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- Persian Letters - Letters -

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Usbek to Rhedi in Venice

I see here people who debate endlessly over religion, but they seem to vie at the same time to see who will observe it least.

Not only are they not better Christians, but even better citizens, and that is what concerns me : for in whatever religion one lives, the observance of the laws, the love of mankind, and piety towards one's parents, are always the premier acts of religion. [1]

Indeed ought not the premier object of a religious man be to be pleasing to the deity that established the religion he professes ? But the surest means of achieving that is doubtless to observe the rules of society and the duties of humanity ; for in whatever religion one lives, once one is supposed, one must needs suppose also that God loves men, since he establishes a religion for their happiness ; that if he loves men, one is sure to be pleasing to him by loving them also, in other words, by exercising towards all of them the duties of charity and humanity, and by not violating the laws under which they live.

One is far more certain to please God in that way than by observing such and such a ceremony ; for ceremonies have no level of goodness in themselves : they are only good in relation to something, and in the supposition that, God has commanded them. But that is the matter of a great discussion. It is easy to be wrong, for one must choose those of one religion among those of two thousand. [2]

There was a man who made this prayer to God every day : Lord, I understand nothing in the disputes that are constantly being carried on concerning you. I would like to serve you according to your will, but every man I consult wants me to serve you according to his. When I want to make my prayer to you, I do not know in what tongue I must speak to you, nor do I know what posture I should assume : one man tells me I should pray to you standing, another would have me seated, another requires that my body weight be on my knees. [3] That is not all : there are some who pretend that I must wash myself every morning in cold water ; others maintain that you will look on me in horror if I do not have a little piece of my flesh cut off. [4] The other day I chanced to eat a rabbit in a caravansary [5] ; three men who were in the vicinity made me quake : all three maintained that I had grievously offended you, the first [6] because that animal was impure [7] ; the second, [8] because it was suffocated [9] ; the third, finally, [10] because it was not a fish. [11] A brahman who was passing by, and whom I called on to judge, said to me : They are mistaken, for surely you did not kill this animal yourself. Oh yes, I said. Ah, you have committed an abominable act, which God will never forgive you, he said to me with a stern voice ; how do you know your father's soul had not passed into that creature ? All these things, Lord, plunge me into unthinkable confusion ; I cannot move my head without being threatened with offending you ; yet I would like to please you, and so use the life which I owe to you. I do not know if I am wrong, but I believe that the best way of achieving that is to live as a good citizen in the society where you caused me to be born, and as a good father in the family that you have given me.

Paris this 8th day of the moon of Chahban 1713

[1] Letter 10, and the letters on the Troglodytes (11-14) seem to accord little place to the role of God.

[2] A shrewd pluralization of the problem of truth in religion : Usbek replaces the conventional bipolarity (Catholics versus Protestants or Christians versus Muslims) with a myriad of possible truths, all of which might be opposed to natural religion.

[3] The Jew, the Quaker perhaps, and the Christian or Muslim : Chardin remarks that Persians sit on their rugs "on their heels, which is done by getting on one's knees with the heels pressed together" (VII, 261).

[4] The foreskin. Circumcision was a practice common to Christians and Muslims.

[5] A term for stations where caravans could lodge during desert crossings.

[6] A Jew [*author's note*].

[7] The hare is among the animals declared impure and forbidden in Leviticus (11:6).

[8] A Turk [*author's note*].

[9] Qur'an 5:3.

[10] An Arménien [*author's note*].

[11] Tavernier had noted that during the five festivals of the year meat was forbidden among the Armenians, but not fish. This was not a general interdiction, as the Armenians were Christian.