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- Persian Letters - Letters -

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Usbek to Mirza in Isfahan

You know, Mirza, that some ministers of Shah Soliman had come up with the plan to oblige all the Armenians in Persia to leave the realm or become Muhammadans, in the thought that our empire would always be polluted so long as it kept those infidels in its bosom. [1]

Persian grandeur was finished if on that occasion blind devotion had been listened to. [2]

It is not clear how the plan fell through [3] ; neither those who made the proposal nor those who rejected it ever knew its consequences ; chance acted in lieu of reason and politics and saved the empire from a peril greater than what it would have risked by the loss of three battles and the capture of two cities.

By proscribing the Armenians they came close to destroying all the merchants and almost all the artisans of the realm in a single day. [4] I am sure that the great Shah Abas [5] would have rather had his two arms cut off than to sign such an order, and that by sending his most industrious subjects to the Mogul and other kings of the Indies, he would have thought he was giving them half of his estates.

The persecutions that our zealous Muhammadans have made against the Ghebers forced them to go in droves to the Indies, and deprived Persia of that hard-working nation, so diligent at plowing, which alone by its labor was able to overcome the sterility of our lands.

All that remained was for devotion to deliver a second blow : to ruin enterprise, by which the empire would fall unassisted, and with it, as a necessary consequence, that very religion that they wanted to make so flourishing.

If we are to reason without prejudice, I do not know, Mirza, if it is not a good thing for there to be several religions in a state. [6]

It is observed that those who live in tolerated religions generally make themselves more useful to their homeland [7] than those who live in the dominant religion, because, honors being forbidden them, and able to stand apart only by their opulence and wealth, they are motivated to acquire them by their work, and to embrace society's most onerous functions.

Moreover, as all religions contain precepts useful to society, it is good for them to be zealously observed. Now what is more capable of inspiring that zeal than their multiplicity ?

They are rivals who forgive each other nothing. Jealousy comes down to individuals ; everyone is on his guard, and fears doing things that would dishonor his party and expose it to the scorn and unpardonable censure of the opposition party.

Indeed it has always been observed that a new sect introduced into a state was the surest way to correct all the

abuses of the old one.

There is no point in saying that it is not in the prince's interests to allow multiple religions in his state. Were all the sects in the world to come and gather there, it would do him no harm, for there is none that does not prescribe obedience and preach submission.

I concede that the histories are filled with wars of religion ; but mark what I say : it is not the multiplicity of religions that has produced these wars, it is the spirit of intolerance that animated the one that thought itself dominant.

It is this spirit of proselytism that the Jews got from the Egyptians, and which from them has spread, like an contagious and popular disease, to the Muhammadans and the Christians.

It is in short that vertiginous spirit of which the advances can only be regarded as a total eclipse of human reason.

For, finally, were there no inhumanity in aggrieving other peoples' conscience [8] ; were none of the ill effects which it foments by the thousands to result from it, you would have to be a fool to think up such a thing. He who tries to make me change religion only does so, no doubt, because he would not change his even if one tried to force him to ; thus he finds it strange that I will not do something he would not do himself, perhaps not to rule the world.

Paris this 26th day of the moon of Gemmadi I, 1715

[1] The evocation of the persecution of the Armeniens by Soliman, who reigned from 1666 to 1694, manifestly alludes to the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 ; between 1679 and 1700, something like two hundred thousand Huguenots took refuge in England, the United Provinces, and other Protestant countries.

[2] The episode is related by Tavernier (livre V, chap. VIII, vol. I, p. 640-641).

[3] In contrast with the numerous apologists of the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes like Bossuet, who congratulated France for having extirpated heresy "in a single day", Montesquieu aligns himself with the likes of Robert Challe who emphasizes the economic loss to France (*Mémoires*, Geneva : Droz, 1996, p. 36-37).

[4] Cf. letter 57, note 2, and letter 58.

[5] Abas I, who reigned in Persia from 1587 to 1629 ; see letter 89 and *My Thoughts*, no. 1453.

[6] Few people ventured to defend toleration in France in the years 1680-1720. The most noteworthy is Pierre Bayle, who had defended pluralism with similar arguments in his *Critique générale de l'histoire du calvinisme du P[ère] Maimbourg* and in the *Commentaire philosophique sur ces paroles de Jésus-Christ : Contrains-les d'entrer*.

[7] Some, including Colbert, invoked the economic asset which Protestants represented for France ; but the Revocation must soon have appeared to them inevitable.

[8] The notion of liberty of conscience is behind the whole toleration movement in the eighteenth century. Protestants had often interpreted the Edict of Nantes as guaranteeing this principle, but the crown had never conceded this ; it had to become established as a principle on its own, inseparable from the notion of natural right.