

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS

Book 2 · Chapter 19



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Of the liberty of Conscience

IT IS ordinarily seene, how good intentions being managed without moderation, thrust men into most vicious effects. In this controversie, by which *France* is at this instant molested with civill warres, the best and safest side, is no doubt, that which maintaineth both the auncient religion and policie of the Country. Neverthelesse amongst the honest men that folow it (for my meaning is not to speak of those, who use them as a colour, either to exercise their particular revenges, or to supply their greedie avarice, or to followe the favour of Princes: But of such as do it with a true zeale toward their Religion, and an unfained-holy affection, to maintaine the peace and uphold the state of their Country) of those I say, divers are seene, whom passion thrusts out of the bounds of reason, and often forceth them to take and follow unjust, violent and rash counsels. Certaine it is, that when first our religion beganne to gaine authoritie with the Lawes, it's zeale armed many against all sorts of Pagane bookes, whereof the learned sort have a great losse. My opinion is, that this disorder hath done more hurt to learning, than all the Barbarian flames. *Cornelius Tacitus* is a sufficient testimonie of it: for, howbeit the Emperor *Tacitus* his kinsman had by expresse appointment stored all the libraries in the World with it, notwithstanding one onely entire example could not escape the curious search of those, who sought to abollish it, by reason of five or sixe vaine clauses, contrary to our beleefe. They have also had this, easily to affoorde false commendations to all the Emperours, that made for us, and universally to condemne all the actions of those, which were our adversaries, as may plainly be seene in *Julian* the Emperor, surnamed the Apostata; who in truth was a notable-rare-man, as he whose mind was lively endowed with the discourses of Philosophie, unto which hee professed to conforme all his actions; and truely there is no kind of vertue, wherof he hath not left most notable examples. In chastity (wherof the whole course of his life giveth apparant testimony) a like example, unto that of *Alexander* and *Scipio* is read of him, which is, that of many wonderfull-faire captive Ladies, brought before him, being even in the very prime of his age (for he was slain by the Parthians about the age of one and thirtie yeares) he would not see one of them. Touching justice, himselfe would take the paines to heare all parties: And although for

curiosity sake, he would enquire of such as came before him, what religion they were-of, neverthelesse the enmitie he bare to ours, did no whit weigh downe the ballance. Himselfe made sundrie good Lawes, and revoked diverse subsidies and impositions, his Predecessours before him had received. We have two good Historians, as eye-witnesses of his actions. One of which, (who is *Marcellinus*) in sundry places of his Historie bitterly reproveth this ordonance of his, by which he forbade schooles, and interdited all Christian Rhetoricians, and Gramarians to teach: Saying, he wished this his action might be buried under silence. It is very likely, if he had done any thing else more sharpe or severe against us, he would not have forgot it, as he that was well affected to our side. Hee was indeede very severe against us, yet not a cruell ennemie. For, our people themselves report this Historie of him, that walking one day about the City of *Calcedonia*, *Maris* Bishop thereof, durst call him wicked and traitor to Christ, to whom he did no other thing, but answered thus: Goe wretched man, weepe and deplore the losse of thine eyes; to whom the Bishop replied, I thanke Jesus Christ, that he hath deprived me of my sight, that so I might not view thy impudent face, affecting therby (as they say) a kind of Philosophicall patience. So it is, this part cannot be referred to the cruelties, which he is said to have exercised against us. He was (saith *Eutropius* my other testimony) an enemy unto Christianity, but without shedding of blood. But to returne to his justice, he can be accused of nothing but of the rigors he used in the beginning of his Empire, against such as had followed the faction of *Constantius* his Predecessour. Concerning sobrietie, he ever lived a Souldiers kinde of life, and in time of peace, would feede no otherwise, than one who prepared and enured himselfe to the austeritie of warre. Such was his vigilancie, that he divided the night into three or foure parts, the least of which hee allotted unto sleepe; the rest he employed in visiting the state of his army, and his guardes, or in study; for, amongst other his rare qualities, he was most excellent in all sorts of learning. It is reported of *Alexander* the Great, that being laide down to rest, fearing lest sleep should divert him from his thoughts and studies, he caused a basen to be set neere his bed side, and holding one of his handes out, with a brazen ball in it, that if sleepe should surprize him, loosing his fingers endes, the ball falling into the basen, might with the noyse rouze him from out his sleepe. This man had a mind so bent to what he undertook, and by reason of his singular abstinence so little troubled with vapours, that he might well have past this devise. Touching mylitary sufficiency, he was admirable in all partes belonging to a great Captaine. So was he almost all his life time in continuall exercise of Warre, and the greater part with us in *France* against the Alemans and Franconians. We have no great memorie of any man, that either hath seene more dangers, nor that more often hath made triall of his person. His death hath some affinitie with that of *Epaminondas*, for being stricken with an arrow, and attempting to pull it out, he had surely done it, but that being sharpe-cutting, it hurt and weakened his hand. In that plight he earnestly requested to bee carryed forth in the midst of his army, that so he might encourage his souldiers, who without him courageously maintained the battell, untill such time as darke night severed the Armies. Hee was beholding to Philosophie for a singular contempt, both of himselfe and of all humane things. Hee assuredly believed the eternitie of soules. In matters of religion, he was vicious every-where. He was

surnamed *Apostata*, because he had forsaken ours; notwithstanding this opinion seemes to mee more likely, that he never tooke it to hart, but that for the obedience which he bare to the lawes, he dissembled til he had gotten the Empire into his hands. He was so superstitious in his, that even such as lived in his time, and were of his owne religion, mocked him for it; and it was saide, that if he had gained the Victory of the Parthians, hee would have consumed the race or breede of Oxen, to satisfie his sacrifices. He was also besotted with the Art of sooth-saying, and gave authoritie to all manner of prognostikes. Amongst other things hee spake at his death, he saide, he was much beholding to the Gods, and greatly thanked them, that they had not suffred him to be slaine sodainly or by surprize, as having long before warned him both of the place and houre of his end; nor to dy of a base and easie death, more beseeming idle and effeminate Persons, nor of a lingring, languishing, and dolorous death; and that they had deemed him worthy to end his life so nobly in the course of his victories, and in the flower of his glory. There had before appeared a vision unto him, like unto that of *Marcus Brutus*, which first threatned him in *Gaul*, and afterward even at the point of his death, presented it selfe to him in *Persia*. The speach he is made to speake when he felt himselfe hurt, *Thou hast vanquished ô Nazaraean*; or as some will have it; *Content thy self oh Nazaraean*, would scarce have beene forgotten, had it beene believed of my testimonies, who being present in the army, have noted even the least motions, and wordes at his death, no more than certaine other wonders, which they annex unto it. But to returne to my theame, he had long before (as saith *Marcellinus*) hatched Paganisme in his hart, but forsomuch as he saw all those of his armie to be Christians, he durst not discover him selfe. In the end, when hee found himselfe to be sufficiently strong, and durst publish his minde, he caused the Temples of his Gods to be opened, and by all meanes endeavoured to advance idolatrie. And to attaine his purpose, having found in *Constantinople* the people verie loose, and at ods with the Prelates of the christian Church, and caused them to appeare before him in his pallace, he instantly admonished them to appease all their civill dissensions, and every one without hinderance or feare apply themselves to follow and serve religion. Which he verie carefully sollicitated, hoping this licence might encrease the factions, and controversies of the division, and hinder the people, from growing to any unity, and by consequence from fortifying themselves against him, by reason of their concord, and in one mind-agreeing inteligence: having by the cruelty of some Christians found, that *There is no beast in the world, so much of man to be feared, as man*. Loe-heere his very words, or very neare: Wherin this is worthy consideration, that the Emperor *Julian*, useth the same receipt of libertie of conscience, to enkindle the trouble of civill dissention, which our Kings employ to extinguish. It may be saide on one side, that, *To give factions the bridle to entertaine their opinion, is to scater contention and sow division*, and as it were to lend it a hand to augment and encrease the same: There beeing no Barre or Obstacle of Lawes to bridle or hinder hir course. But on the other side, it might also be urged, that to give factions the bridle to uphold their opinion, is, by that facilitie and ease, the readie way to mollifie and release them, and to blunt the edge, which is sharpned by rarenesse, noveltie, and difficultie. And if for the honour of our Kings devotion, I believe better; it is, that since they could not doe as they would, they have fained to will what they could not.