

Interpretation

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Interpretation

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Inquiries: Maddy Canestra, Assistant to the Editor,
INTERPRETATION, Queens College, Flushing, N.Y.
11367-0904, U.S.A. (718)520-7099

Christianity and Politics in Montesquieu's *Greatness and Decline of the Romans*

Richard Myers,
St. Thomas University, Fredericton

Recent events have revived discussion of a political issue which most people had probably thought long dead, that of the relationship between church and state. One of the most remarkable features of North American politics in the 1980s has been the unprecedented involvement of various churches not only in issues which have traditionally been of concern to them (abortion, for example) but, more importantly, in issues that were formerly thought to be none of their business, such as economics and foreign policy. This new trend has brought in its wake a reopening of the old debate about the proper role of ecclesiastical power in a liberal political order, and the questions that are being posed are not always easy to solve. If we are to achieve clarity about these difficult issues, one of our most important tasks will be to reexamine the thought of those men who stood at the head of our liberal tradition, to see how they understood this problem and on what grounds they proposed the solution they did. The purpose of this paper will be to contribute to such a reexamination by investigating Montesquieu's presentation, in his *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and their Decline*,¹ of Christianity and its political effects.

It might seem that the *Greatness and Decline* is an odd book to turn to in this connection. Robert Shackleton, the dean of Montesquieu scholars, has argued that one of the most remarkable features of the work is what he calls its "memorable silence" about Christianity.

A writer in the vanguard of the Enlightenment, treating in 1734 the reasons for the decline of the Roman Empire, might have been expected boldly to list Christianity among them, perhaps even to give it pride of place. Montesquieu's past activity would lead one to expect this of him. In his discourse to the Bordeaux Academy he had treated religion as an important factor in Roman history under the kings and in the early days of the republic. In the *Lettres persanes*, particularly in his discussion of the causes of depopulation, he treated religion as an important factor in the development of societies, and included Christianity itself in his investigation. In the *Considerations*, he does not move on, but retreats, from this position. The Abbé Raynal, spokesman of the most doctrinaire of the *philosophes*, reproves him for his reticence; and the examination of Christianity in relation to Rome is left to the incisiveness and prejudice of Gibbon half a century later (Robert Shackleton, *Montesquieu: A Critical Biography* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961], p. 161).

Yet Shackleton suggests that the main reason for Montesquieu's failure to take up this theme was not ignorance or lack of interest but a kind of "timidity," a fear that the open publication of his thoughts on the matter would have gotten him into serious trouble (Shackleton, p. 162). Though it would be very difficult to quarrel with Shackleton's assessment of Montesquieu's situation, one wonders if this sort of "timidity" would really stop a political thinker of Montesquieu's caliber from expressing his thoughts in one way or another. Shackleton is right to have expected a discussion of the influence of Christianity on Rome, but perhaps he finds himself disappointed in his expectations only because he is insufficiently sensitive to the subtlety of Montesquieu's manner of writing. It is our suggestion that Montesquieu does indeed have a great deal to say about Christianity and its effects on politics but that precisely because of his (understandable) "timidity" he was forced to present his thoughts "between the lines."

The devious or ambiguous character of Montesquieu's art of writing was not lost on the best readers of his own age. Voltaire, for example, expressed the opinion that the *Greatness and Decline* is a work "full of hints" while d'Alembert suggested that "in allowing much to be seen, he left even more to be thought" (Montesquieu, *Considerations sur les causes de la grandeur des romains et de leur decadence*, ed. J. Ehrard [Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1968] p. 11). The suspicion that the *Greatness and Decline* may contain a "secret" account of Christianity is raised by the following fact: the only explicit discussion of Christianity of any length in the work is a "hidden" one. At the beginning of Chapter XIX Montesquieu takes up the question of the role played by the Christian religion in the collapse of the Roman empire. Yet the themes of the chapter, according to its title, were supposed to be "Attila's Greatness," "The Cause of the Settlement of the Barbarians," and "The Reason Why the Western Empire Was the First to Fall" (p. 176). This discussion of Christianity is thus intentionally kept as quiet as possible by Montesquieu and the reader is led to wonder whether, given this attempt to hide these particular thoughts about Christianity, the work might not contain others which are kept more carefully hidden.

Our goal here will therefore be to bring to light what seem to be the three main features of Montesquieu's presentation of Christianity: his accounts of its rise, of its effect on the Roman empire, and of its effect on the "Greek" empire.

1. THE RISE OF CHRISTIANITY

Montesquieu never explicitly discusses the origins of the great Christian influence in Rome, and this is understandable, given the obviously sensitive nature of such a theme. Nevertheless, he does express his thoughts on this subject, and he indicates to us where he is doing so in a most ingenious manner:

his reflections on Christianity's emergence in Rome are presented precisely in that passage where the Christian God makes His first appearance in the book.

God is first mentioned in the discussion, in Chapter XIV, of the tremendous grief that the Romans displayed upon the death of Germanicus. This is a very important passage because we are promised that it will somehow "make known the genius of the Roman people" (p. 146). Montesquieu informs us that by the time of Tiberius the Romans had become so conscious of their "impotence" that they had come "to make their entire happiness depend on the difference between masters": thus, at the death of Germanicus, in whom they had "placed their hopes and fears," they displayed a deep mourning and "fell into complete despair" (p. 146). Montesquieu concludes this passage with the following maxim: "no people fears unhappiness so strongly as those the misery of whose condition should reassure them." In support of this claim he then cites a contemporary example:

There are fifty thousand men in Naples today who live on herbs alone and have only, as their entire property, half a cotton garment. These people, the most unhappy on earth, fall into a terrible despondency at the slightest smoke from Vesuvius: they are foolish enough to fear becoming unhappy (p. 147).

Montesquieu suggests that this reaction of the Neapolitans is very odd. One could try to persuade them of the folly of their reaction by citing to them the words of a popular poet of the 1960s to the effect that those who have nothing have nothing to lose. Montesquieu, in fact, cites a somewhat better poet to make the same point. He notes that these people ought to say, like Andromache, "May it please God that I should fear," that is, "if only I were well enough off to have something to be afraid for" (p. 147).

That this is the first mention of God in the work is truly striking. The Christian God makes His first appearance in the mouths of the utterly desperate, of those who are so devoid of normal, reasonable hopes that they are reduced to hoping in some single almighty Being who might overturn the natural course of events and make their situation less intolerable. In introducing God at this point in the work, then, Montesquieu hints to the reader that he thinks that the Romans' regime made them psychologically ripe for the advent of a religion like Christianity. The tyranny of the emperors had made the Romans so desperate, so fearful, and so conscious of their impotence that they eagerly absorbed a new religious teaching which gave them great hope, if not for this world, then at least for the next. In short, Montesquieu suggests that part of the reason for the success of Christianity was the fact that it served as the "opiate" of the Roman people.

This sort of analysis of the emergence of Christianity is clearly in itself too crude to be entirely persuasive for, while many peoples have been desperately unhappy, on only one occasion has history witnessed the arrival of a religion like Christianity. To give a plausible psychological explanation of the origins of

Christianity, one would have to be able to explain not only why the Romans turned to religion, but why they turned to that particular kind of religion. This is a demand that Montesquieu tries to meet in his presentation of Caligula.

In the paragraph that follows immediately after his discussion of Andromache and Germanicus, Montesquieu writes:

Caligula succeeded Tiberius. It was said of him that there had never been a better slave nor a nastier master. These two things are very much linked: for the same disposition of mind that causes one to be impressed by the unlimited power of him who commands causes one to be no less so when one comes to command oneself (p. 147).

For Montesquieu, the most servile slave becomes the harshest of masters and the harshest of masters becomes the most servile of slave, and in this we find his explanation for why the Romans' unusual political experiences laid the psychological groundwork for the specifically Christian religion. Montesquieu appears to be suggesting that the Romans' previous position as supreme, universal, and uniquely harsh rulers would account for the particular character of the religion to which they turned: having passed from absolute, universal rule to absolute, universal slavery, they developed an unprecedented spirit of servility which induced them to think of themselves as being under the power of a single, supremely mighty, and universal God. Just as Montesquieu anticipates the Marxian understanding of Christianity as the "opiate of the people," so too he anticipates the Nietzschean understanding of Christianity as the "slave religion" *par excellence* (Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, ed. W. Kaufmann [New York: Vintage Books, 1969], Essay I, Section 8, pp. 34–35).

If the universal Roman tyranny contributed to the rise of Christianity in a psychological way, it also accounts for the success of that religion in a more direct, more political manner. The first explicit mention of Christianity occurs in Chapter XVI. Here Montesquieu informs us that the universality of the empire "aided very much the establishment of the Christian religion" (p. 158). Because the empire had grown so large, it became necessary to levy troops from all corners of it. As the emperors were almost all former soldiers, it soon came about that the majority of them were non-Romans, and even barbarians. Gradually, foreign manners, morals, and religions were freely introduced in Rome: "there was no longer anything foreign in the empire, and people were prepared to accept all the customs an emperor might wish to introduce" (p. 148). The universal Roman tyranny thus paved the way for Christianity not only by preparing men's souls for it but also by turning the entire world into a single free market of religions, thereby giving Christianity the chance to reach those who would now be susceptible to its appeal.

Of course, it is doubtful that these two factors alone suffice to explain the tremendous influence that Christianity gained over the Western world, but, in

Chapter XVII, Montesquieu hints at a third: Constantine's use of Christianity for his own political purposes. Much of this chapter is devoted to the reign of Constantine and to the very great impact he had on the empire. This discussion is somewhat perplexing. The title of the chapter leads us to believe that the reader's attention is to be focused on some "Change in the State." For the first two pages, the change to which Montesquieu is referring seems to be the emperors' new-found security and the consequent change in the nature of the tyranny (pp. 164–65). But then Montesquieu turns to a discussion of the great change implemented by Constantine, the division of the empire into East and West, and the issue becomes somewhat confused—what, exactly, *is* the "change in the state" to which Montesquieu is referring? Is it the new style of tyranny? Is it the division of the empire? It may well be that Montesquieu intentionally leaves the reader up in the air on this issue as a means of leading him to recognize the existence of a third possibility, a change that was ultimately of far greater significance than the other two: Constantine's adoption of Christianity. His remarks on Constantine's division of the empire could then be understood as a covert treatment of Constantine's elevation of the Christian religion.

After reading his description of Constantine and his motives, it is easy to see why Montesquieu would have thought it essential to present his view of Constantine's relationship to Christianity covertly. Constantine is usually thought of as a great emperor, primarily because of what he did for the establishment of the new religion. Montesquieu discreetly, but very firmly, rejects the conventional view. After speaking of Constantine for ten paragraphs, he suddenly (and very innocently) makes the following general observation:

The brevity of reigns, the various political parties, the different religions, the particular sects of these religions, have caused the character of the emperors to come down to us extremely distorted. I shall give only two examples. This Alexander, so cowardly in Herodian appears full of courage in Lampridius; this Gratian, so highly praised by Theodorus, is compared by Philostorgus to Nero (p. 169).

Montesquieu names no names and gives no explicit indication of what he is referring to, but the context makes his point very clear: Constantine was not a praiseworthy figure. Only because of the power of Christianity, from his time down to Montesquieu's own, is Constantine thought of as great. The Christians protect his reputation because their own is closely linked to it, and this makes it difficult for Montesquieu to express his true thoughts openly. What Montesquieu does express openly is a criticism of Constantine's motives in dividing the empire. We are told that it was personal vanity, the desire to give a new city his name, that led Constantine to "carry the seat of the empire to the East" (p. 166) and there follows a lengthy discussion of the harm this did to the empire. This, of course, is a very strange claim. Montesquieu knows quite well

that Constantine never intended to carry the seat of the empire to the East, that in founding Constantinople, he was creating a new religious capital more than anything else. (See, for example, W. Sinnigen and A. Boak, *A History of Rome to A.D. 565* [New York: Macmillan, 1977] pp. 415–16.) Why does Montesquieu make this “slip”? Undoubtedly because he wishes the reader to see that what he says of Constantine’s political innovations also holds true for his more important religious innovations: Montesquieu suggests that Constantine’s “founding” of Christianity was every bit as much the product of personal vanity, of the desire to spread his name, as his founding of the new city was. Christianity became entrenched in the world, not because of its own merits, but because its entrenchment served the private interests of one of the Roman emperors. Christianity therefore attained its position of preeminence in the world not only because of the servile disposition of the Roman people and the lack of religious orthodoxy under the empire, but also because the power of the emperors was so great that they were able to shape the fortunes of particular religions for very personal ends.

If we accept the suggestion that Montesquieu’s discussion of Constantine’s motives in founding Constantinople is at the same time a discussion of his motives in establishing Christianity, a difficult question arises. Is the discussion of the effects of that founding also meant to be a reflection of Montesquieu’s opinion of the effects of Christianity on the empire? Does Montesquieu believe that Christianity weakened the empire in the same way that he suggests the founding of Constantinople did? The discussion of Constantine in Chapter XVII prepares the reader for the unannounced discussion, at the beginning of Chapter XIX, of the political effects of Christianity on Rome.

II. THE EFFECTS OF CHRISTIANITY ON THE ROMAN EMPIRE

Montesquieu begins Chapter XIX by informing us that the simultaneity of the emergence of Christianity and the weakening of the empire led to a vehement dispute. The Christians blamed the pagans for Rome’s problems. They argued that Diocletian’s division of power (the tetrarchy) had ruined the empire because “each emperor wanted to spend as much and to maintain as strong armies as if he were alone” (p. 176). As a result of this tendency, claimed the Christians, taxes were increased so drastically that much of the empire’s land was simply abandoned. The pagans, on the other hand, did not accept this argument. They believed that it was the widespread acceptance of Christianity that was really to blame for Rome’s troubles: “as previously, in a flourishing Rome, the floodings of the Tiber and the other effects of nature were attributed to the anger of the gods, so now, in dying Rome, misfortunes were imputed to the new cult and to the overthrow of the old altars” (p. 176). As an example of the “most popular” and therefore “most seductive” of these arguments, Montesquieu paraphrases a letter of the prefect Symmachus:

“What can better lead us to knowledge of the gods,” he said, “than the experience of our past prosperity? We must remain faithful to so many centuries, and follow our fathers who so successfully followed theirs. Imagine that Rome is speaking to you and is saying: Great princes, fathers of the country, respect my years, during which I have always observed the ceremonies of my ancestors. This cult has subjected the universe to my laws; by it, Hannibal was repulsed from my walls and the Gauls from the Capitol. It is for the gods of the country that we ask peace; we ask it for the native gods. We do not enter into disputes fit only for idlers, and we wish to offer prayers, not blows” (p. 177).

To conclude this discussion, Montesquieu then summarizes the responses of three Christian authors to the position of Symmachus. Unwilling, or at least unable, to blame the pagan religion for Rome's problems, these writers content themselves with absolving their own. Orosius' history was written with the intention of demonstrating that Christianity could not be regarded as the source of Rome's evils since equally great evils had always existed in the world. Salvianus' book attempted to demonstrate that the cause of Rome's troubles was really the dissoluteness of the pagans themselves. Finally, in *The City of God* St. Augustine made the argument that “the city of heaven was different from the city of earth where the ancient Romans, for some human virtues, had received rewards as vain as these virtues” (p. 177).

As we have noted, Montesquieu delivers no explicit judgment as to the relative merits of these competing claims. Nevertheless, a fairly clear picture of his view can be derived from certain hints that are left us in this passage.

Montesquieu rejects Symmachus' position, but not for the reasons one would first suppose. It would be tempting to simply dismiss the Symmachean argument on the grounds that the pagan religion it extols is absurd. Such a conclusion would be unwarranted. Symmachus' argument does not presuppose the truth of the Roman religion; his argument is actually an attempt to prove it. Symmachus offers a truly anthropocentric account of the gods. He maintains that one learns the truth about the gods by looking to what is good for oneself—the success of the past vindicates the gods of the past. For this reason, one cannot reject Symmachus' political views on the grounds of dissatisfaction with his religious “presuppositions.” He has no religious presuppositions because he himself holds religion to be determined by politics, that is, by success or failure in the political world.

Montesquieu's attack on Symmachus takes another route. His approach is to refute Symmachus by offering a political (that is, nonreligious) explanation for Rome's political circumstances. The pagan practice seems to be to look for divine intentions in temporal matters as a means of making temporal suffering less fearsome. Men persuade themselves that great calamities have their origins in divine will and this is reassuring, not only because it gives meaning to those calamities but also because it offers some hope of controlling them in the future. Montesquieu's response to this practice seems to be that appeals to divine explanations are not necessary when temporal explanations can be found. It is

significant that the example of this pagan practice to which Montesquieu refers is the flooding of the Tiber. In Chapter XIV, he had already made reference to the flooding of a river and, on that occasion, the flooding was to be understood as a metaphor for the tyranny (p. 143). Montesquieu's equation here of the two pagan views that Christianity was responsible for Rome's ruin and that the gods were responsible for the flooding of the Tiber is a clear indication of where he thinks the blame for Rome's problems really belongs—with the tyranny. Indeed, this is the position Montesquieu developed with great care in Chapters XIII–XVIII. In Chapter XVIII it is shown that the reason the Romans were unable to stop the barbarians was that they had lost their old maxims and the loss of these old maxims is said to be the result of the inability of the soldiers (who had by this point become the real masters of the regime) to discipline themselves (pp. 173–75). The rise of the army to a position of mastery in the regime was in turn said to be the result of the tyranny of the emperors, which had destroyed any sense of moderation that the soldiers might have had (pp. 151–52, 162).

Yet if Montesquieu rejects the position taken by Symmachus, it is not clear that he simply endorses those of the Christians. It is obvious that he cannot be in agreement with the stand taken by Orosius. Even if it were true that “there had always been as great evils in the world as those complained of by the pagans” it is by no means evident that within one particular part of the world—the Roman part—men had always been so badly off. The very title of Montesquieu's book indicates just how impossible it would be for him to accept the argument made by Orosius. Montesquieu probably finds the arguments of Salvianus reasonable, but would undoubtedly ask whether Salvianus really gets to the bottom of the issue. From Montesquieu's perspective, the moral disorder of the pagans was ultimately the result of their political disorder.² As for St. Augustine's argument, Montesquieu's position is one of only partial agreement. To the extent that this argument is a response to Symmachus' suggestion that the truth about the gods is determined by the this-worldly success of those who worship them, Montesquieu is certainly in agreement with Augustine. His own criticism of Symmachus seems to be founded on precisely this distinction between this world and the next. To the extent that Augustine is asserting the relative unattractiveness of this-worldly greatness, however, it is unlikely that Montesquieu would endorse his position—again, this is apparent from Montesquieu's very choice of the “greatness of the Romans” as a suitable theme of study.

In any event, the common point on which all of the Christian writers agree is that politics and religion are two separate matters and it is in this respect that they and Symmachus are in fundamental disagreement: while Symmachus argues that religious factors are at the root of Rome's political problems (and hence, that there must be a religious solution to the political problem), the Christians insist that these two realms are separate, that political problems require political solutions.

But are the realms of politics and religion as completely separate as the Christian authors insist? Montesquieu raises certain doubts in our minds. We note that he describes Symmachus' arguments as the "most popular" and "most seductive" objections to Christianity and its effects. This clearly implies the existence of other objections, objections which, although not as popular as those made by Symmachus, might, in fact, be more powerful. What might these objections be? A very clear indication is given in the paragraph in which Montesquieu describes the response of the three Christian writers to Symmachus' letter. We reported above that Montesquieu summarizes Salvianus' argument as a claim that it was the dissoluteness of the pagans that was the true cause of Rome's weakness. That is not exactly what is written in the text of the *Greatness and Decline*, however. Our presentation of the summary of Salvianus' argument has been slightly emended to correct an "obvious" mistake on Montesquieu's part. While Salvianus' book clearly focuses on the moral decrepitude of the pagans, Montesquieu actually describes it as an account of the moral decrepitude of the *Christian*: "Salvianus wrote his book, in which he maintained that it was the dissoluteness of the *Christians* that had attracted the ravages of the barbarians."³ Now surely where Montesquieu says "Christians" one ought to read "pagans," not only because that is what Salvianus actually said, but also because Montesquieu's designation of Salvianus as a defender of the Christian faith against the attacks of Symmachus would otherwise make no sense at all. Yet even if the reader has the right to substitute "pagan" for "Christian" in this context, and important question still remains: Did Montesquieu make a mistake here? Or to put the matter more precisely, is his mistake intentional or unintentional? After all, the *Greatness and Decline* is not only a book written with extreme care; it is one that Montesquieu constantly reread and rethought. Indeed, he went so far as to personally correct the entire book for a new edition in 1748. In light of this kind of attention to the text, it is very difficult to imagine that Montesquieu was not aware of what he was saying here.

The implications of interpreting this as an intentional mistake are quite significant. Montesquieu's statement suggests that the objection which Symmachus could have made against Christianity but failed to is this: that the barbarians had been able to subjugate the Romans because of the dissoluteness of the Christians, because the Christian religion had corrupted Rome's military virtue. This, of course, is the objection to Christianity first made by Machiavelli (and later taken up by Gibbon), that it is a pernicious religion because it renders its adherents "effeminate." In Book II, Chapter II of *The Discourses* Machiavelli offers the following comparison of Christianity and the original cult of the Romans:

Our religion has glorified humble and contemplative men more than men of action. It has posited the highest good in humility, abjection, and contempt for human things, whereas the other placed it in greatness of the soul, in strength of the body

and in all the other things suitable for making men very bold. And if our religion demands that you have strength in you, what it wants is that you should be suited to suffering rather than to be able to do bold things. This way of loving, therefore, appears to have rendered the world weak and to have given it over as a prey to the wicked, who are able to run it securely seeing how the generality of men, in order to go to heaven, think more about how to bear their injuries than how to avenge them (*Discorsi Sopra La Prima Deca di Tito Livio in Opere*, Vol. I [Verona: Arnoldo Mondadori, 1949], II, ii, p. 238; translation is my own).

To the extent that there is any truth in this Machiavellian critique, politics and religion are not as separate as Montesquieu's three Christian authors would have us think. Indeed, one begins to realize just why they emphasized the independence of these two realms, and why one of them, Augustus, felt compelled to go so far as to argue that, even if Christianity did have a pernicious effect in worldly terms, this would be no argument against its validity. The great question, of course, is where Montesquieu stands in this debate. Does his discreet hint at what we might call "the Machiavellian position" amount to an endorsement of that position?

Ultimately, the answer to that question must be both yes and no. In Part I of this paper, it was suggested that Montesquieu ascribes much of the success of Christianity to the peculiar political condition of the Roman empire and, in particular, to the existence of a universal tyranny. And, as shown above, a careful examination of Chapters XIII–XVIII of the *Greatness and Decline* reveals that Montesquieu believes the fall of the Roman empire to have been caused by the tyranny of the emperors. Christianity can *not* be held responsible for the fall of the Roman empire because it, like the loss of the ancient Roman military virtue, was a by-product of the tyranny. Christianity was ultimately an effect, and not the cause, of Rome's weakness. Montesquieu clearly implies this in the very first sentence of Chapter XIX: Christianity was established "in the time that the empire was weakening" (p. 176). At the same time, however, it seems fair to suggest that once Rome was already in decline, Christianity may well have contributed to an acceleration in her decrepitude. Indeed, it is probable that it is to make precisely this point that Montesquieu introduces the whole issue in such a guarded manner—had he thought Christianity to be completely blameless in this regard, there would have been no reason not to address the issue openly. In the final analysis, then, it appears that Montesquieu does believe that Christianity was partially responsible for the weakness of the Roman empire.

III. THE EFFECTS OF CHRISTIANITY ON THE GREEK EMPIRE

In the final four chapters of the *Greatness and Decline of the Romans*, a series of chapters devoted to the "Eastern" or "Greek" (that is, the Byzantine)

empire, Montesquieu develops a second, and ultimately more damaging, criticism of the political effects of Christianity. Here Christianity is presented not merely as a force that accelerated the corruption of a very sick regime; on the contrary, in Chapters XX–XXIII, the Christian religion (or to speak more precisely, a particular use of that religion) is singled out as the great cause of the collapse of a political order.

The core of Montesquieu's argument about the effects of Christianity on the Eastern or Greek empire is contained in Chapter XXII, one of the longest in the book. Toward the end of that chapter, Montesquieu summarizes his discussion as follows:

The most vicious source of all the misfortunes of the Greeks is that they never knew the nature or the limits of ecclesiastical and secular power, which made them fall, on both sides, into continual aberrations.

This great distinction, which is the base on which the tranquility of peoples rests, is founded not only on religion, but also on reason and nature, which ordain that things that are really separate and can only endure as separate should never be confused (p. 203).

It is the lack of a proper separation of church and state that lies at the heart of the Eastern empire's problems and Montesquieu's main intention in this chapter is to explain how, precisely, this brought about the destruction of that empire. In the pages that follow, we shall try to summarize that argument as briefly as possible.

The key to Montesquieu's account of the manner in which the inadequate separation of spiritual and temporal power ruined the Greek empire is his presentation of the priestly soul. In the twenty-fifth paragraph, he suggests that the sense of self-abnegation which lies at the heart of the priestly spirit must ultimately turn against itself:

Here is a strange contradiction of the human mind. The ministers of religion among the first Romans, not being excluded from the charges of civil society, involved themselves little in its affairs. When the Christian religion was established, the ecclesiastics, who were more removed from worldly affairs, involved themselves in them with moderation. But when, in the decline of the empire, the monks were the sole clergy, these men, destined by more particular vows to flee and fear worldly affairs, seized every occasion to take part in them; they never stopped making a stir everywhere and agitating that world they had left (p. 199).

Montesquieu's suggestion here is that, precisely because the ecclesiastical life prohibits the satisfaction of certain natural "worldly" desires, when given the chance priests will demonstrate an unnaturally powerful fixation with political power, simply as an outlet for those passions that have been unnaturally repressed. The more removed from the temporal realm the priests find themselves, the more fiercely will they try to compensate for their condition by pursuing (and abusing) political power.⁴

This peculiar deformity of the priestly soul, according to Montesquieu, can have disastrous consequences, not only for the political world but for religion as well. Allowing the priests to get involved in politics is dangerous to religion because this tempts them to manipulate and distort religious dogma in order to exploit it for political gain. Montesquieu tells us, for example, that the position of the monks in the wars over icons (a dispute that tore the empire apart) was determined not by theological considerations but by the monks' calculation of which dogmas would maximize their political power.

What is of greater immediate concern to us, however, is the temporal effect of ecclesiastical involvement in politics. Montesquieu claims that the political life of the Greek empire was thoroughly dominated by the monks:

No affairs of state, no peace, no war, no truce, no negotiation, nor marriage was arranged except through the monks. The prince's councils were full of them and the nation's assemblies almost wholly composed of them (p. 199).

He goes on to argue that "the evil this caused was beyond belief" (p. 199), and the chapter gives numerous examples. The emperors Basil and Leo were either persuaded or forced to keep their soldiers occupied with the construction of churches while barbarians pillaged the provinces (p. 199). Andronicus Palaeologus disbanded his navy, having been assured by the monks that God was so happy with his zeal for the peace of the Church that his enemies would not dare attack him (p. 199). And even in battle, generals were said to have lifted sieges and lost cities for the sake of procuring religious relics (p. 196).

But the dangerous effects of the monks' power were not limited to the military sphere. Montesquieu argues that one of the monks' most harmful practices was their habit of stirring up doctrinal disputes as a means of protecting their privileged position. He compares the monks to the Scythians presented at the beginning of the fourth book of Herodotus' work who blinded their slaves in order to keep them submissive. Like the Scythians, the monks tried to blind the laity to their own political powers and pretensions by diverting the public's attention to disputes over icons and dogma. This was a sure means of preoccupying the laity because religious quarrels are by definition passionate and interminable:

In ordinary disputes, since each senses that he can be wrong, stubbornness and obstination are not extreme; but in those that we have over religions, since, by the nature of the thing, each is sure that his opinion is true, we are indignant with those who, instead of changing themselves, obstinately insist on making us change (p. 201).

The religious divisions that were stirred up by the monks tore the empire apart for centuries. Indeed, Montesquieu indicates that these quarrels were so intense that the Greeks often forgot about their very freedom and self-preservation:

The furor of disputes became such a natural state to the Greeks that, when Cantacuzene took Constantinople, he found the Emperor John and the Empress Ann

occupied with a council against some enemies of the monks. And when Mohammed II besieged the city, he could not suspend the theological hatreds; and people were more occupied there with the Council of Florence than with the army of Turks (p. 201).

It is because of incidents like these that Montesquieu declares, at the end of the chapter, that the failure to separate ecclesiastical and secular power was the ultimate cause of the destruction of the Greek empire. In the very last paragraph of the chapter, however, Montesquieu makes it clear that this problem is not unique to the Greek empire; in a very devious way, he suggests that it is also quite a serious problem in his own time.

This is indicated to us in a very peculiar presentation of the status of religion among the “ancient Romans,” that is, the Romans of the republican age. Montesquieu argues that the Romans followed the “natural” and “reasonable” course, rigorously distinguishing between ecclesiastical and secular power: “although, with the ancient Romans, the clergy did not constitute a separate body, this distinction was as well known to them as it is among us” (p. 203). He then goes on to cite a story which is supposed to confirm this claim:

Clodius had consecrated Cicero's house to Liberty and Cicero, having returned from exile, demanded it back. The pontiffs decided that if it had been consecrated without an express order of the people, it could be returned to him without offending against religion. “They declared,” said Cicero, “that they had only examined the validity of the consecration, and not the law made by the people; that they had judged the first matter as pontiffs and that they would judge the second as senators” (p. 203).

Oddly enough, this story seems to point to the absence rather than the presence of a separation of church and state in republican Rome. The offices of senator and pontiff may have been distinct in principle, but who can fail to see that since they were always filled by the very same men, church and state were in effect fused into one element? Because the Roman “pontiffs” were merely senators wearing different hats, this meant that there was no real distinction between secular and ecclesiastical power in the Roman republic—Clodius had used his religious power to strike at his political enemy Cicero and Cicero was able to have the religious act in question overturned only by virtue of his later political victory (Plutarch, *Life of Cicero*, xxviii–xxxiv). The example thus establishes the very antithesis of the point Montesquieu was trying to make.

But why does Montesquieu choose such an obviously problematic example here? Are we to attribute this to a kind of sloppiness or even obtuseness on his part? A moment's reflection points to a much more likely possibility. As Montesquieu claimed at the outset of the paragraph that the ancient Romans and the modern French (or perhaps by “us” modern Europeans in general) had an equally good understanding of the proper distinction between ecclesiastical and secular power, his presentation of the Cicero story allows him to make, with the greatest of delicacy, a very dangerous, but very important point: the French

do not properly understand the “natural” and “reasonable” principle that “really separate things” (spiritual and temporal power), things that “can only subsist when separate,” must “never by confused” (p. 203). Church and state are as badly confused in modern France as they were in ancient Rome.

At this point, Montesquieu’s true intentions in discussing the “Greek empire” should be quite clear. David Lowenthal has pointed out that if the *Greatness and Decline* were merely a work of history, a history of “the Romans,” these final four chapters on “the Greeks” would be superfluous (Lowenthal, pp. 144–45). This remark appears to be just. Montesquieu does not append these four chapters to the work because he is interested in Byzantine history for its own sake; he does so because they allow him, under the cover of a discussion of an ancient and far-off land, to express a very harsh criticism of one of the predominant political features of his time, the interconnection of religious and political power.

Any student of French history can, of course, see what it is that Montesquieu is worried about. At the time of the composition of the *Greatness and Decline*, religious conflict had been tearing France apart for almost two centuries. As recently as 1685 Louis XIV, under pressure from the clergy, had revoked the Edict of Nantes, effectively banning the practice of Protestantism in France and chasing many of the country’s most valuable and most productive citizens abroad; and throughout Montesquieu’s lifetime, the vicious struggle between Jansenists and Jesuits—a struggle in which the monarchy took a very active part—continued to disturb the peace of the land (André Maurois, *A History of France* [London: Jonathan Cape, 1949], pp. 219–20; cf. *The Persian Letters*, letters XXIV and LXXXV). To anyone even remotely acquainted with the history of France in the age of Montesquieu, then, the irony of the suggestion that the French had achieved a perfect understanding of the “natural” distinction between ecclesiastical and secular power would be painfully obvious.

If the failure to properly distinguish between church and state was “the most vicious source of all the misfortunes of the Greeks,” one wonders if Montesquieu does not regard the lack of an adequate distinction between the two in France as a very grave threat to his own nation. At the very least, one would expect him to have some sort of strategy for improving the situation, for establishing a better separation of ecclesiastical and secular power. As might be expected, Chapter XXII itself contains several indications as to how Montesquieu thought such an enterprise might be carried out.

There are two passages within this chapter in which the theme is the reform of a corrupted church. In one of these passages, Montesquieu deals with the situation in the Greek empire itself. Paragraph 17 opens with the claim that, at one point,

[t]here nearly took place, in the East, much the same revolution that occurred about two centuries ago in the West when, with the revival of letters, people began to sense the abuses and irregularities into which they had fallen (p. 197).

Unfortunately, the potentially useful effects of this proto-Renaissance were completely negated by the impetuous actions of more impatient reformers. Just as the revival of letters had led people to begin to seek a reasonable solution for the problem, "men who were bold, but insufficiently docile, shattered the church instead of reforming it" (p. 197). Montesquieu claims that the open war that the iconoclastic emperors chose to wage against the monks and their abuses was counterproductive. The explanation for this can be found in paragraph 42 of this chapter, where Montesquieu argues that "there exists in each nation a general spirit, on which power itself is based; and when it [power] shocks this spirit, it strikes against itself and necessarily comes to a standstill" (p. 203). This is a profoundly conservative doctrine, one which counsels slow but steady reform from within, not revolution from outside. The declaration of war against the icons (that is, against the monks) was a failure because it was too radical. As the "general spirit" of the empire was still one of great piety, the open attacks of their enemies gave the monks the opportunity to play their trump card, to fight back by making an appeal to the people for support:

The monks, accused of idolatry by the partisans of the new opinions, threw them off track by accusing them, in turn, of magic. And showing the people the churches stripped of icons and of all that had previously constituted their veneration, they did not let them imagine that such churches could serve any purpose other than sacrificing to devils (pp. 197–98).

If Montesquieu's account of the attempt at reform in the Greek empire is any indication, then, the realization of his own great enterprise will depend not on an open declaration of war, but on a subtle campaign of propaganda. Montesquieu is no Voltaire. He is wise enough to see that an open confrontation with the "general spirit" of his own age would be counterproductive. His strategy is therefore to attempt to gradually and imperceptibly change that spirit from within, to spark a sort of "revival of letters" which, without preaching, will allow people "to begin to sense the abuses and irregularities into which they [have] fallen." The best example of this revival of letters is, of course, the *Greatness and Decline* itself, a work which always suggests but never makes its point explicitly. Montesquieu does not offend the general spirit of his age because he does not openly criticize the French confusion of ecclesiastical and secular power. But what Frenchman, having read the long tale of abuses in the Greek empire that were caused by the political power of the monks, would not begin to sense that there might be something wrong with the great power exercised by the clergy in his own age? To a certain extent, then, the *Greatness and Decline* itself (and, perhaps, other works like it) will be the proper vehicle for gradually bringing into effect the "natural and reasonable" separation of church and state that Montesquieu seeks. The book is thus not only a diagnosis of the illness; it is also, in an odd way, the cure.

The *Greatness and Decline* draws to a close just at the point where the Turks are about to extinguish the Greek empire. Montesquieu's final paragraph is worth quoting in full:

I do not have the courage to speak of the woes that followed. I shall only say that, under the last emperors, the empire, reduced to the suburbs of Constantinople, ended like the Rhine, which is only a brook when it loses itself in the ocean (p. 209).

As David Lowenthal has pointed out, this final metaphor is rather odd (Lowenthal, p. 164). Most rivers are at their widest when they reach the sea. The Rhine is unusual because just before it reaches the ocean most of its waters are diverted into the Waal, a river that flows off *to the west*, leaving the Rhine proper quite small. The significance of this imagery should be obvious. Montesquieu is suggesting that while the Roman empire died out in the East, its essence (let us say its spirit) is alive and vigorous in the West. (For a very different interpretation of this passage, see Lowenthal, pp. 164–65.) But this, of course, is to say that Rome's *problems* are alive and vigorous in Western Europe. The Rhine metaphor is thus Montesquieu's graceful way of reminding the reader that his book on the Romans is "relevant" in the deepest sense, that "one can never leave behind the Romans" (*Spirit of the Laws*, XI, xiii, p. 414) because reflection on the problems of the Romans continues to be the best guide for reflection on the problems of the modern world. To the extent that the question of the relationship between Christianity and politics has today become an issue once more, Montesquieu's claim would seem to be no less true for our time than it was for his own.

NOTES

1. All citations of the works of Montesquieu are to the second volume of the Pléiade edition of the *Oeuvres complètes*. Translations are my own.

2. Montesquieu implies that the moral disorders of the late republic as well had a political cause, namely the expansion of the republic (pp. 121–22). Cf. David Lowenthal, "The Design of Montesquieu's *Considerations*," *Interpretation* (Fall 1970), I.2. pp. 150–51.

3. "Christians" appears both in the Pléiade edition (p. 177) and in the 1734 edition of Desbordes (Amsterdam).

4. The fact that the monks were celibates while "the first ecclesiastics" were not is undoubtedly of some significance here. The curious link between priestly asceticism and the priestly fixation with power is a favorite theme of Montesquieu. See the twisted autobiographical letter of the First Eunuch in *The Persian Letters* (vii). (The eunuchs in Usbek's harem may, to a certain extent, be understood as stand-ins for the clergy.) A similar thought is also expressed in Book v, Chapter ii of *The Spirit of the Laws*:

Why do monks love their order so much? It is precisely because of what makes it intolerable. Their rule deprives them of all the things the ordinary passions aim at: there remains, therefore, only that passion for the rule itself which afflicts them. The more austere it is, the more it restrains their passions, the more power it gives to the only passion it leaves unrestrained (p. 274).