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- Persian Letters - Letters -

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Rica to the same

I returned the next day to this library, where I found a completely different man from the one I had seen the first time. He was simple of mien, his physiognomy bright, and he was most approachable. Once I had communicated to him my curiosity, he undertook to satisfy it, and even as a foreigner to instruct me.

Father, I said, what are those large volumes that fill this whole side of the library ? Those, he said, are the interpreters of Scripture. There are a great number of them, I replied : the Scripture must have once been very obscure, and very clear now ; are there any doubts remaining ? Can there be contested points ? Can there be, good Lord, can there be ! he replied. There are almost as many as there are lines. Oh ? I said. And what then have all these authors done ? These authors, he replied, have not searched in the Scripture for what we must believe, but what they themselves believe ; they have not regarded it as a book in which were contained the dogmas they should receive, but as a work that could lend authority to their own ideas. That is why they have corrupted all its meanings, and put all its passages to the torture. It is a country which men of all sects come in and more or less pillage ; it is a battlefield where the enemy nations that encounter each other wage many a struggle, where they attach each other, where they skirmish in many ways.

Right near them you see the ascetic or devotional books ; then the much more useful books of morality. The theological ones are doubly unintelligible, both by the subject matter they treat, and by the manner of treating it. [1] The writings of mystics, that is to say the pious, who have tender hearts. Oh, Father, I said, one moment, do not go so fast : tell me about these mystics. Monsieur, he said, devotion warms a heart disposed to affection, and makes it send spirits to the brain, which likewise warm it, whence arise ecstasies and raptures. [2] This state is the delirium of devotion ; often it perfects itself, or rather degenerates, into quietism : you know that a quietist is nothing but a man who is mad, devout, and libertine. [3]

You see the casuists, who bring the secrets of the night into broad daylight, [4] who form in their imagination all the monsters that the demon of love can produce, collect them, compare them, and make them the eternal object of their thoughts. Would that their hearts would not get involved, and themselves become the accomplices of so many perversions so naively described and so nakedly depicted.

You see, monsieur, that I think freely, and tell you all I am thinking ; I am naturally candid, and even more with you who are a foreigner, who want to know things, and know them as they are. If I wished, I would tell you about all these things only admiringly ; I would constantly be telling you : that is divine, that is respectable, it is something wonderful ; and as a result one of two things would happen : either I would fool you, or I would dishonor myself in your mind.

We went no farther : because of something that came up, the dervich interrupted our conversation until the next day.

Paris this 23rd day of the moon of Rhamazan 1719

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[1] As in the following letters, the classification follows a progression typical of the libraries and bookstores of the time.

[2] This schema is approximately what one finds in Descartes's *Les Passions de l'âme*.

[3] A sect deriving from the Spanish priest Miguel de Molinos, who died in Rome [in 1696] in the prisons of the Inquisition, which sought to induce in the soul a state of utter repose and inactivity.

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