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- Persian Letters - Letters -

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Usbek to the same

I cannot, divine mullah, calm my impatience ; I cannot bear to await your sublime reply : I have doubts ; they must be settled. I can feel my reason vacillating : bring it back into the straight way [1] ; source of light, come illuminate my way ; strike down with your divine pen the difficulties I am about to put before you. Make me ashamed of myself, make me blush at the question I am about to ask. [2]

Why is it that our Legislator [3] prohibits us the flesh of swine and of all meats he calls unclean ? [4] Why is it that he forbids us to touch a dead body, and that to purify our souls he commands us constantly to wash our bodies ? It seems to me that things in themselves are neither pure nor impure [5] ; I cannot conceive any quality inherent in the subject that can make them so. Mud seems dirty to us only because it offends our sight or another of our senses, but in itself it is not more so than gold and diamonds. The idea of uncleanness contracted by contact with a carcase occurred to us only because of a certain natural repugnance it gives us. If the bodies of those who do not wash offended neither smell nor sight, how could anyone have imagined that they were impure ?

The senses, divine mullah, therefore must be the sole judges of the purity or impurity of things ; but inasmuch as objects do not affect men in the same way, inasmuch as what causes an agreeable sensation to some, produces a repulsive one in others, it follows that the evidence of the senses cannot serve as our rule unless we were to say that everyone may decide this point as he will, and discern, with respect to himself, pure things from those that are impure.

But would not that itself, holy mullah, reverse the distinctions established by our divine Prophet, and the fundamental points of the Law which was writ by the hand of angels ?

Erzerum this 20th day of the moon of Gemmadi II, 1711 [6]

[1] The Qur'an begins with the invocation : "It is You we worship and You we ask for help. Guide us to the straight path" (1:5-6).

[2] Whereas in letters 11-14 it is Usbek who "answered" a question put to him by Mirza (letter 10) on the nature of justice, Usbek submits here to a religious authority, evoking the avoidance of Mirza who has already expressed to him his exasperations with mullahs.

[3] The word can designate Moses as well as Muhammad ; prescriptions of the Qur'an often resemble those of the Bible, and Montesquieu clearly plays on this ambiguity.

[4] The Mosaic definition of *immundus* is the theme of Leviticus 11. The Qur'an repeats the Biblical injunction : "Prohibited to you are dead animals, blood, the flesh of swine, and that which has been dedicated to other than Allah" (5:3). These forbidden foods had long been the object of medical and religious commentary.

[5] St. Paul several times suggests a similar attitude : "I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself : but to him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean." (Romans 14:14 ; cf. 14:20 and Titus 1:15.)

Letter 16

[6] The last letter written from Erzerum (the first being letter 6), where Usbek has stayed eighty-seven days.