Bayle on Religious Toleration: Whence and Why?

Textual Evidence

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The “Natural Light” Argument

1) “The Light of Nature, or the first Principles of Reason universally receiv’d, are the genuine and original Rule of all Interpretation of Scripture; especially in Matters of Practice and Morality… This single Principle of natural Reason; That all literal Construction, which carries an Obligation of committing Iniquity [les crimes], is false (I.1; 65-6).

2) ’Tis… contrary to good Sense, to the Light of Nature, to the common Principles of Reason; in a word, to that primitive original Rule of distinguishing Truth from Falshood, Good from Evil; to exercise Violence for the inspiring a Religion into those who profess it not (I.2; 78).

3) Writing as a Philosopher, I’m oblig’d to go back to the original and mother Rule, to wit, Reason or natural Light. I say then, that the Gospel being a Rule which has been verified by the purest Ideas of Reason, which are the primary and original Rule of all Truth and Rectitude; to sin against this Gospel, is sinning against the primary Rule it self; or which is the same thing, against that internal still Revelation, by which God discovers to all Men the very first Principles (I.3; 80).

4) The literal Sense of this Gospel-Text, Compel ’em to come in, is not only contrary to the Lights of natural Religion, which are the primary and original Rule of Equity, but also to the reigning and essential Spirit of the Gospel it self, and of its Author; for nothing can be more opposite to this Spirit, than Dungeons, Dragoons, Banishment… Therefore this literal Sense is false (I.3; 84).

The “Reciprocity” (or “Reflexivity”) Argument

5) Is it not… plain that Murder, Calumny, Robbery, and Perjury, are expressly forbidden by God? Yet, if notwithstanding the Prohibition, these Actions become righteous, when perform’d for the Good of the Church; mayn’t we say the same of every other prohibited Action, not excepting even that of deposing Kings? (I.4; 92)

6) “An Absurdity I have spoke to sufficiently already, to wit, That an Action, which might be a Crime in any other case, ceases to be so, when committed against one of a false Religion, with a design of bringing him over to the true: An Absurdity, which opens a door to the fearfullest State ’tis possible to imagine (I.6; 105).

7) “Negative” Reciprocity: That Party which, if uppermost, wou’d tolerate no other and wou’d force Conscience, ought not to be tolerated (II.5; 93).

8) Men of Half-Toleration say… That we ought to tolerate Sects which destroy not the Fundamentals of Christianity, but not those which do. But here’s the very same Illusion again. For we may ask them what they mean by destroying the Foundation? Is it denying a Point, which really and in it self is a fundamental Article, or only denying a thing which is
believ’d such by the Accuser, but not by the Accused? If they answer, the first; here’s the ground laid of a tedious debate, in which the Accused will hold for the Negative, and maintain that what he denys, far from being a Fundamental of religion, is really a Falshood, or at best but a matter indifferent. If they answer, the second; the Accused will reply, that truly he shan’t stick at destroying that which passes for a Fundamental only in his Adversary’s brain, because it by no means follows that it is really such. And so here’s a new Dispute started upon this Enthymeme of the Accusers[:] Such a thing appears to me a fundamental Article. Therefore it is such. Which is poor Reasoning (II.7; 217-8).

9) [T]f all those who believe themselves the true Church persecuted the rest; ‘tis plain, it’s a most ridiculous Conceit, that only the Orthodox are allow’d to persecute, since the very Supposition is enough to oblige each Sect to turn Persecutress, each believing it self the only true and pure Religion (II.11; 279).

The “Erring Conscience” Argument

10) Conscience is a Light dictating that such a thing is good or bad… [T]t is the same thing to say, My Conscience judges such an Action to be good or bad; and to say, My Conscience judges that such an Action is pleasing or displeasing to God. To me these Propositions seem allow’d by all the world, as much as any of the clearest Principles of Metaphysicks (II.8; 220).

11) Whether the Arguments for the Truth are always more solid than those for Falshood. To consider things absolutely, the Affirmative of this Question is most certain; but to consider ‘em with regard to Main in common Life, I think there a distinction to be made… [T]here are necessary Truths, and Truths contingent. Among the necessary Truths there are some so evident, either immediately… or mediately… [that] it [is] easily perceivable, that nothing of any weight can be offer’d in favor of these [opposite] Falshoods. But when a necessary Truth is not evident, either in it self, or by means of a Train of Demonstrations… then indeed it may be attack’d in such a manner, that it’s hard to distinguish, whether those who deny or those who affirm are most in the wrong… [The same distinction holds for “Truths contingent”], not only historical Facts, but such Truths also as depend on the free Decrees of God… [T]t’s very possible in this Case, that the opposite Errors may be defended as solidly, in all appearance, as these Truths (Supp 24; 531-2).

12) Philosophy affords us a hundred Examples of contradictory Propositions, which are each so strongly supported by Reasons equally specious, that difficult nice Understandings don’t know, upon a fair hearing, how to chuse the best from the less good Opinion (Supp 24; 533).