

Interpretation

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Natural Religion in Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* and *The Spirit of the Laws*

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Abstract: This paper explores Montesquieu's treatment of natural religion in the *Persian Letters* and *The Spirit of the Laws*. I discuss in detail the moral psychology behind Usbek's support of natural religion in the *Persian Letters*. I argue that Montesquieu wants his best readers to see Usbek's natural religion has a moral backbone that, at bottom, is quite similar to the religious fanaticism that Montesquieu aims to moderate. In the second half of my paper, I consider Montesquieu's presentation of natural religion in books 24 and 25 of *The Spirit of the Laws*. I argue that his rhetorical presentation of natural religion is heavily shaped by his aim of encouraging religious toleration. While natural religion is useful for moderating religious fanaticism, I show that Montesquieu indicates that the softening effect of natural religion is compatible with despotism; the value of natural religion is limited to a specific context. I conclude with some remarks on the type of citizen Montesquieu aims to cultivate and the place natural religion has in such a citizen's life.

I. INTRODUCTION TO THE *PERSIAN LETTERS*

The bulk of Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* consists of letters written by Usbek and Rica, two Muslims visiting France. Rica's letters are primarily social commentary critical of particular French customs. Usbek's letters fall primarily into two categories: various moral, philosophic, and theological criticisms of France and Christianity (as practiced in France in the early 1700s) and issues relating to his seraglio. One might think that the most obvious way of reading the *Persian Letters* is to associate the criticisms made by Usbek and Rica with those of Montesquieu, that is, an obvious way to read the *Persian Letters* is to assume that these men are simply the mouthpieces of Montesquieu; accordingly, Montesquieu would have chosen two Muslims

as his mouthpieces simply as a way of providing plausible distance from his more dangerous or unpopular criticisms.¹

There is something to be said for the approach just described; the criticisms the two men make, as criticisms, are capable of persuading the reader. Perhaps it would be irresponsible of Montesquieu if he did not want his readers to be persuaded by the criticisms of his major characters. That being said, there is an equally obvious reason to distance the character of Usbek, at least, from the author Montesquieu: Usbek's private life is in disorder; his seraglio is falling apart.² If the fact that Usbek's domestic life becomes increasingly disordered as the narrative progresses does not serve to refute his theoretical claims, then it at least calls their value into question. To exaggerate for the sake of clarity, if one behaves and thinks as Usbek does, then one's private life will fall apart. How are we to reconcile the two threads of Usbek, that is, how are we to reconcile Usbek's failed domestic situation with the fact that his theoretical criticisms are appealing and are meant to be appealing?

The most obvious answer would be that Montesquieu aims to undercut both the theoretical life in general and Christianity, at least as practiced in France in the early 1700s, in particular; the private disaster undercuts the theoretical life and the criticisms of Christianity undercut Christianity. This approach is on the right track, but needs to be modified. The criticisms Usbek makes of Christianity have a moral foundation as distinct from a strictly theological foundation; they could apply equally well to Judaism or Islam. In fact, Usbek's criticisms lack theoretical rigor; instead, they are grounded in *demands* he makes in the name of justice.

¹ For a list of attempts to determine how the *Persian Letters* is a coherent (or incoherent) whole see Diana J. Schaub, *Erotic Liberalism: Women and Revolution in Montesquieu's "Persian Letters"* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995), 163n45.

² Schaub and Starobinski are right to treat Usbek as a unified literary character, and both authors emphasize that Usbek is a product of Persia. "The very ambiguity of Usbek's contradictory, 'divided' character requires an interpretation that fully justifies Montesquieu's decision to make him as he is. The contradiction between Usbek's intellectual predilections and his private behavior is significant; is an object lesson. His appeal to universal reason is sincere and heartfelt (as can be seen from the views he expresses about justice, truth, virtue, and many other topics), yet he remains in some respects the product of a particular civilization and moral code, a man educated and shaped by a historical tradition" (Jean Starobinski, *Blessings in Disguise; Or, The Morality of Evil*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993], 75). "The despot himself is not the culprit. To put it in terms we are all too familiar with: he is a product of the system. Montesquieu's protagonist Usbek is just such a reluctant despot, a despot not by his own desire or design. Usbek is presented to us as an enlightened and virtuous man whom we nevertheless see authorizing and perpetuating horrible cruelties" (Schaub, *Erotic Liberalism*, 23). I differ from both by arguing that Usbek is fundamentally a moral ascetic; that he is Persian merely colors and bolsters his asceticism.

Montesquieu's purpose regarding Usbek's criticisms is twofold. Assume the reader shares the same moral convictions as Usbek and has a similar understanding of justice. This type of reader will find Usbek's criticisms straightforwardly persuasive. A man of religious zeal impressed by the moral seriousness of a man like Usbek may find himself either replacing his religion with a gentler natural religion that does not rely on claims to divine revelation, or, more likely, relaxing his attachment to the content of his religion not linked explicitly with morality, such as ceremony or belief in certain miracles. This hypothetical reader's underlying moral concerns and beliefs would remain fundamentally unaffected; he would simply be redirected from a harsh variant of, say, Christianity to or toward natural religion. Now, for a different kind of reader, Usbek serves as a psychological case study. He illustrates, among other things, the moral hopes and demands that breathe life into certain religious claims. While it is Usbek's particular political and religious situation that allows him to have a seraglio in the first place, the seraglio is falling apart for the same reason that Usbek rejects the harshness of certain claims made on behalf of revealed religion; the same ascetic morality that allows him to make demands on God in the name of justice leads him to treat the women of his seraglio with unseemly contempt.

II. THE NATURAL RELIGION OF USBEK

The *Persian Letters* begins by presenting three different ways of life that might be of interest to Usbek: that of the pious adherent of revealed religion (in this case as a Shiite Muslim), that of the philosopher, and that of the moral man. The first action we read of, in the first paragraph of the first letter, is the pious devotion Usbek makes at the tomb of Fatima.³ Furthermore, when leaving Persia and entering Turkey, Usbek reports that, as he entered the country of the "treacherous Osmanlis," it seemed to him that he was "becoming more profane" (6.2).⁴ The stated religious concerns of Usbek color the first reason he gives his friend Rustan for leaving Persia with Rica: "We were born in a flourishing kingdom, but we did not believe that its borders were those of our knowledge, and that Oriental light alone should enlighten

³ In fact, Usbek conflates two different Fatimas. This is either *Usbek's* error, that is, we are immediately presented with evidence that Usbek's pious devotion is perfunctory, or the error is *Montesquieu's*, that is, Montesquieu made a genuine error. However this may be, Montesquieu aims to make the reader's very first impression of Usbek one of a man who pays pious respect, an aim he may or may not undercut as he makes it. See Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, trans. Stuart D. Warner and Stéphane Douard (South Bend, IN: St Augustine's, 2017), 5n3.

⁴ All parenthetical references to the *Persian Letters* are by letter number followed by the paragraph number and taken from Warner and Douard's translation.

us” (1.3). To what extent are Usbek’s philosophic concerns linked to his religious concerns? This question turns out to be a red herring. In a subsequent letter to Rustan, Usbek reveals the real reason he left Persia: “I appeared at court from my most tender youth. I am able to say it: my heart was not corrupted there. I even formed a great design: I dared to be virtuous there. As soon as I knew vice, I drew away from it; but afterwards I approached vice in order to unmask it. I carried truth up to the foot of the throne. I spoke a language there until then unknown; I confounded flattery; and at the same time, I astonished the worshippers and the idol.” Usbek’s uncompromising concern for moral virtue made him “some enemies” and aroused “the jealousy of some ministers, without [attracting] the favor of the prince”; Usbek flees under the pretext of education (8.2). While he is decidedly concerned with morality, neither religious nor philosophic concerns are the motive for his journey.⁵

As Usbek moves deeper into Turkey he writes a letter to a mullah lamenting that he is in “the midst of a profane people” (16.4). His apparent religious concern, however, has an underlying moral concern; he asks the mullah to “distinguish [him] from the wicked, as one distinguishes at the break of dawn, the white thread from the black” (16.4). While it makes sense for an author to have a Shiite character lament the wickedness of his Sunnite surroundings, what is most striking is that Usbek’s request is made in stark terms; he should be distinguished as white from black. Usbek’s comment indirectly references a passage of the Koran stating when men are allowed to be intimate with their wives during Ramadan. Usbek asks for distinction even when referencing a passage designed to allow for union; given the overarching plot of the *Persian Letters*, it is striking that Usbek asks for distinction by referring to a passage designed to bring men and women together. And while this letter to the mullah uses religious terminology, we do not see Usbek’s genuine concern until he sends the mullah a second letter: “I have doubts; they must be resolved. I feel that my reason is straying; lead it back to the right path” (17.1). These doubts are related to the prohibitions against eating pigs and touching corpses: “It seems to me that things in themselves are neither pure nor impure; for I cannot conceive of a single quality inherent in any object that can make the things in themselves be such. Mud appears dirty to us only because it offends our sight or some other of our senses—but in itself it is no dirtier than gold or diamonds” (17.2). How can the senses serve as the rule

⁵ See Stuart D. Warner, “Montesquieu’s Literary Art: An Introduction to *Persian Letters*,” in Warner and Douard, *Persian Letters*, xiv.

when what appears agreeable to one will appear disgusting to another? If the individual's senses are sole judge of the purity of something, then "unless one can say that each can, by his fancy, decide this point and distinguish, on those matters that concern him," then the senses ought not be used as the standard (17.3). Revealed divine law, at least in these instances, comes to sight for Usbek as either confused or tyrannical when held up to the moral demand that the law be good, understood as in accordance with reason.

After Usbek has been in Paris for approximately eight months, he writes a letter to another religious authority, a dervish who happens to be his cousin. Here his concern is over Christians: "I know well that they will not go to the abode of the prophets, and that the great Hali did not come for them. But because they have not been fortunate enough to find mosques in their country, do you believe that they are condemned to eternal chastisements, and that God will punish them for not having practiced a religion that he has not made known to them?" (35.1). Two of Usbek's observations in particular are worth considering. He notes that Christian "priests and monks pray, like us, seven times a day" (35.3). Usbek is more impressed by ascetic devotion than by the particular content of the ascetic devotion, but he is mistaken about the extent to which a Muslim should pray.⁶ Muslims should pray five times a day; in *The Spirit of the Laws* Montesquieu states that "they pray five times a day, and each time they must do something that makes them turn their backs on all that belongs to this world" (24.11.2).⁷ Usbek is not greatly concerned about the particulars of his religion, but he errs on the side of ascetic distance from the world. Again, according to Usbek, Christians "recognize, as we do, the insufficiency of their own merits, and the need they have for an intercessor close by God" (35.3). Usbek is primarily concerned with ascetic moral merit.

After having spent two years abroad, Usbek indicates that there is no fundamental difference between the moral merit of Christian and Muslim holy men. Usbek still honors the holy men of various revealed religions, but solely on grounds of ascetic moral merit. For Usbek, a Christian ascetic holy man would be superior to a normal Muslim: "God has chosen for himself, from every corner of the earth, souls purer than others, which he has separated from the impious world" (93.2). This letter is a thinly veiled call for religious toleration, but part of what makes religious toleration possible for

⁶ *Persian Letters*, 57n68.

⁷ All parenthetical references to *The Spirit of the Laws* are by book number followed by chapter and paragraph number and taken from Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. Anne M. Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller, and Harold Samuel Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

Usbek is his admiration for religious ascetics as such: "If what they say about them is true, their lives [i.e., those of early Christian saints] were as full of marvels as those of our most sacred imams" (93.3). While Usbek does not speak of "sensible Muslims," it is easy enough to determine what he thinks of incredible tales as such: "Sensible Christians look upon all these stories as a quite natural allegory that can serve to make us feel the unhappiness of the human condition. In vain we seek in the desert for a tranquil state. Temptations always follow us; our passions, represented by demons, still do not leave us" (93.4). The isolation of holy men, that is, their apparent lack of social comforts, causes their passions to go haywire; the ensuing struggle speaks to their moral merit and not, as one might imagine, their imprudence.

Usbek spells out the content of his conception of religion in a letter to Rhedi on religious disputes. "I see people here who endlessly dispute about religion; but it seems at the same time that they fight over who will observe it the least. Not only are they not better Christians, but they are not even better citizens—and this is what strikes me" (46.1-2). Apparently ardent believers—men willing to kill each other on the strength of their beliefs—are worse Christians *because* they are bad citizens. While Usbek's use of the phrase "not even" implies that it is more important to be a proper adherent of the right religion than to be a good citizen, this ordering is more of a formality; Usbek's heart lies with religion understood as political decency: "For under whatever religion one lives, the observation of laws, love of men, and piety toward one's parents are always the first acts of religion" (46.2). Indeed, if the "first act of a religious man" is to "please the divinity," then "the surest means for succeeding at this is doubtlessly to observe the rules of society and the duties of humanity; for under whatever religion one lives, from the moment it is supposed, it must also be supposed that God loves, since he established one religion in order to make them happy; that if he loves them, one is assured of pleasing him by also loving them, that is to say, in practicing all the duties of charity and humanity toward them, and in not violating the laws under which they live" (46.3). Usbek is confident that he speaks for the divinity even as he speaks against the specific claims of revealed religion. Acting on the authority of his own moral beliefs, he runs roughshod over the various claims of revealed religion: "ceremonies do not have any degree of goodness by themselves; they are good only in regard to and on the supposition that God has commanded them. But this is a matter of great discussion. It is easy to be deceived about it, for the ceremonies of one religion must be chosen from among the ceremonies of two thousand" (46.4). Usbek takes on religious authority, that is, acts as a theologian prepared to state what God

wants, solely on the basis of the strength of his ascetic moral beliefs. He concludes his letter by instructing Rhedi on the proper way to pray to God. His moral concerns lead him to speak and instruct others on behalf of God; even while giving voice to moderate religious practices that we might be inclined to approve of, Usbek begins to reveal himself as a potential tyrant or, if that characterization is thought to be too extreme at this point, then as presumptuous and self-satisfied.

Usbek presents his metaphysical suppositions in two subsequent letters respectively critical of adherents of revealed religion and philosophers. While the “spirit of intolerance” previously animated Christians, they are beginning to understand “that the zeal for the progress of religion is different from the affection that one should have for it, and that in order to love and observe it, it is not necessary to hate and persecute those who do not observe it” (60.6). Indeed, it “would be desirable that our Muslims think as sensibly on this subject as the Christians” (60.7). The spirit of tolerance is a fundamental moral presupposition for Usbek; it stems from his understanding of justice, which begins to be spelled out in his more detailed metaphysical letter criticizing philosophy.

Usbek calls his metaphysical letter to Rhedi the “outpouring of my philosophy” (69.1). While Usbek thinks he is providing theoretical support for his moral-religious claims, the reader is allowed to see that his moral-religious claims are, in fact, the foundation of his theoretical claims. He begins by distancing himself from what the “most sensible philosophers” have said about “the nature of God”; while they have “grossly abused this idea,” the idea itself is sound (69.2). At the start of his letter, then, we see that Usbek accepts that God has a set nature without argument. This is important to Usbek; without a set nature, the justice of God could not be guaranteed or even understood. Out of concern for the justice of God, Usbek attacks the concepts of omnipotence and omniscience. Regarding omnipotence: “Often God lacks some perfection that could bestow a great imperfection upon him. But he is never limited, save by himself; *he can neither violate his own promise nor deceive men*. Very often the impotence is not in him, but in relative things; and this is the reason why he cannot change the essence of things” (69.4, my emphasis). The dignity of God seems to demand the perfection of God; Usbek gets around this problem by limiting the power of God. God’s imperfection is limited to an inability to perfect the naturally imperfect; *very often* the impotence is not in Him, but in relative things. Why does Usbek qualify even this understanding of impotence? He could have said that God lacks the power to perfect things outside of Himself and therefore cannot change their essence. The answer to this

question is supplied by his otherwise irrelevant claim that God can neither violate His own promise nor deceive men. God's power has to be limited to prevent Him from being morally responsible for the corruption Usbek sees in the world; God's power has to be limited to prevent "great imperfection" (69.4). If God could lie or deceive men, He would be subject to a greater imperfection than lack of power; He would be subject to a moral imperfection.

Having undercut the omnipotence of God for the sake of justice, Usbek next undercuts the omniscience of God for the sake of the free will: "it is not a matter about which to be surprised that some of our scholars have dared to deny the infinite foreknowledge of God upon this foundation, that it is incompatible with his justice" (69.5). God cannot be omniscient, because "it is not possible that God foresees things that depend on the determination of free causes" (69.6). God would be able to foresee "things that depend on the determination of free causes...[only] by conjecture, which is contradictory with infinite foreknowledge; or else he could see them as the necessary effects that infallibly follow from a cause that would infallibly produce them, which is even more contradictory. For the soul would be free by supposition, but, in fact, it would not be free any more than a billiard ball is free to move when it is struck by another one" (69.7). It is not possible that God be omniscient, then, because God's omniscience would make free will impossible. While Usbek makes no effort to explain why he believes men have free will, free will is clearly more important to him than the omniscience of God. Omniscience is not compatible with the justice of God because omniscience undercuts free will which, in turn, is the necessary requirement for moral merit: "although he can see everything, he does not always use that power. He ordinarily leaves the power of acting or not acting to the creature, so as to leave to him the capability of being worthy or unworthy" (69.8). The foundational starting point of Usbek's theology is moral merit; starting with moral merit, he moves from free will to a contradictory presentation of God's omniscience: on one hand, "it is not *possible* that God foresees things that depend on the determination of free causes," but on the other hand, "although he can see everything he does not always use that power" (69.6, 69.8, my emphasis). Finally, the way one demonstrates moral merit is made clear at the end of the letter: "Humiliating ourselves always, this is to adore him always" (69.12).

After explaining his philosophy, Usbek returns to the theme of justice and God in another letter to Rhedi; this letter begins with a demand in the name of justice: "If there is a God...he must necessarily be just; for if he were not, he would be the most evil and most imperfect of all beings" (83.1). It is hard to say

whether Usbek's concern for moral merit stems from his concern for justice or whether his concern for justice stems from his concern for moral merit; it is possible that these two concepts are so tightly intertwined in his mind that one cannot say that one stems from the other. Usbek thinks he believes that justice is purely rational: "Justice is a relation of congruence.... It is true that men do not always see these relations; when they see them, they often even turn away from them; and their own interest is always what they see the best. Justice raises its voice, but it has trouble making itself heard amidst the tumult of the passions" (83.2-3). Usbek implies that justice is separate from the passions; however, he ends the letter by passionately embracing justice: "When a man examines himself, what satisfaction it is for him to find that he has a just heart! This pleasure, severe as it is, should delight him. He sees his being as much above those who do not have it, as he sees himself above tigers and bears" (83.11). While justice was initially presented as contrary to one's own interest but somehow nevertheless worth pursuing, now it is presented as in one's own interest in terms of pleasure. Furthermore, this pleasure is dependent on the comparison Usbek makes with others: if others behaved justly, such that there was nothing special about the justice of Usbek, then he would no longer take pleasure in it. The joy of behaving justly is the reflective sense of one's own moral superiority; justice is pleasant for Usbek because he thinks he gets nothing out of being just.

By comparison to men, who as needy and passionate sometimes behave unjustly, Usbek thinks the perfection of God demands a God that could not possibly be needy and passionate; this means that it is also "not possible that God should ever do anything unjust. As long as it is supposed that he sees justice, he must necessarily follow it; for he needs nothing, and he is sufficient unto himself, he would otherwise be the wickedest of all beings, since he would be wicked absent any interest" (83.5). Precisely because Usbek is able to imagine that justice is distinct from one's own interest and that wickedness is the preference of one's "own satisfaction to that of others," by analogy he is able to imagine a God without any interest behaving justly. However, if justice *is* in one's interest, then Usbek's analogy falls apart, and not only have we already seen that Usbek takes pleasure in behaving justly, but we should also note that Usbek finds it a "relief for us to know that there is in the heart of all these men an interior principle that fights in our favor and protects us.... Without that, we would have to be in continual dread" (83.8-9).

III. THE SERAGLIO

We have seen that Usbek is both willing to instruct Rhedi on the nature and justice of God in unconditional terms and also to instruct him on the proper way to pray; on the strength of his ascetic moral presuppositions, he is willing to take on the authority of God. Does this make Usbek tyrannical? And if so, is the tyrannical aspect of Usbek linked to his ascetic morality? Asceticism is linked to tyranny because, as was shown with Usbek, the ascetic's moral foundations are the standard by which everything else is forced to fall into place. The bare fact that Usbek behaves tyrannically toward the members of his seraglio is neither controversial nor hard to demonstrate. As Warner puts it, "Usbek will not hesitate to treat every member of the seraglio, from his wives to his eunuchs, monstrously." He even calls Usbek the "principal exemplar of the tyrant."⁸ Why, then, does Usbek's ascetic morality lead him to behave tyrannically toward the members of his seraglio in particular? Usbek thinks that women are *the* spark of the passions most in need of repression. The story of the seraglio has three parts.⁹

The first part introduces us to Usbek's relationship with the women of his seraglio. The second letter shows us how Usbek governs his eunuchs. He orders the first of his black eunuchs both "blindly [to] carry out...every wish" of the women and to "make them carry out the laws of the seraglio" (2.2). If this order, given in religious language, is not contradictory, it is certainly quite challenging. The first black eunuch is "the scourge of vice and the pillar of faithfulness" (2.1). He is urged "always to remember the nothingness out of which" Usbek took him and to exhort the women "to cleanliness" (2.3). Usbek presents himself to his eunuch as something of an angry and omnipotent deity; however, the context of the letter indicates that even at the beginning of his journey Usbek has lost control of his wives. His specific orders are to allow the women to go into the country if they would like, but to keep them

⁸ "Montesquieu's Literary Art," xi.

⁹ Montesquieu presents the *Persian Letters* within the context of a frame in which an anonymous lodging companion of the primary characters merely translated some of the letters he had access to and ordered them thematically; this means that it is the interpretive duty of the reader to compare the order of composition with the dates in which the letters were written to figure out *when* a given character would have had access to the contents of a given letter. Warner spells out the work this entails in "Montesquieu's Literary Art." In their translation, Warner and Douard also provide both notes on the relationship between the lunar calendar used by the Muslim characters and the solar calendar the reader is likely to be familiar with, and also a list comparing the order of presentation of the letters with the order of their composition. Schaub provides a figure (*Erotic Liberalism*, 49) laying out the structure of the three groups of letters sent to Usbek by his wives as well as an appendix intercalating the last set of harem letters with the nonharem letters according to Usbek's perspective. I found the compilations in these two works to be quite helpful.

under close supervision and have any man “seized” who approaches (2.3). In the next letter, Zachi, one of Usbek’s wives, informs him that they ordered the chief eunuch to take them to the country (3.1). The reader’s initial belief is likely to be that the wives are taking advantage of Usbek’s offer; however, when we consider the order of composition of the letters, as distinct from their order of presentation, we see that Zachi’s letter was written before Usbek’s, indicating that Usbek gave permission after the fact.

The reader’s first informed impression, that Usbek is losing control even at the start of the work, is immediately confirmed by what follows; a brief summary of the events of the first part shows sexual frustration on the part of the women of the seraglio and brutality on the part of Usbek, often discussed within the context of religious language. (1) We learn in the fourth letter that Zephis, another of Usbek’s wives, has been disloyal to Usbek with Zelide, one of the eunuchs (this letter would not have reached Usbek at the time of the composition of the letter to the first black eunuch). (2) Fatme, who we later learn has her own seraglio and seems to be less guarded than the rest of the women, ends a letter to Usbek in terms worthy of being spoken to a deity in need of flattery: “I live only to worship you” (7.5). (3) Usbek does not bother responding to the letters of Zachi, Zephis, or Fatme. His first letter to Zachi—the first letter he sends to any of his wives—is penned only when he finds out that she has been unfaithful both with a white eunuch, who will be executed, and Zelide, the same slave Zephis was found with. The language of the letter is remarkable for the religious imagery found within: the white eunuch placed his “sacrilegious” hands on her; the seraglio is a “sacred temple”; she has broken the “holy” morals of her country (20.4). Usbek, when angry, cannot help comparing himself to God and acting with the wrath his sense of justice demands. (4) The same day Usbek pens his letter to Zachi, he pens a letter to the first white eunuch who placed his “sacrilegious foot” where it did not belong, who ought to be aware “of the thunder fully ready to fall,” who is one of many “vile instruments” having no other purpose than “submission, no other soul than [Usbek’s] will, [and] no other hope than [his] felicity” (21.1–2). (5) The only letter he pens to a wife of his own initiative is to his favorite, Roxane. The letter, written with affection, makes it painfully clear that, despite the fact that “heaven” gave her to Usbek to provide for his happiness, she used every means in her power, including the attempt to defend herself with a dagger, to avoid being legally raped by him. To Usbek, her reticence indicates her greater moral merit and is no small part of the reason Usbek trusts and prefers her. She deserved a husband “who himself could repress those desires that [her] virtue alone knows how to subjugate” (26.1).

(6) The first part ends with a letter from Zachi describing another country outing in which a naked bather and a man who approached out of curiosity were “sacrificed” to the “honor” of Usbek and his wives (47.4).

The second part consists of three letters sent to Usbek by his wife Zelis; he responds only to the third. We find out from the first of Zelis’s letters that her slave Zelide—he has been transferred to her by now—would like to get married, even though as a eunuch he will be frustrated; what she says about the eunuch could apply to Usbek in Paris, that is, Usbek has no access to his wives (53). The second letter informs Usbek that she is committing their seven-year-old daughter to the interior apartments of the seraglio. Zelis too uses religious language to describe the seraglio: their daughter will be “deprived of the liberties of childhood” and given a “holy education” within the “sacred walls” of the seraglio (62.1). Zelis ends the letter by observing that the seraglio is a “prison” (62.7). The third letter describes the sad case of the daughter of Soliman, a friend of Usbek’s. Soliman’s daughter, likely innocent, had her face slashed by her new husband, who maintained that she was not a virgin (70.1). This letter ends with an expression of concern: “Fathers are very unfortunate to be exposed to such affronts. If my daughter received a like treatment, I believe that I would die of grief from it” (70.1). The unifying theme of the three letters is that Zelis wants Usbek to return to avoid sexual frustration and to care for and protect their daughter; each letter indicates that the seraglio is a tyrannical institution. Usbek responds that he pities “Soliman, especially as his distress is without liberty” (71.1). He is silent about Soliman’s daughter, and the letter ends by praising Zelis’s treatment of their daughter in a way that endorses the seraglio as an institution.

The work ends with increasingly aggressive letters of rebellion from Zachi, Zelis, and Roxane. While Zachi insults only the eunuchs carrying out Usbek’s orders (157), Zelis flatly states that it is “the tyrant who outrages me, and not the one who carries out the tyranny” (158.2). Finally, after Roxane’s secret lover has been discovered and killed by the eunuchs, she reveals—in the final letter of the work—that she has poisoned not only herself, but also all of the eunuchs; how could Usbek be “credulous enough to imagine that [Roxane] existed in the world only in order to worship [his] every caprice” (161.3)?

Now, when we consider the dates of composition of the letters, we realize that the last two letters *composed* by Usbek are presented to the reader before the string of letters concluding the work with the collapse of the seraglio. Furthermore, these two letters merit close consideration on the grounds that not only are they *written* after the destruction of the seraglio, but also enough

time has passed that Usbek would have had access to the letters pertaining to its collapse. While the work ends on a dramatic high note, the order of presentation of the letters has the effect of obscuring the fact that we are allowed to observe how Usbek responds to and to what degree he is changed by the disaster. In the first of these two letters, Usbek describes the difficulties suffered by witty men and scholars; read in the proper context, the letter comes to sight as a self-serving means for Usbek to blame his wives. Within this letter he includes a letter penned by a scholar; this scholar is noticeably oblivious to his surroundings, killed a woman's pet dog for an experiment, and is thereafter blamed when another dog goes missing. The letter within the letter ends with this lament: "I believe I will never be delivered from the troublesome malice of these women, who, with their yelping voices, ceaselessly deafen me with the funeral orations of all the automata that have died in the last ten years" (145.15). In the light of this letter within a letter, Usbek's statements favoring the scholar over the offended women seem to be a self-portrait: "a scholar can scarcely avoid being reproached for irreligion or heresy," and if he is of "noble mind and has some rectitude in his heart, then he will be subject to a thousand persecutions"; at least he is "more fortunate" than those who "flatter the passions" (145.17-19). Likewise, the second of these two letters gains its proper meaning when read in context. Usbek blames John Law, the economist appointed to the position of controller general of finances of France, for the disastrous economic situation of France. He blames John Law alone; there is not a word of blame for the regent who appointed him. Ostensibly referring to events in France, Usbek states that he has seen "faith in contracts banished, the holiest conventions annihilated, [and] all the laws of families reversed" (146.6). Taken in context, these two letters indicate that Usbek blames his wives and eunuchs rather than himself for what has happened; he learned nothing and thinks he remains pure.

IV. NATURAL RELIGION IN *THE SPIRIT OF THE LAWS*

The preceding sections have shown that, far from being disparate elements presented side by side, the two threads of natural religion and tyranny in Usbek's story are bound together by his ascetic morality. It becomes hard or impossible to think that Montesquieu wholeheartedly shared the natural religion of Usbek. That being said, in the two books of *The Spirit of the Laws* explicitly considering the laws in their relation to the religion established in each country, Montesquieu makes a number of statements on natural

religion that do, in fact, overlap with the statements of Usbek.¹⁰ Given the problems associated with Usbek's statements, problems Montesquieu appears to encourage his readers to notice, what are we to make of the statements Montesquieu makes in his own name? The first thing to notice is that Montesquieu does not make these statements *simply* in his own name. Montesquieu's first qualification concerns religion in general: "As in this work I am not a theologian but one who writes about politics, there may be things that would be wholly true only in a human way of thinking, for they have not been at all considered in relation to the more sublime truths" (24.1.3). Montesquieu's second qualification concerns toleration in particular: "Here we are political men and not theologians, and even for theologians there is much difference between tolerating and approving a religion" (25.9.1). Montesquieu openly admits that he is abstracting from one area of thought and emphasizing another; his rhetorical needs may have a distorting effect on the presentation of his thought.¹¹

Montesquieu follows up his first qualification with comments about the true religion and Christianity: "With regard to the true religion, the slightest fairness will show that I have never claimed to make its interest cede to political interests, but to unite them both; now in order to unite them, they must be known.¹² The Christian religion, which orders men to love one another, no doubt wants the best political laws and the best civil laws for each people, because those laws are, after it, the greatest good men can give and receive" (24.1.4–5). The manner in which Montesquieu writes makes it easy for the reader to assume that the "true religion" is the "Christian religion"; however, this assumption would be hasty.¹³ Is it unfair to think that Montesquieu is ceding the interests of Christianity to political interests when he acknowledges a relationship between climate, government, and religion? And that

¹⁰ Compare how Schaub discusses Usbek's analysis of population in the series of letters from 113 to 122: "In this set of letters, written by Usbek (in his enlightened rather than his despotic mode), the voice of Montesquieu is heard most directly, with essay-like clarity rather than novelistic distance and complication. Many of the positions articulated here can also be found in *The Spirit of the Laws*" (Diana J. Schaub, "The Woman Problem," in *Finding a New Feminism: Rethinking the Woman Question for Liberal Democracy*, ed. Pamela Grande Jensen [Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996], 65n16).

¹¹ For an extensive list of commentators on Montesquieu's religious views, see Andrew Scott Bibby, *Montesquieu's Political Economy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 186n24.

¹² Sullivan rightly claims that a "European reader would naturally assume that [Montesquieu] refers here to Christianity"; however, she does not state an opinion as to why Montesquieu would be vague on this point (Vickie Sullivan, *Montesquieu and the Despotic Ideas of Europe: An Interpretation of "The Spirit of the Laws"* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017], 85).

¹³ See Thomas L. Pangle, *The Theological Basis of Liberal Modernity in Montesquieu's "Spirit of the Laws"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 129.

therefore in “human terms, it seems that climate has prescribed limits to the Christian religion and to the Mohammedan religion” (24.26.3)? To put this differently, how can Montesquieu claim that the Christian religion is the greatest good (24.1.5) when he claims that he is not speaking theologically (24.1.3)? How can Montesquieu exclude Christianity from his discussion of toleration (25.10n17) in a chapter explicitly linked to the one in which he is speaking politically rather than theologically (25.9.1)? Finally, contrary to the explicit statement made excluding Christianity from the need for toleration, doesn't the pitiable letter Montesquieu places in the mouth of a Jew to the Inquisition encourage Christian toleration (25.13)?

The exceptions Montesquieu makes for Christianity have the markings of lip service. In fact, these exceptions are too *obviously* lip service.¹⁴ The shocking thing is the extent to which Montesquieu does not adequately defend himself against the charge of being merely nominally Christian. Consider what he does in book 1: when presenting a sketch of the theological, natural, and moral laws governing men, the only authority he cites is the pagan Plutarch (1.1n1). He is utterly silent in book 1 when it comes to Christianity. He goes out of his way to provide a shabby defense against the accusation that he is not a serious Christian. Why should he do this? Montesquieu's morally decent presumed heterodoxy allows the reader to view Montesquieu's statements on religion within a benign context of natural religion. This presumed heterodoxy is made palatable to the extent that we are inclined to look favorably on the moral presuppositions of the natural religion Montesquieu brings to the foreground of books 24 and 25. For example, consider what Montesquieu says about book 10 of Plato's *Laws*: “It is impious toward the gods,’ Plato says, ‘to deny their existence, or to grant it but to hold that they do not take a hand in the things here below, or finally to think that they are easily appeased by sacrifices: three equally pernicious opinions.’ Plato says there all of the most sensible things that natural enlightenment has ever said on the subject of religion” (25.7.1). Now, isn't it easy to think that Montesquieu shares the opinion of “Plato” on these points?¹⁵

¹⁴ “But what Montesquieu makes loudly and even shockingly clear is that nature's divinity as he conceives it is far from being the Creator Who is believed to speak through the Scriptures” (Pangle, *Theological Basis*, 18). “By so awkward and intrusive an ornamentation, Montesquieu in fact draws attention to how *far* his conception of ‘natural laws’ stands from the traditional conception of natural law” (ibid., 20).

¹⁵ Montesquieu's subsequent citation of Plato makes it even harder to think that Montesquieu is a serious Christian: “as Plato says, chaste and pious men should offer gifts that resemble themselves” (25.7.5). Montesquieu points the reader to book 3, but what is cited actually occurs in book 4, that is, Montesquieu disguises the location of the citation somewhat—and for good reason: “for the good man

Here we face a problem.¹⁶ “Plato” never says anything in the *Laws*. The Athenian Stranger says the things that Montesquieu places in the mouth of Plato as though Plato were writing a treatise, but Plato wrote a dialogue in which the Athenian Stranger attempts to persuade the Cretan Kleinias of a number of things; in the relevant section, the Athenian Stranger is attempting to prove *to the satisfaction of Kleinias* that the gods are morally concerned. The Athenian Stranger’s natural religion would be palatable to a man like Usbek; Kleinias and Usbek have similar moral concerns, and Kleinias is persuaded of the truth of the three proofs to the extent that they appeal to his moral concerns as distinct from being rightfully persuaded by the logical rigidity of the proofs. In fact the proofs are mutually exclusive and even internally inconsistent.¹⁷ Just as Montesquieu both encouraged natural religion *and* showed the psychology of the adherent of natural religion in the *Persian Letters*, so Plato encourages natural religion *and* shows the psychology of one who is likely to find it plausible in the *Laws*. Is it likely that Montesquieu has more in common with Usbek and Kleinias than Plato? Or is it more likely that Montesquieu’s “shocking” apparent heterodoxy—the morally decent natural religion—disguises his actual heterodoxy? Elsewhere Montesquieu discusses the natural religion of Plato in an entirely different tone: “the doctrine of a superior intelligent being was founded by Plato only as a safeguard and a defensive arm against the calumnies of zealous pagans.”¹⁸

it is very noble, very good, and most efficacious for a happy life...if he sacrifices and communes with the gods—through *prayers*, votive offerings, and every sort of service to the gods. But for the bad man just the opposite of these things holds true” (716e, my emphasis). Could a serious Christian approvingly cite a passage claiming that the bad should not pray?

¹⁶ Sullivan does not address adequately Montesquieu’s relationship to Plato in the fifth chapter of *Montesquieu and the Despotism of Europe* despite her claim that “this chapter examines Montesquieu’s peculiar treatment of Plato’s writings in the entirety of *The Spirit of the Laws*” (*Montesquieu and the Despotism of Europe*, 140). To be specific, she never mentions Montesquieu’s statement in approval of the natural religion found in the *Laws*. Her book shows that Montesquieu associates the institutions found in the *Republic* and *Laws* with those of Sparta and treats these “singular institutions” as despotic, but a full treatment of Montesquieu’s relationship with Plato would at least require one to address the question of what it means that Montesquieu is critical of “Plato’s singular institutions” as despotic, while also treating the natural religion of Plato with the highest praise, that is, she does not address the problem that despotic institutions are apparently perfectly compatible with the best natural religion has to offer.

¹⁷ For reasons of space this claim must be left mostly as an assertion; however, for example, the first proof contradicts itself when, on one hand, it asserts that there is one source of motion, that is, one unmoved moving soul, but, on the other hand, that there is a second soul responsible for the bad things (895a, 896e). The dignity of the good soul demands that it be the sole originating cause; the dignity of the good soul demands that another soul be responsible for evil. This problem is further exacerbated when, after switching the discussion from “souls” to “gods,” the bad soul is subsequently dropped, that is, for the moral reason that there would not be bad gods (900e).

¹⁸ Montesquieu, *Pensée* #853, in *My Thoughts* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2012), 247; see also

Montesquieu makes the relationship between morality and religion thematic in the chapter entitled “On the agreement of the laws of morality with those of religion” with a statement agreeable to natural religion: “In a country where one has the misfortune of having a religion not given by god, it is always necessary for it to be in agreement with morality, because religion, even a false one, is the best warrant men can have of the integrity of men” (24.8.1). The chapter closes with the example of the people of Pegu: “The principal points of the religion of the people of Pegu are not to kill, not to steal, to avoid immodesty, to cause no displeasure to one’s fellow man, and instead, to do him all the good one can. Further, they believe that one will be saved in any religion whatever; this makes these peoples, though they are proud and poor, show gentleness and compassion to unfortunates” (24.8.1). The way Montesquieu has structured the paragraph leads one to think that these people have a religion in agreement with morality; while their religion sounds similar to that of Christianity, they are tolerant.¹⁹

If the Peguan religion exemplifies natural religion, one nevertheless has to wonder about its political value; natural religion is by no means sufficient to guarantee good government. Montesquieu mentions the Peguians in only one other location: “When in Pegu, a Venetian named Balbi was brought to the king. When the latter learned that there was no king in Venice, he laughed so much that he began to cough and could scarcely talk to his courtiers” (19.2.2). This story is meant to show that even “liberty has appeared intolerable to peoples who were not accustomed to enjoying it” (19.2.1). Montesquieu is trying to support natural religion; it would be contrary to his purpose to draw attention to the government of the Peguians in book 24. That being said, he allows the careful reader to link the bad government of the Peguians with their religion. It would be strange to think that the Peguians have bad government because of their religion *and* that Montesquieu speaks favorably of their religion; by using the Peguians as his example of a people with a natural religion, Montesquieu quietly alerts the reader to its limitations. Natural

Pensée #711, #216; Thomas L. Pangle, *Montesquieu's Philosophy of Liberalism: A Commentary on "The Spirit of the Laws"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 14; Pangle, *Theological Basis*, 176n6.

¹⁹ Pangle takes what Montesquieu says about the Peguians to be simple praise: “In his praise of non-Christian religions...the third (that of Pegu), which seems to have instilled as much ‘softness and compassion’ as Christianity, was extremely undogmatic and tolerant” (*Montesquieu's Philosophy of Liberalism*, 255). Pangle shows quite well just how problematic Montesquieu finds Christianity; given what will be shown to be the *excessive* gentleness of the Peguians, it is surprising that he takes Montesquieu’s apparent praise at face value. Pangle’s treatment of the Peguians in his second book on Montesquieu is no different: he takes the gentleness of the Peguians to be simply the gentleness “belonging to the ‘humanity,’ and hence to the religion, that reason dictates” (*Theological Basis*, 107).

religion does not guarantee good government and even keeps the Peguians complaisant while under a tyrant. Natural religion comes to sight as a useful way to moderate an extreme religion, but the example of the Peguians leaves its long-term value inconclusive.

Montesquieu's next chapter, "On the Essenes," appears to be a somewhat redundant expression of natural religion: "The Essenes took an oath to observe justice toward men, to do no harm to anyone even in order to obey, to hate unjust men, to keep faith with everyone, to command with modesty, always to take the side of the truth, and to flee all illicit gain" (24.8.1). Now, if one does not compare this passage with the description of the people of Pegu closely, then it appears that Montesquieu is simply giving another example of a religion he approves of; this is what the context seems to imply. However, a cursory comparison points to silence on the issue of religious toleration. Are the Essenes, in fact, being held up as a positive example? Montesquieu cites Prideaux's *The Old and New Testament Connected in the History of the Jews*; a comparison of Montesquieu's citation with what Prideaux actually writes regarding keeping faith is instructive. Regarding the central tenet, to keep faith with everyone, Montesquieu suppresses a key aspect: "ever to keep faith inviolable with all men, especially with princes (for no one comes to have rule and government over us but by God's appointment)."²⁰ The doctrine of this Jewish sect is predicated on, or at least intimately tied up with, divine right of rule by kings, a doctrine Montesquieu finds to be poisonous! This same text also claims that the Essenes believe in predestination, a doctrine Montesquieu claims "arises from laziness of the soul, and from this dogma of predestination is born laziness of the soul" (24.14.4). For the purposes of discovering Montesquieu's relationship to natural religion, it is worth noting that he suppresses undesirable aspects of the Essenes, such as their doctrine of predestination, in favor of a natural religion part of whose tenet of always taking the side of the truth Montesquieu can hardly be said to obey.

Montesquieu subsequently places an appeal to the inquisitors of Spain and Portugal in the mouth of a Jew; the arguments made on behalf of the Jew appeal to natural religion.²¹ The Jew asks the inquisitors to "treat us as

²⁰ Humphrey Prideaux, *The Old and New Testament Connected in the History of the Jews*, ed. J. Talboys Wheeler (London: William Tegg, 1858), 294.

²¹ Sullivan treats the thought of the Jew as essentially the same as that of Montesquieu (*Montesquieu and the Despotism of Europe*, 93). According to Bibby, Montesquieu "does not separate himself from the point of view of the Jewess, however; only from the *manner* or ultimate persuasiveness of the arguments within it." Bibby thinks that (Montesquieu thinks that) the arguments themselves are correct even if they are unpersuasive. If Bibby's interpretation is correct, then it is hard to see why

you would if, having only the feeble lights of justice that nature gives us, you had no religion to guide you and no revelation to enlighten you” (25.13.9). He makes the moral argument that if “Christ is the son of god, we hope he will reward us for not having wanted to profane his mysteries” (25.13.12). The Jew presents a moral teaching that would appeal to an adherent of natural religion, but what is the necessity that one speaks the truth in the face of religious persecution? Montesquieu’s Jew takes a heavy-handed moral attitude that Montesquieu himself avoids when it comes to the case of Christianity. “You live in a century when natural enlightenment is more alive than it has ever been, when philosophy has enlightened spirits, when the morality of your gospel has been better known, when the respective rights of men over each other, the empire that one conscience has over another conscience, are better established. Therefore, if you do not give up your passions, it must be admitted that you are incorrigible, incapable of all enlightenment and of all instruction; and a nation is very unhappy that gives authority to men like you” (25.13.13). In the same breath that the Jew speaks favorably of natural enlightenment, he attacks the passions. These are statements of the sort that Usbek would readily endorse. I am not suggesting that Montesquieu is not concerned about the plight of the Jews; the insertion of the letter suggests that he *is* concerned. I mean to suggest that the manner of the appeals would not work on Montesquieu himself. The implied moral demand that one remain honest in the face of religious persecution appeals to the moral passions of the kind of reader who would be impressed with the moral merit involved in openly stating the truth in the face of persecution, that is, the great bulk of Montesquieu’s readers. Montesquieu’s far from straightforward presentation of both *Persian Letters* and *The Spirit of the Laws* demonstrates by deed what he thinks of this type of moral demand.

When discussing “the motive for attachment to the various religions” Montesquieu explains why “we” are “very attached to religions that have us worship a spiritual being” even though “we” are “scarcely inclined to spiritual ideas” (25.2.2). These religions are conducive to a “happy feeling that comes, in part, from the satisfaction we find in ourselves for having been intelligent

Montesquieu included this passage. On one hand, Bibby seems to think that the passage is meant to serve as a foil, showing what sort of arguments will not be persuasive; on the other hand, Bibby himself prefaces his analysis of the chapter by pointing out that it was the philosophes’ general practice of highlighting individual cases of public persecution that was “one of the key reasons for the reform of criminal justice in the old regime” (*Montesquieu’s Political Economy*, 111). Montesquieu’s comment that the Jew’s “small work...is sure not to convince” is certainly paradoxical, but—contra Montesquieu’s explicit statement—the remonstrance elicits the pity of the reader in such a way that is bound to contribute to the cause of religious toleration.

enough to have chosen a religion that withdraws divinity from the humiliation in which others had placed it. We regard idolatry as the religion of coarse peoples, and a religion whose object is a spiritual being, as that of enlightened peoples” (25.2.2). Does the vanity of superiority that Montesquieu associates with spiritual religions include that of the natural religion? The sect Montesquieu most closely allies himself with is that of the Stoics.²² Montesquieu says of the Stoics that their “principles were more worthy of men and more appropriate for forming good men” than any other “sect of philosophy” or “kind of religion.” Yet by blurring the distinction between a sect of philosophy and a kind of religion, Montesquieu forces the reader to wonder if Montesquieu approves of the Stoics in the same way that he approves of the Peguians. Pangle is right to say that Montesquieu is “stubbornly silent about this theology or metaphysics which was the core of Stoicism.... Montesquieu praises and accepts Stoic practice, the effect of Stoic metaphysics; he cannot praise or accept that metaphysics itself.”²³ However, if the natural religion of the Stoics requires certain metaphysical beliefs, beliefs that Montesquieu does not share, then why should we assume that he shares their natural religion, as distinct from encouraging others to accept their natural religion in the same way that Plato encourages, but does not share, his own natural religion?²⁴ Montesquieu says that the Stoics “were occupied *only* in working for men’s happiness and in exercising the duties of society” and he says that they were “happy in their philosophy *alone*” (24.10.5–6, my emphases). The happiness of the Stoics both is and is not their devotion to others. The presentation of the Stoics is confused. *Either* this presentation allows one to see the moral confusion of the Stoics even while it encourages one to imitate the Stoics, that is, it both encourages natural religion and allows access into the psychology

²² See Robert C. Bartlett, “On the Politics of Faith and Reason: The Project of Enlightenment in Pierre Bayle and Montesquieu,” *Journal of Politics* 63, no. 1 (Feb. 2001): 25.

²³ *Montesquieu’s Philosophy of Liberalism*, 234.

²⁴ In part because he takes what Montesquieu says about the Peguians at face value, Pangle takes the natural religion of Montesquieu at face value; he ascribes a religious experience with attendant religious longings to Montesquieu and implies that he has not thought through the meaning of his religious longings: “Here [24.10, on the Stoics], with all appropriate reserve and graceful avoidance of prolixity, Montesquieu’s natural religion or natural theology suddenly dominates the stage. Here Montesquieu evokes that experience of the divine that can be understood to emanate from the god of Reason.... The description of what the Stoics understood to be moving them may be taken as expounding or as adorning Montesquieu’s pithy and indirect self-portrait in the preface.... The religious experience of the Stoics is echoed in the experience Montesquieu testifies to in his prose hymn to the Muses, those divinities whose inspirational presence is felt with and through reason” (*Theological Basis*, 142–43). It would be better to say that Montesquieu encourages those who have not thought through the meaning of their religious longings to place the hopes associated with these longings in something salutary to the political good.

of the adherent of natural religion, or Montesquieu himself is confused in the same way that Usbek and the Stoics are confused.²⁵ Given his presentation of Usbek, the Peguians, and his deliberate distortion of the teaching of the Essenes, I believe that Montesquieu himself is clear-eyed on this point.

V. THE VALUE OF NATURAL RELIGION

Both the *Persian Letters* and the *Spirit of the Laws* encourage natural religion for the sake of moderating religious fanaticism. That being said, Usbek's treatment of the women of his seraglio shows that the ascetic foundation of natural religion is compatible with brutality and the support of tyrannical institutions. In *The Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu clearly moves away from the political institutions Plato's *Laws* appear to recommend (e.g., "Plato in his *Laws* wants any citizen who engages in commerce punished" [4.8.4]); however, the political institutions found in the *Laws* are perfectly compatible with the natural religion Montesquieu recommends. Furthermore, the case of the Peguians shows that natural religion may keep men overly peaceful in the face of tyranny. I do not suggest that Montesquieu thinks natural religion is bad, but he does indicate that natural religion is not unequivocally good or sufficient for good political institutions.

A reader of the *Spirit of the Laws* is bound to observe that, while Montesquieu initially speaks favorably of the ancient devotion to virtue, part 4 effects a change away from ancient virtue toward a free people devoted to commerce. By coming down on the side of commerce at the expense of ancient virtue, Montesquieu aims to cultivate a preference for industry over a concern for honor and to encourage the cultivation of virtues that can be shown through commerce as distinct from war. A discussion of the state that stands for this shift, England, bridges the two halves of the work. By way of conclusion, I will make a few remarks about 11.6 and 19.27, the two major chapters on England, with an eye to the place natural religion would have in the cultivation of the characteristics described in these chapters.

First, while the title of 11.6 indicates that the chapter is on the constitution of England and 19.27 refers back to 11.6, the choice of tense used in these two chapters indicates that in 11.6 Montesquieu is describing a hypothetical

²⁵ Bibby takes Montesquieu's presentation of Stoicism at face value: "The example of Stoicism... illustrates Montesquieu's inner conviction that life is not reducible to satisfaction of base desires, or toil for its own sake" (*Montesquieu's Political Economy*, 103). I do not disagree with his conclusion that for Montesquieu life is not reducible to the satisfaction of base desires or otherwise pointless toil, but I do not think the section on the Stoics reflects an inner conviction on Montesquieu's part.

regime. This regime is modeled on the English regime as distinct from depicting that regime itself; therefore, 19.27 describes the characteristics the citizens of this hypothetical regime would have. The disjunction between England's actual situation and Montesquieu's prescriptions is most pronounced on the issue of religion; there is silence on the part of Montesquieu regarding either the Church of England or any other formally political religious power in these chapters. "Thus, legislative power will be entrusted both to the body of the nobles and to the body that will be chosen to represent the people," that is, legislative power will *not* be in the hands of the clergy (11.6.31).

There can be no commerce between men if one of the two groups of men abhors the other or feels duty-bound to kill or convert them; avoiding religious fanaticism goes hand in hand with commerce between nations. Montesquieu also favors toleration within the state, especially regarding religion: "With regard to religion, as in this state each citizen would have his own will and would consequently be led by his own enlightenment or his fantasies, what would happen is either that everyone would be very indifferent to all sorts of religion of whatever kind, in which case everyone would tend to embrace the dominant religion, or that one would be zealous for religion in general, in which case sects would multiply" (19.27.46). Accordingly, the clergy would have only indirect power: "This clergy, unable to protect religion or to be protected by it, lacking force to constrain, would seek to persuade; very fine works would come from their pens, written to prove the revelation and the providence of the great being" (19.27.51).

A commercial people devoted to liberty would be tolerant in general and regarding religion in particular. To the extent that one follows one's own fantasy, organized religion will lose power, but what will it look like when one follows one's own enlightenment? Montesquieu does not describe what the "very fine works" of clergy will look like, but the language of enlightenment seems to provide a clue. The need to persuade in the terms of enlightenment points toward natural religion.²⁶ I do not believe that works considered persuasive would emphasize the ceremonial aspects of a religion or attempt to support the literal as distinct from allegorical truth of incredible tales. Montesquieu subsequently states that Protestantism is suited, or at least more suited than Catholicism, to "a spirit of independence and liberty," and England is clearly Protestant (24.5). Given his depictions of 11.6 and 19.27, Montesquieu could not mean a Protestantism that had formal legislative

²⁶ Cf. Pangle, *Theological Basis*, 85–87.

power or, to say the least, failed to tolerate private fantasies and enlightenment thinking.

The kind of Protestantism that favors toleration and commerce will be sympathetic to or informed by natural religion, as distinct from being replaced by a pure natural religion. I do not think that Montesquieu envisioned that specific revelatory claims would be done away with, but rather that they would be ignored and minimized. One would nominally remain this or that particular religion as, for example, Rousseau's Savoyard Vicar is nominally Catholic, but, like the Savoyard Vicar, one's heart would be with moral precepts over and even against ceremony and dogma.