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XXIV.2 Bayle's paradox

- The Spirit of Law - Book XXIV. On laws in their relation with religion, considered in its doctrines and in itself -

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Mr. Bayle has pretended to prove that it was better to be an atheist than an idolater, which is to say in other terms that it is less dangerous to have no religion at all than to have a bad one. [1] "I would prefer," he says, "that it be said of me that I do not exist, than for it to be said that I am a wicked man." This is a mere sophism, based on its being of no use to the human race to believe that a certain man exists, whereas it is very useful to believe there is a God. From the thought that there is no God follows the thought of our independence ; or if we cannot have this thought, that of our revolt. To say that religion is not a restraining motive because it does not always restrain is to say that civil laws are not a restraining motive either. To gather into a great book a long enumeration of the evils it has produced is to reason wrongly against religion, if one does not do likewise for the good it has done. If I wanted to relate all the harm that civil laws, monarchy, and republican government have produced in the world, I would assert some frightful things. Were it unnecessary for subjects to have a religion, it would not be useless for princes to have one, and to whiten with foam [2] the only restraint that those who do not fear human laws can have.

A prince who loves religion and fears it is a lion who submits to the hand that strokes it or to the voice that soothes it ; one who fears religion and hates it is like the savage beasts who bite the chain that keeps them from leaping on passers-by ; one who has no religion at all is that fearsome animal that feels his freedom only when he rends and devours.

The question is not to know whether it would be better for a certain man or a certain people to have no religion than to abuse the one they have, but to know which is the lesser evil, to abuse religion sometimes, or that there be none at all among men.

To diminish the horror of atheism, too much is said against idolatry. It is not true that, when the Ancients raised altars to some vice, it meant they loved that vice : it meant on the contrary that they hated it. When the Lacedæmonians erected a chapel to fear, that did not mean that that warlike nation was asking fear to lay hold of the Lacedæmonians' hearts in their combats. There were deities whom they asked not to inspire crime, and others whom they asked to turn it away from them.

[1] *Thoughts on the Comet*, etc.

[2] [As a horse straining at his bit.]