

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 2 · Chapter 19

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On Freedom of Conscience

'Tis usual to see good intentions, if carried on without moderation, push men on to very vicious effects. In this dispute which has at this time engaged France in a civil war, the better and the soundest cause no doubt is that which maintains the ancient religion and government of the kingdom. Nevertheless, among the good men of that party (for I do not speak of those who only make a pretense of it, either to execute their own particular revenges or to gratify their avarice, or to conciliate the favor of princes, but of those who engage in the quarrel out of true zeal to religion and a holy desire to maintain the peace and government of their country), of these, I say, we see many whom passion transports beyond the bounds of reason, and sometimes inspires with counsels that are unjust and violent, and, moreover, rash.

It is certain that in those first times, when our religion began to gain authority with the laws, zeal armed many against all sorts of pagan books, by which the learned suffered an exceeding great loss, a disorder that I conceive to have done more prejudice to letters than all the flames of the barbarians. Of this Cornelius Tacitus is a very good testimony; for though the Emperor Tacitus, his kinsman, had, by express order, furnished all the libraries in the world with it, nevertheless one entire copy could not escape the curious examination of those who desired to abolish it for only five or six idle clauses that were contrary to our belief.

They had also the trick easily to lend undue praises to all the emperors who made for us, and universally to condemn all the actions of those who were adversaries, as is evidently manifest in the Emperor Julian, surnamed the Apostate, who was, in truth, a very great and rare man, a man in whose soul philosophy was imprinted in the best characters, by which he professed to govern all his actions; and, in truth, there is no sort of virtue of which he has not left behind him very notable examples: in chastity (of which the whole of his life gave manifest proof) we read the same of him that was said of Alexander and Scipio, that being in the flower of his age, for he was slain by the Parthians at one-and-thirty, of a great many very beautiful captives, he would not so much as look upon one. As to his justice, he took himself the pains to hear the parties, and although he would out of curiosity inquire what religion they were of,

nevertheless, the antipathy he had to ours never gave any counterpoise to the balance. He made himself several good laws, and repealed a great part of the subsidies and taxes levied by his predecessors.

We have two good historians who were eyewitnesses of his actions: one of whom, Marcellinus, in several places of his history sharply reproves an edict of his whereby he interdicted all Christian rhetoricians and grammarians to keep school or to teach, and says he could wish that act of his had been buried in silence: it is probable that had he done any more severe thing against us, he, so affectionate as he was to our party, would not have passed it over in silence. He was indeed sharp against us, but yet no cruel enemy; for our own people tell this story of him, that one day, walking about the city of Chalcedon, Maris, bishop of the place; was so bold as to tell him that he was impious, and an enemy to Christ, at which, they say, he was no further moved than to reply, "Go, poor wretch, and lament the loss of thy eyes," to which the bishop replied again, "I thank Jesus Christ for taking away my sight, that I may not see thy impudent visage," affecting in that, they say, a philosophical patience. But this action of his bears no comparison to the cruelty that he is said to have exercised against us. "He was," says Eutropius, my other witness, "an enemy to Christianity, but without putting his hand to blood."

And, to return to his justice, there is nothing in that whereof he can be accused, the severity excepted he practised in the beginning of his reign against those who had followed the party of Constantius, his predecessor. As to his sobriety, he lived always a soldier-like life; and observed a diet and routine, like one that prepared and inured himself to the austerities of war. His vigilance was such, that he divided the night into three or four parts, of which the least was dedicated to sleep; the rest was spent either in visiting the state of his army and guards in person, or in study; for among other rare qualities, he was very excellent in all sorts of learning. 'Tis said of Alexander the Great, that being in bed, for fear lest sleep should divert him from his thoughts and studies, he had always a basin set by his bedside, and held one of his hands out with a ball of copper in it, to the end, that, beginning to fall asleep, and his fingers leaving their hold, the ball by falling into the basin, might awake him. But the other had his soul so bent upon what he had a mind to do, and so little disturbed with fumes by reason of his singular abstinence, that he had no need of any such invention. As to his military experience, he was excellent in all the qualities of a great captain, as it was likely he should, being almost all his life in a continual exercise of war, and most of that time with us in France, against the Germans and Franks: we hardly read of any man who ever saw more dangers, or who made more frequent proofs of his personal valor. His death has something in it parallel with that of Epaminondas, for he was wounded with an arrow, and tried to pull it out, and had done so, but that, being edged, it cut and disabled his hand. He incessantly called out that they should carry him again into the heat of the battle, to encourage his soldiers, who very bravely disputed the fight without him, till night parted the armies. He stood obliged to his philosophy for the singular contempt he had for his life and all human things. He had a firm belief of the immortality of souls.

In matter of religion he was wrong throughout, and was surnamed the Apostate for having relinquished ours: nevertheless, the opinion seems to

me more probable, that he had never thoroughly embraced it, but had dissembled out of obedience to the laws, till he came to the empire. He was in his own so superstitious, that he was laughed at for it by those of his own time, of the same opinion, who jeeringly said, that had he got the victory over the Parthians, he had destroyed the breed of oxen in the world to supply his sacrifices. He was, moreover, besotted with the art of divination, and gave authority to all sorts of predictions. He said, among other things at his death, that he was obliged to the gods, and thanked them, in that they would not cut him off by surprise, having long before advertised him of the place and hour of his death, nor by a mean and unmanly death, more becoming lazy and delicate people; nor by a death that was languishing, long, and painful; and that they had thought him worthy to die after that noble manner, in the progress of his victories, in the flower of his glory. He had a vision like that of Marcus Brutus, that first threatened him in Gaul, and afterward appeared to him in Persia just before his death.

These words that some make him say when he felt himself wounded: "Thou hast overcome, Nazarene;" or as others, "Content thyself, Nazarene;" would hardly have been omitted, had they been believed, by my witnesses, who, being present in the army, have set down to the least motions and words of his end; no more than certain other miracles that are reported about it.

And to return to my subject, he long nourished, says Marcellinus, paganism in his heart; but all his army being Christians, he dared not own it. But in the end, seeing himself strong enough to dare to discover himself, he caused the temples of the gods to be thrown open, and did his uttermost to set on foot and to encourage idolatry. Which the better to effect, having at Constantinople found the people disunited, and also the prelates of the church divided among themselves, having convened them all before him, he earnestly admonished them to calm those civil dissensions, and that every one might freely, and without fear, follow his own religion. Which he the more sedulously solicited, in hope that this licence would augment the schisms and factions of their division, and hinder the people from reuniting, and consequently fortifying themselves against him by their unanimous intelligence and concord; having experienced by the cruelty of some Christians, that there is no beast in the world so much to be feared by man as man.

These are very nearly his words. Wherein this is very worthy of consideration, that the Emperor Julian made use of the same receipt of liberty of conscience to inflame the civil dissensions that our kings do to extinguish them. So that a man may say on one side, that to give the people the reins to entertain every man his own opinion, is to scatter and sow division, and, as it were, to lend a hand to augment it, there being no legal impediment or restraint to stop or hinder their career; but, on the other side, a man may also say, that to give the people the reins to entertain every man his own opinion, is to mollify and appease them by facility and toleration, and to dull the point which is whetted and made sharper by singularity, novelty, and difficulty: and I think it is better for the honor of the devotion of our kings, that not having been able to do what they would, they have made a show of being willing to do what they could.