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- Persian Letters - Letters -

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| Letter 89 |
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| Letter 91 |
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Usbel to his brother Santon, [1] at the Casbin monastery [2]

I humble myself before thee, holy fakir, and prostrate myself : I regard your footprints as the apple of my eyes. Your holiness is so great that you seem to have the heart of our holy Prophet. Your austerities surprise heaven itself ; the angels have looked at you from the pinnacle of glory, and have said : How can he still be on earth, since his spirit is with us, and flies about the throne that is supported by the clouds ?

And how would I not honor you, I who have learned from our doctors that even infidel derviches always have an essence of holiness that makes them respectable to true believers ; and that in every corner of the earth God has chosen for himself some souls purer than others which he has separated from the ungodly world so that their mortifications and their fervent prayers might suspend his wrath that is about to fall on so many rebel peoples.

The Christians speak marvels of their earliest fakirs, thousands of whom took refuge in the awful wastelands of the Thebaid, [3] and had as their chiefs Paul, Anthony and Pachomius. If what they say about them is true, their lives are as full of wonders as those of our most holy Immaums. They sometimes spent ten full years without seeing a single man, but they lived night and day with demons ; they were ceaselessly tormented by these evil spirits : they found them in bed, they found them at table, never an asylum against them. If all this is true, venerable fakir, we would have to admit that no one had ever kept worse company.

Sensible Christians regard all these stories as a quite natural allegory, [4] which can serve to make us feel the unhappiness of the human condition. In vain do we seek a tranquil state in the desert, temptations still follow us ; our passions symbolized by the demons do not yet leave us. These monsters of the heart, these illusions of the mind, these vain phantoms of error and falsehood, still come to us to seduce us, and attack us even in fasts and cilices, in other words even in our strength.

For my part, venerable fakir, I know that the Messenger of God has enchained Satan and cast him into the abyss [5] ; he has purified the earth formerly full of his domination, and made it worthy of the abode of angels and prophets.

Paris this 9th day of the moon of Chahban 1715

[1] Furetière defines Montesquieu's term *santon* as a name given to (false) saints and prophets of the Muslim religion "who by their hypocrisy attract great veneration among the people".

[2] Persian city equidistant from Isfahan and Tauris. The Capuchin of letter 47 was seeking a settlement near Casbin.

[3] Upper Egypt (the region around Thebes).

[4] In the theology of the time, the term *allegory* did not have the modern sense, but designated an interpretation authorized by "the unanimous tradition of the Church Fathers," according to the Council of Trent, and refers to a spiritual sense in which the Old Testament prefigures the New, as

in what Pascal called *figures*.

[5] According to the Talmud, Satan had been an archangel but was cast out of heaven ; cf. Luke 10:18 : "And [Jésus] said unto them, I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven." Likewise, in Islamic tradition, Iblis, too proud to submit to Adam, was cast out of heaven (Qur'an, 2:34).