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- Persian Letters - Letters -

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Letter 58	Letter 60

Usbek to Rhedi in Venice

The other day I went into a famous church they call Notre Dame. While I was admiring that superb edifice, I had the opportunity to talk with a churchman who like me had been drawn there by curiosity. The conversation came around to the tranquillity of his profession. Most people, he said to me, envy our fortunate station, and they are right ; yet it has its drawbacks. We are not so separated from the world that we are not called into it in a thousand situations ; there we have a very difficult role to uphold.

Worldly people are surprising : they can bear neither our approval nor our censures ; if we try to correct them, they find us ridiculous ; if we approve them, they regard us as men beneath our calling. There is nothing so humiliating as to think one has scandalized even the impious. We are therefore obliged to conduct ourselves equivocally and fool the libertines, not by a decisive stance, but by making the uncertainty we place them in about the manner in which we receive their words. You have to be very clever for that : this state of neutrality is difficult. Worldly people, who risk anything, who let fly with all anything they want to say, and press or abandon them according to the results, succeed much better.

That is not all : this happy, tranquil estate that is so vaunted is not one we preserve in the world. The minute we appear, we are made to dispute : we are told, for example, to undertake to prove the utility of prayer to a man who does not believe in God ; the necessity of fasting to another who his whole life has denied the immortality of the soul. The enterprise is laborious, and we do not have the laughs on our side. There is more : a certain need to attract others to our positions constantly torments us, and is, so to speak, attached to our profession. That is as ridiculous as if Europeans were to try, for the benefit of the human race, to whiten the face of Africans. We trouble the state, we even torment ourselves trying to prove points of religion that are not fundamental, and we are like that conqueror of China who pushed his subjects to a general revolt by trying to oblige them to trim their hair or their nails. [1]

Even the zeal we have for getting those under our aegis to fulfill the duties of our holy religion is often dangerous, and cannot be accompanied by too much prudence. An emperor named Theodosius had all the inhabitants of a city, even the women and little children, run through with the sword ; then when he then showed up to enter a church, a bishop named Ambrose had the doors closed to him for murder and sacrilege, and in that he committed an heroic act. [2] After the emperor subsequently, after doing the penance which such a crime required and being admitted into the church, went and took his place among the priests, the same bishop sent him away, [3] and in that he committed the act of a fanatic or a fool, so true it is that one must mistrust one's zeal. What did it matter to religion or to the state that the prince did or did not have a place among the priests ?

Paris this 1st day of the moon of Rebiab I, 1714

[1] Xunchi or Choun-Tchi, who founded the Manchurian Tartar dynasty of the Taï-Tsing in 1643 (see letter 79), ordered the Chinese in revolt to cut their hair (but not their nails) and dress like Tartars.

[2] Following a revolt, the emperor had seven thousand killed in Thessalonica in 390, and then was refused entrance to a church by St. Ambrose,

archbishop of Milan, who imposed a penance that lasted eight months (Theodoret, *Historia ecclesiastica*, book V, ch. 18-19).

[3] Although Theodosius had received absolution, his error was, after the offering, to have remained within the enclosure of the altar, which was reserved to priests ; St. Ambrose made him leave, and the emperor obeyed. Theodoret praises both for the nobility of their behavior.