carries them constantly from the one to the other. One of them said to me one day : I believe in the immortality of the soul six months of the year. My opinions depend absolutely on the constitution of my body ; according to whether I have more of less animal spirits, whether my stomach digests well or poorly, whether the air I breathe is subtle or crude, the meats I eat are light or solid, I am a Spinozist, a Catholic, impious or devout. [1] When the doctor is at my bedside, the confessor has the advantage with me. I am quite able to keep religion from bothering me when I am in health, but I allow it to console me when I am sick. When I have nothing more to hope for on one hand, religion pops up and wins me over with its promises ; I am willing to surrender to it, and die on the side of hope.

The princes of Europe have long since freed all the slaves of their states, because, they say, Christianity makes all men equal. It is true that this act of religion was most useful to them, because they demoted the lords thereby, from whose power they rescued the lowest class. Then they made conquests in countries where they saw it was to their advantage to have slaves : they allowed their purchase and sale, forgetting that religious principle that moved them so. What am I to say ? Truth at one time, error at another. [2] Why do we not do as the Christians ? How simple we are to refuse swettlements and easy conquests in happy climes [3] because their water is not pure enough to wash ourselves according to the principles of the holy Qur'an.

I give thanks to allmighty God who sent Ali, his great Prophet, that I profess a religion that puts itself above all human interests, and is pure as the heaven from which it descended.

Paris this 13th day of the moon of Saphar 1715

[1] Montesquieu lightly caricatures here the theory which he elsewhere holds dear of the influence of physical conditions on the moral being : cf. letter 31.

[2] An adaptation of Pascal : "Truth this side of the Pyrenees, error beyond" (Pascal, *P*, no. 94).

[3] The Muhammadans have no interest in taking Venice, because they would not find water there for their purifications [author's note].