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# Religion and Politics

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Montesquieu's views on religion might not seem very remarkable at first sight. He voiced skepticism about the truth of Christian dogma and practice in his private notebooks. In his published writings, notably in his youthful *Persian Letters*, he showed a propensity to mock the religious establishment and its beliefs as irrational. While he toned down this irreverent attitude in his more mature writings, he continued to under-mine the truth-claims of established religion in more subtle ways. In *The Spirit of the Laws*, he made clear that religious beliefs and practices could best be understood not as divine dictates, but as having emerged in response to specific, locally bound human needs, thus pioneering a new scientific, objectifying approach to religion.

In other words, Montesquieu seems to exemplify a typical Enlightenment attitude towards revealed religion, promoting a critical, irreverent attitude to religious dogma and practice.[1] Nevertheless, as I will argue in this chapter, there was more to Montesquieu's views on religion than might first meet the eye. Notably, in his masterpiece, *The Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu, while subtly undermining the idea that Christianity was the one true religion, at the same time developed an original defense of established religion in general and Christianity in particular on instrumental grounds, as being socially and politically useful. Taking account of this aspect of Montesquieu's work allows us to throw new light on a topic that has provoked considerable scholarly discussion: the diversity of enlightened attitudes towards religion.

## MONTESQUIEU'S RELIGIOUS SKEPTICISM

Born into a traditional Catholic family, Montesquieu remained a lifelong and ostensibly faithful member of the Church. He maintained cordial relations throughout his life with his younger brother Joseph, a clergyman of some distinction. Other family members also had strong ties to the Church: Montesquieu's two surviving sisters became nuns. His wife, Jeanne Lartigue, was born into a prominent Calvinist family and she remained true to her ancestral faith throughout her life. But Montesquieu never seems to have been tempted by her example, and their children were raised within the Catholic Church. On his deathbed, Montesquieu was attended not just by his grandson and by his philosophically minded friends, but also by two Jesuit confessors.[2]

Yet, despite his outward conformity, Montesquieu seems to have become converted from a relatively early age to the new, skeptical outlook toward established religion evinced by many educated Europeans of his age.[3] In his private notebooks, he frequently voiced doubts about the truth of Christian dogma and practice. He likened the doctrine of the Trinity, for instance, to the pagan belief in multiple gods and went on to explain that these similarities were not accidental. Christianity, after all, had emerged in a pagan world and many core beliefs of the early Church had been shaped by that background. This observation led Montesquieu to speculate that if Christianity had first established itself in China rather than among the Romans, the Church might very well have espoused very different dogmas and practices (*MT* 876).

In another remarkable passage, Montesquieu asserted that the very "absurdity" of Christianity showed that it must be the true religion. After all, how else to explain the success of this new religion among ancient philosophers? These men had rejected paganism because of its irrational nature, but they had ended up accepting the idea of a crucified deity, whereas that doctrine must have seemed, *prima facie*, just as bizarre to them. "If the establishment of Christianity among the Romans were an event solely in the category of things of this world," Montesquieu commented, "it would be the strangest event of its kind that has ever occurred" (*MT* 969). But these reflections seem to have been more tongue-in-cheek than a statement of firm conviction. In yet another one of his notes, Montesquieu attributed Christianity's triumph in Late Antiquity to the long duration of the reign of Constantine – the emperor who had embraced Christianity and made it the official state religion – or,

in other words, he attributed it to contingent historical factors rather than to divine intervention (*MT* 92).

In sum, it seems likely that Montesquieu had, as his biographer expresses it, no "firm Christian conviction."[4] That is not to say that Montesquieu was an atheist. Both in his published writings and in his private notebooks, he argued against materialism, using the traditional argument from design. "The least reflection," he wrote in one of his notebooks, "is enough for a man to cure himself of atheism. He has only to consider the Heavens, and he will find an invincible proof of the existence of God. It is inexcusable when he does not see Divinity depicted in everything that surrounds him; for as soon as he sees the effects, he must acknowledge a cause." Reason therefore led to the conclusion that God was "an intelligent being that brings forth this order that we see in the world" (*MT* 1946). Montesquieu seems in other words to have been a typical deist, someone who believed that there had to be a divine being, but who did not believe in revealed religion or special divine action in the world. And that was of course a position he shared with many other enlightened thinkers, such as his younger contemporary Voltaire.[5]

Montesquieu's skeptical attitude towards established religion was also very much in evidence in his published writings. One of his earliest texts, written in 1716, when he was just twenty-seven years old (though unpublished until his death), was an essay on the religion of ancient Rome. Montesquieu's central thesis was that Roman elites had invented religion for their own political purposes. In addition to instilling a fear of the gods to discipline their people, these elites had deliberately presented themselves as the only true conduits to the divine. Priests, for instance, were completely subject to the Senate. Montesquieu was careful to emphasize that Roman elites themselves had not believed in their own absurd inventions, but instead espoused a more rational, natural religion, thus presenting the religion of the Romans, in essence, as a hoax perpetrated by elites against the gullible masses, in order to perpetuate their power over the latter (*OC* 8:77–98).

Montesquieu's first major literary contribution, the *Persian Letters*, published five years after his essay on the religion of the Romans, brought closer to home this critique of established religion as essentially irrational. In letters purportedly written by two wealthy and educated Persians travelling through France and other countries, Montesquieu provided extensive comments on all sorts of common beliefs and customs, including religious ones. His European readers were thus presented with a funhouse mirror image of their society, as they learned to look at familiar

ideas and practices through the eyes of Usbek and Rica, the *Persian Letters'* exotic protagonists. The overall effect of the novel was to foster a skeptical, relativistic attitude toward Montesquieu's own society, including its dominant religion, Catholicism.[6]

Thus, Montesquieu, through the mouthpiece of Usbek, irreverently described the Pope as a "great magician" capable of making Europeans believe that "three are only one, that the bread he eats is not bread, or that the wine he drinks is not wine, and countless other things of that nature" (*PL* 22). Usbek also agonized over the question whether Christians would be condemned to serve eternity in Hell, like Turkish infidels, thus parodying commonly held Christian beliefs about the damnation of unbelievers, while pointing out how illogical they were. ("Do you think that they [the Christians] will be condemned to eternal retribution, and that God will punish them for not practicing a religion of which he denied them knowledge?" Usbek wondered (*PL* 33).)

But Montesquieu did not just mock Christian beliefs. He also pointed out, through his mouthpiece Usbek, the considerable similarities between Islamic and Christian dogmas and religious practices, thus undermining in yet another way the idea that Catholicism was the only true religion.[7] He compared Christian baptism to the mandatory ablutions performed by Muslims. ("The only mistake made by the Christians," Usbek commented, "is in the efficacy they attribute to this first ablution, which they believe suffices for all the others.") He pointed out that, just like Muslims, Christian priests and monks prayed seven times a day; that they expected to enjoy the blessings of paradise through the resurrection of the body; that they kept specified fast days and mortified the flesh; and that they believed in miracles. In short, Usbek concluded provocatively, "I see Muhammadanism everywhere, although I do not find Muhammad here" (*PL* 33).

In his more mature writings, notably *The Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu toned down his irreverent and mocking tone, instead describing Christianity as a religion with "its roots in heaven" (*SL* 24.1). Yet, Montesquieu's skeptical attitude towards established religion was nonetheless also very much in evidence in his masterpiece. Indeed, in *The Spirit of the Laws*, he pioneered a new, scientific understanding of established religious beliefs and practices as a product of local, context-bound human needs and desires, rather than of divine inspiration. Arguably, this new understanding was just as corrosive of the truth-claims of the Catholic Church as the mocking, relativizing attitude he expressed in the *Persian Letters*.[8]

*The Spirit of the Laws* is a hugely ambitious work. Montesquieu's ultimate goal was to explain the patterns behind the seemingly endless variety in political and social practices across space and time. Taking his cue from the natural sciences, he used empirical observation to discover regularities in human behavior, from which he then distilled more general laws. In doing so, Montesquieu was pioneering a new and scientific approach to human behavior that would come to be adopted by many Enlightenment thinkers as well as by later social scientists, so much so that Peter Gay has dubbed him "the most influential writer of the eighteenth century."[9] In Book 24 and Book 25 of *The Spirit of the Laws*, he extended this analysis more specifically to religious matters, examining, respectively, the dogmas of different religions as well as their structure and organization in relation to other aspects of humans' political and social behavior.

Montesquieu's central claim was that different religious systems originated in different human needs and wants. Sedentary peoples, he explained for instance, believed that their gods resided in temples, just like they themselves lived in houses, whereas nomads, for obvious reasons, did not share this belief. "Almost all [civilized] peoples," Montesquieu wrote,

> live in houses. From this has naturally come the idea of building a house for god where they can worship him and go to seek him in their fears or their hopes. . . . But this very natural idea comes only to peoples who cultivate land, and one will not see temples built by those who have no houses themselves. This is why Genghis Khan showed such great scorn for mosques. (*SL* 25.3)

More specifically, Montesquieu maintained that the striking global variety in religious practices and beliefs could best be explained by reference to climatic differences, which were the ultimate cause, he argued (following the abbé Dubos), of human diversity. The fact that Hindus believed in reincarnation, for instance, was not random, but due to the particularities of the Indian climate. Hindu belief in reincarnation encouraged vegetarianism, which was necessary in a hot environment. "Excessive heat scorches the whole countryside," Montesquieu explained.

> As a result, one can feed only very little livestock; one is always in danger of having little stock for plowing; the livestock reproduce poorly; they are subject to many diseases: Therefore, a law of religion that preserves them is very suitable to the police of this country. (*SL* 24.24)

Montesquieu gave example after example of how different religious practices and beliefs originated from climatic differences. In India, for

instance, as the English explorer William Dampier had observed, people living in warmer areas had plenty of time for diversions, since a hot climate produced more food. By contrast, in colder climes people were more occupied with fishing and hunting and hence had less time for fun and dance. Religious practices necessarily had to adapt themselves to these differences by instituting more or fewer festivals (*SL* 24.23). Montesquieu, it is important to note, did not shy away from making similar arguments about Christian beliefs and practices, which were likewise revealed to have their roots in various needs resulting from the climate characteristic of Europe.

By presenting such a scientific, objectifying account of religion, *The Spirit of the Laws* of course encouraged a skeptical attitude toward established religion. After all, if many or even most religious practices adopted by Christians and other believers were developed in response to particular human needs rather than upon God's command, then perhaps these beliefs and practices did not require the kind of faithful obedience one should accord to God's will. Thus, Montesquieu's analysis of temples as originating in the need of human beings to imagine the gods as being much like themselves – that is, in need of a house – was not terribly conducive to respect for the sanctity of, say, Catholic churches.

In sum, Montesquieu's writings propagated a skeptical view towards the truth-claims of revealed religion in general and of Christianity in particular. It is therefore tempting to think of Montesquieu as exemplifying a typical Enlightenment attitude toward religion. More specifically, it is tempting to think that his ultimate goal was to undermine established religion in order to encourage its replacement, not by atheism, but by a more rational, "natural" religion. But that would be to misunderstand Montesquieu. As we shall now see, for all of his explicit skepticism about the truth of prevalent religious dogma and practice, Montesquieu developed a novel defense of established religion generally speaking and Christianity in particular on the ground of its political and social utility. Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* in other words illustrates that the new, enlightened approach to religion could not just be used to attack religion. Paradoxically, it could also be mobilized to argue for a complacent acceptance of existing religious practices and beliefs, in particular Christian practices and beliefs.

## MONTESQUIEU ON THE UTILITY OF RELIGION

Montesquieu developed his enlightened, instrumental defense of established religion in particular in Book 24 of *The Spirit of the Laws*, entitled

"On the laws in their relation to the religion established in each country." In this section of *The Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu embarked on an attempt to systematically evaluate different kinds of religion from the perspective of their social and political usefulness, or, as he expressed it himself, to "examine the various religions of the world only in relation to the good to be drawn from them in the civil state, whether I speak of the one whose roots are in heaven or of those whose roots are in the earth" (*SL* 24.1).

Montesquieu's analysis led him to the conclusion, first and foremost, that organized religions in general were useful things. They acted as a check on both rulers and subjects, making sure that people behaved morally. Montesquieu opened Book 24 with a discussion of Pierre Bayle's claim that a society of virtuous atheists was possible – a claim Montesquieu roundly rejected. According to Montesquieu, fear of God was the best guarantee human beings had against the perfidy of other human beings, and without such a bridle, any society would soon devolve into anarchical violence. "Religion, even a false one," he wrote, "is the best warrant men can have of the integrity of men" (*SL* 24.8).

This was of course a familiar argument: Voltaire, too maintained that societies would collapse without religion, famously remarking that "if God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him."[10] But in Montesquieu's view, instilling a basic morality was not the only function of religion. Established religions, he made clear, also tended to support the particular socio-political systems of which they were a part. Throughout Book 24 of *The Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu gave his readers example after example to show that even the most bizarre religious beliefs and practices typically had some useful social or political effects.

Thus, Montesquieu explained, for instance, that the Muslim prohibition on eating pork made considerable sense in the context of the Arab world, where people were subject to diseases of the skin. As medical men had observed, "when one eats pork it transpires little and . . . this food even greatly prevents the transpiration of other foods." It was also well known that "the lack of transpiration forms or sharpens diseases of the skin," so that abstaining from pork was healthy in Arab lands (*SL* 24.25). Montesquieu also appealed to social utility to explain religious habits closer to home. For instance, he asked himself why Protestants had fewer religious festivals than Catholics. The answer, again, was social utility: "Protestant countries and Catholic countries," Montesquieu wrote, "are situated in such a way that one needs to work more in the former than in

the latter. Therefore, the suppression of festivals suited Protestant countries better than Catholic countries" (*SL* 24.24).

In *The Spirit of the Laws*, in short, Montesquieu pioneered a type of analysis that today we would describe as "functionalism" – an approach to understanding social phenomena in which the existence of a specific institution or social custom is explained by pointing to its function, its social benefits.[11] Now, functionalism can easily lead to conservatism with a small "c," to complacency. If even the most bizarre social habits or customs exist because they benefit society in one way or another, then it is clear that there are no truly "bad" or pernicious habits and customs but rather all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds. And hence, functionalism can work against reformism: To change specific customs and beliefs, even seemingly harmful ones, might rend the delicate fabric of society and result in far worse outcomes than just leaving things alone.

Montesquieu's own analysis definitely points in that direction. Throughout *The Spirit of the Laws*, he repeated again and again that the specific customs and habits of a particular people could not simply be transferred or used as a model by other people. Or, as Montesquieu expressed it himself: "May we be left as we are" (*SL* 19.5). This was also true for religious practices and beliefs. Because each religion was a reflection of local needs and adapted to local social and political systems, there were considerable "drawbacks," as Montesquieu put it, in "transferring a religion from one country to another" (*SL* 24.25). A ruler was therefore justified in trying to prevent this from happening by prohibiting the proselytizing of new religions (*SL* 25.9–25.11).

But Montesquieu was not simply saying that whatever is, is best. He also argued that, from the perspective of social and political utility, Christianity was in many respects a better, that is, more useful religion than other religious traditions. More specifically, he argued that Christianity had beneficial effects because it supported freedom from despotism, especially when compared to other religions like Islam that helped to maintain slavery and tyranny. These ideas held a prominent place in Book 24 of *The Spirit of the Laws*, where Montesquieu devoted a chapter to the idea that "moderate government is better suited to the Christian religion, and despotic government to Mohammedanism" (*SL* 24.3).

So why was this the case? Why did Christianity foster moderate government and freedom, rather than despotism? In answering this question, Montesquieu insisted first and foremost on the gentleness fostered by Christianity. Christianity softened the mores of both rulers and ruled. As

Montesquieu put it: "We owe to Christianity both a certain political right in government and a certain right of nations in war, for which human nature can never be sufficiently grateful." This was immediately apparent, he believed, when one compared the mores of Christian nations with the Greeks and Romans, whose histories testified to their continual massacres of their kings and leaders. Likewise, nomads and Muslims were equally violent. "The Mohammedan religion," he wrote, "which speaks only with a sword, continues to act on men with the destructive spirit that founded it." All of this brought Montesquieu to the happy conclusion that "the Christian religion, which seems to have no other object than the felicity of the other life, is also our happiness in this one!" (*SL* 24.3–24.4).

In addition, Montesquieu also believed that the higher status of women in Christianity helped stave off the rise of oriental despotism in Europe. The fact that Christianity encouraged monogamy, and Islam polygamy, Montesquieu wrote, had contributed to establishing greater equality between the sexes in the Christian world. This had, in turn, important political effects. The example of the Islamic world showed, Montesquieu believed, that there was a causal relation between the "domestic slavery" of women and political slavery. In the Islamic world, for instance, harems isolated the prince from the people. By contrast, in the Christian world, kings got married like everyone else, hence remaining more integrated into society. As a result, they were more inclined to think of themselves as subject to the law rather than above it (*SL* 24.3).

This is not to say that, in Montesquieu's view, all forms of Christianity were equally conducive to fostering political freedom. As he explained, Protestantism, "a religion that has no visible leader," was better suited to foster freedom than Catholicism. Hence, it had become the dominant religion of northern Europe, where a colder climate went hand in hand with "a spirit of independence and liberty" (*SL* 24.5). Yet Montesquieu was careful to emphasize that Catholicism, while being generally less conducive to freedom, could nevertheless, in specific contexts, help protect against despotism. Because the Church was headed by the pope, who controlled an independent religious hierarchy, it could play a useful role in offsetting the potentially overweening power of hereditary kings. "In monarchy," Montesquieu remarked, "where one cannot have too much separate the orders of the state and where one should not bring together all the powers in the same head, it is good for the pontificate to be separated from the empire" (*SL* 25.8).

Of course, Montesquieu was aware that Christianity had not always lived up to this idealized description. He acknowledged that the religious

violence sparked by disagreements between Christians, as well as intolerance toward nonbelievers, could undermine the social utility he attributed to Christianity. But at the same time, Montesquieu seems to have believed that such intolerance was becoming ever less rampant in his own day and age. Thus, in the *Persian Letters*, he had Usbek remark that "Christians are beginning to abandon that spirit of intolerance which formerly inspired them," as they had come to realize "that zeal for the advancement of religion is different from the love one should bear it, and that in order to love it, and observe its precepts, there is no need to hate and persecute those who do not do so." In this regard as well, Christianity compared favorably to Islam. "We must hope that our Muslims," Usbek remarked, "can think as sensibly on this subject as Christians do" – thus implying that, so far, they had remained stuck in their intolerant ways (*PL* 59).[12]

Indeed, Montesquieu made clear that he believed the beneficial properties of Christianity to be so considerable that they could overcome or at least counter the nefarious political effects of a hot climate, as he made clear in a discussion of the Ethiopian Empire. In Montesquieu's view, a very warm climate was conducive to political despotism, as "great heat enervates the strength and courage of men," thus making them less capable of resisting tyranny. By contrast, a cold climate gave men "a certain strength of body and spirit" that made them "capable of long, arduous, great, and daring actions," hence, they were more inclined to fight for their freedom. "Therefore, one must not be surprised," he wrote, "that the cowardice of the peoples of hot climates has almost always made them slaves and that the courage of the peoples of cold climates has kept them free" (*SL* 17.2).

In the case of Ethiopia, however, the effects of a hot climate had been overruled by the advent of the Christian religion. That became clear from a comparison with the neighboring kingdom of Sannar. Despite "the vice of its climate," Montesquieu commented (relying on the travelogue of Charles Jacques Poncet), the spread of Christianity in Ethiopia, had kept despotism from being established. Here, the Christian religion, had "carried the mores and laws of Europe to the middle of Africa." By contrast, in Sannar, "Mohammedanism" had encouraged the establishment of despotism by propagating ruthlessness and a general disregard for human life (*SL* 24.3).

By highlighting Christianity's freedom-promoting propensities, it is worth noting, Montesquieu did not aim to promote the expansion of the Christian religion outside of Europe. Indeed, for all his talk about the

beneficial effects of Christianity in Ethiopia, Montesquieu made it very clear that he did not believe in proselytism. Generally speaking, climate determined which religion was most suitable for each particular region, he believed, and even though this rule could be bent in specific cases, where for contingent reasons a religion had taken root that was less suitable to its climate, such cases would always remain exceptional. "Climate," as Montesquieu put it, "has prescribed limits to the Christian religion and to the Mohammedan religion" (*SL* 24.26). In other words, Montesquieu's idealized portrait of Christianity was not meant to propagate Christian proselytism abroad; hence, in this sense at least, he cannot be accused of orientalism.[13]

To sum up: While Montesquieu was skeptical about the truth-claims of Christianity, he propagated a novel and enlightened defense of revealed religion by emphasizing the social and political utility of established religions generally and Christianity in particular. He argued, first, that religions in general were useful because they instilled a certain basic morality in rulers and subjects alike, and second, because religious beliefs and practices tended to support the socio-political systems they were a part of, for instance by making northern Protestants work harder than southern Catholics. But Montesquieu also argued – and that was his third main claim about religion – that Christianity in particular was more useful than other religions because it played a crucial role in helping to preserve political freedom in Europe.

By making such claims, Montesquieu was deviating in an important way from other *philosophes* such as his younger contemporary Voltaire. Like Montesquieu, Voltaire was a deist who believed that atheism formed a threat to the very survival of society. But unlike Montesquieu, Voltaire had little good to say about established religions in general and about Christianity in particular. Throughout his many writings, Voltaire depicted Christianity as a tissue of fraud and lies, imposed by canny priests on gullible populations. There was no hint in his writings that Christianity was more useful than other religions. In his 1767 broadside *Dinner at the Count de Boulainvilliers*, for instance, Voltaire declared that Christianity amounted to a "tissue of the most insipid impostures" and an "uninterrupted series of frauds" perpetrated throughout the centuries. Above all, it was a fanatical and violent religion.[14]

Voltaire's complaints, it is important to note, were by no means restricted to the religion in which he was brought up: He was equally critical of other revealed religions, notably Islam and Judaism. Ultimately, Voltaire's dream seems to have been a society purged of Christianity and

other forms of revealed religion and based instead on a more rational, natural form of religion. "Religion must clearly be purged; the whole of Europe is crying out for it," he remarked in his *Dialogues Between A B and C*. Indeed, Voltaire insisted that getting rid of revealed religion was the only way to prevent the spread of atheism. "Theology has only served to subvert minds," Voltaire wrote, "and sometimes states. It alone creates atheists, for the vast majority of minor theologians, who are sensible enough to see the silly side of this fantastical discipline, don't know enough about it to replace it with a sane philosophy." By contrast, natural religion, "the faith of all decent people," made men "bow down before the Divinity"; it made "just and wise" what revealed religion made "iniquitous and insane."[15]

Montesquieu, however, does not seem to have shared Voltaire's enthusiasm for natural religion.[16] In private notes jotted down in the 1730s, he rejected the idea that natural religion could ever offer an adequate substitute for revealed religion. "What proves to me the necessity of a revelation is the inadequacy of natural religion," he wrote, "given men's fear and superstition. For if you place men today in the pure state of natural religion, tomorrow they would fall into some gross superstition" (*MT* 825). About two decades later, in a letter to the English bishop William Warburton (an enlightened defender of revealed religion against English deists like Lord Bolingbroke), Montesquieu made much the same point. To attack revealed religion, especially in the English context, he wrote, where it had been divested of its pernicious intolerant aspects, was foolish. If a person succeeded in undermining its authority, he would only succeed in "destroying an infinity of practical goods to establish a purely speculative truth."[17]

Montesquieu's doubts about the feasibility of introducing new and more rational, natural forms of religion suggest one possible reason why he felt compelled, in *The Spirit of the Laws*, to come up with a new and more enlightened defense of Christianity. If the eradication of revealed religion was impossible without destroying religion itself – which would ultimately lead to the destruction of society – then there were good reasons, even from an enlightened, deist perspective, to attempt to buttress the authority of Christianity. And that was precisely what Montesquieu set out to do in *The Spirit of the Laws*, as he made clear. His examination of Christianity, in comparison with Islam, was meant to show, he explained, that we should "embrace the one and reject the other" – "for it is much more evident to us that a religion should soften the mores of men than it is that a religion is true" (*SL* 24.4).

## MONTESQUIEU AS A PROPONENT OF THE
## COMPLACENT ENLIGHTENMENT

Montesquieu's views on religion, in short, were a lot more complex than it might appear at first sight. While he was skeptical about the truth of revealed religion, at the same time he developed a novel defense of established religion generally and Christianity in particular by highlighting, among other things, its freedom-enhancing propensities. Acknowledging the complexity of Montesquieu's views on established religion, I will now go on to argue, is not just important for our understanding of Montesquieu himself. It can also help us to bring into focus a particular strand of Enlightenment thinking about religion that has hitherto remained unacknowledged in the literature – a strand of thought we might describe as the "Complacent Enlightenment."

In recent years, debate about the Enlightenment has taken an important new turn. Scholars have increasingly come to question the traditional view of the Enlightenment as a wholesale attack on established religion in the name of reason. In a landmark study, David Sorkin has drawn attention to the existence of a multi-confessional and transnational "Religious Enlightenment" existing alongside, and in dialogue with, the more familiar secular Enlightenment of the French *philosophes*. As Sorkin shows, in the eighteenth century, believers all over Europe attempted to rethink their respective religions in the light of human reason and propagated more humane and tolerant versions of their faith. The Enlightenment, he argues, was "not only compatible with religious belief but conducive to it" by making possible "new iterations of faith." [18]

Montesquieu's defense of Christianity might at first sight bring him close to the Religious Enlightenment, and we know that some enlightened theologians, such as the Calvinist pastor Jacob Vernet, read the *Spirit of the Laws* with at least partial approval. (Indeed, he oversaw the printing of the Genevan edition of the *Spirit of the Laws*).[19] But in the end of the day, a representative of the Protestant Enlightenment like Vernet defended Christianity because he believed it was *true* and that other religions were false beliefs. Montesquieu, as we have seen, never suggested that this was the case. Instead, he harped on the social utility of the Christian religion and especially on its role in preserving freedom in Europe. Montesquieu even suggested, as we have seen, that social utility was a better argument in favor of Christianity than its doctrinal value. Orthodox believers, needless to say, were not exactly thrilled by such an

instrumental defense of Christianity and that was one of the reasons why *The Spirit of the Laws* eventually ended up on Rome's Index of Prohibited Books (much to Montesquieu's surprise and dismay).[20]

Nor can we capture the distinctiveness of Montesquieu's contribution to the Enlightenment debate about religion by describing him as a proponent of the "Moderate Enlightenment." This term, originally coined by Margaret Jacob and later revived by Jonathan Israel, was introduced to distinguish religiously and politically moderate deists from more radical thinkers who espoused a strident, revolutionary atheism. Israel in particular has argued that Montesquieu must be understood as one of the major proponents of the Moderate Enlightenment, an Enlightenment that aimed to "conquer ignorance and superstition," but at the same time also aimed to "preserve and safeguard essential" structures of the Old Regime, in order to come to a "viable synthesis of ... reason and faith," rather than "sweeping away existing structures entirely," as more radical *philosophes* intended.[21]

Montesquieu's ideas, however, cannot simply be described as a more "moderate" version of the ideas propagated by thinkers like Spinoza – or, for that matter, Voltaire. Montesquieu, after all, was just as willing as Spinoza or Voltaire to dismiss the claims of orthodox theologians that Christianity was the one and true religion; he was not intent on reconciling Christianity with reason. Instead, what is interesting about Montesquieu is that he was just as adamant about Christianity's lack of reasonableness as the most radical atheist – while developing, at the same time, a novel defense of Christianity based on a typically enlightened, secular attitude toward revealed religion, as being useful in the here and now.[22]

In sum, if we want to pick out Montesquieu's distinctive contribution to the Enlightenment debate about religion, labelling him a religious or moderate enlightener will not do. Instead, we need to acknowledge that Montesquieu represented a different strand of enlightened thought – a strand of thought that used the tools of enlightenment neither to uproot Christianity nor to affirm its truth or reasonableness, but to reveal its social utility. This strand of Enlightenment thought, I would argue, might be usefully labelled the Complacent Enlightenment.

In his own time, it might be remarked, Montesquieu seems to have made relatively few converts to his distinct way of thinking about religion. If anything, the generation of *philosophes* following in Montesquieu's and Voltaire's footsteps was more hostile to Christianity and revealed religion than even Voltaire.[23] Yet in the longer run, the Complacent

Enlightenment has had a considerable impact on the way in which we think about Christianity. Indeed, the approach pioneered by Montesquieu – his claim that Christianity is a "good" religion not for its intrinsic value but for its social utility, and in particular because it helps to foster individual and political freedom – is now more pervasive than ever. Bernard Lewis, Samuel Huntington, Larry Siedentop and Niall Ferguson are all examples of public intellectuals who have used the arguments pioneered by Montesquieu to argue for the superiority of Christianity, in particular over and above Islam. (Indeed, it should be noted that Ferguson explicitly describes himself as a "Scottish enlightenment liberal.")[24] In that sense, we are still, for better or worse, the heirs of Montesquieu's Complacent Enlightenment.

## Notes

1 See Schaub, "Of Believers and Barbarians"; Bianchi, "La religion dans l'Esprit des Lois," 289–304; Pangle, *Theological Basis*; Bartlett, *The Idea of Enlightenment*, chapter 2. For an important critique of this standard view, see Callanan, *Montesquieu's Liberalism*, especially chapter 5.

2 Shackleton, *Montesquieu,* 1–26, 392–9.

3 For Montesquieu's personal beliefs, see Shackleton, *Montesquieu*, 349–54; as well as Shackleton, "La religion de Montesquieu," 109–16.

4 Shackleton, *Montesquieu*, 352.

5 For the *philosophes*' deism, see Gay, *The Enlightenment*, vol. 1, 383–5.

6 Montesquieu was not alone in using a comparativist approach to undermine the truth-claims of Christianity. See Revel, "The Uses of Comparison."

7 It should be noted that I do not wish to suggest that Usbek's words can always be understood as expressions of Montesquieu's own views. The *Persian Letters* is obviously not a *roman à clef*. Yet in this particular case Usbek is voicing an opinion very similar to views Montesquieu himself expressed in his private writings.

8 See Schaub, "Of Believers and Barbarians," 235; Bianchi, "La religion dans l'Esprit des Lois," 289–304.

9 Gay, *The Enlightenment*, vol. 2, 325.

10 Voltaire, *Épitre à l'auteur du livre des Trois Imposteurs*, 403.

11 For a description of Montesquieu's approach as "functionalist," see Carrithers, "The Enlightenment Science of Society," 232–70.

12 For a nuanced analysis of Montesquieu's views on toleration, see Kingston, "Montesquieu on Religion."

13 For a nuanced discussion of Montesquieu's orientalism, see Curtis, *Orientalism and Islam*, chapter 4.

14 Quoted in Marshall, "Voltaire, Priestcraft and Imposture," 168. For the *philosophes*' dream of a society purged of Christianity and based on natural religion, see Gay, *The Enlightenment*, vol. 1, 371–96.

15 Voltaire, "Dialogues between A B C," 147.
16 For a discussion of Montesquieu's views on natural vs revealed religion, see Spector, "Naturalisation des croyances," 40–109, and Pangle, *Theological Basis*, 20 and 142. But compare Rolando Minuti, who argues that Montesquieu and Voltaire did share the same outlook on religion. See Minuti, "An Overview: Montesquieu and Islam," 181–95.
17 Montesquieu to Warburton, May 1754, Nagel 3:1509–10.
18 Sorkin, *Religious Enlightenment*, 3. See also Rosenblatt, "The Christian Enlightenment," 283–301.
19 Sorkin, *Religious Enlightenment*, 98. About Jacob Vernet's work overseeing the Genevan edition of *The Spirit of the Laws*, see Volpilhac-Auger, "Vernet."
20 Shackleton, *Montesquieu*, 356–77.
21 Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 11. See also Jacob, *Radical Enlightenment*. For Montesquieu as a proponent of the Moderate Enlightenment, see Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, esp. chapter 14.
22 For such a secular outlook as typical for the Enlightenment, see Jacob, *Secular Enlightenment*.
23 Gay, *The Enlightenment*, vol. 1, 17. After 1750, *antiphilosophes* did increasingly adopt arguments highlighting the social and political utility of Christianity, but mostly they argued religion was necessary for stability, not freedom. See Matytsin, "Reason and Utility in French Religious Apologetics," 63–82.
24 Interview with Niall Ferguson, *The Guardian* 20.2.2011.