I

Skepticism and Tolerance: The Case of Montaigne

E. M. CURLEY

AN INITIAL PARADOX

In *The Essays of Montaigne*, Richard Sayce writes that Montaigne presents in an acute form the dichotomy of post-Renaissance Europe, between Christian religion and classical culture. In him classical humanism, relativism, scepticism, indifference, combine to produce his most positive contribution to religious thought, the toleration which released western man from at least one source of savagery and fanaticism.¹

Elsewhere he adds that although Montaigne was not the first to advocate religious toleration, ‘he may well have been the most influential up to that date’.² I think this may be true, and that if true, it’s a surprising truth, an oddity, at least, if you think of Montaigne in the way much of the literature on him encourages us to.

Someone may say: ‘Look, Montaigne is a skeptic, a pyrrhonian skeptic, who thinks that everything is radically uncertain, that in any dispute both sides are equally likely, that no proposition is more probable than its denial, and that the path to contentment is to suspend judgment about

This essay is a revision of a paper first presented to the Tolerance Seminar at the University of Michigan, in September 1997, subsequently at the Central Division meetings of the APA, in Chicago, in April 1998, and most recently at the Montaigne Conference at the University of Chicago in May 2000. I’m indebted to the audiences on those occasions for their comments, and especially to Philippe Desan, Jean-Luc Marion, and David Quint. Special thanks go to George Hoffman, for his encouragement and his delightful and profitable seminar on Montaigne in the winter semester of 2004 at the University of Michigan.

² Ibid. 226.
everything. So of course he believes in toleration. Well, no doubt there is some tendency of skepticism to lead to toleration. We might cite here Montaigne’s observation about the punishment of witches: ‘It is putting a very high value on one’s conjectures, to have a man roasted alive because of them’ (iii, p. xi, ‘Of cripples’; V-S 1032; F 790; S 1169). Or: ‘To kill people, there must be sharp and brilliant clarity’ (V-S 1031; F 789; S 1167).

If it’s necessary to have certainty about your views, before you burn someone for not sharing them, then skepticism may justify a limited toleration: abstention from a particularly brutal kind of killing. In Montaigne’s century that would have been a notable advance. Nowadays we require more of toleration than that. Moreover, it may seem to us that even if you are certain of your views, you’re not entitled to burn someone for disagreeing with them—or for that matter, to kill them in other, less cruel ways.

Perhaps Montaigne’s apparent concession that certainty would justify killing heretics is ironic. But before we can know what to make of remarks like the ones quoted above, we need to think about how Montaigne might deal with a certain kind of rationale for persecution. The persecutor might respond to Montaigne that his faith is far from a mere conjecture, it is an absolute confidence, based on divine revelation, in which God’s Son himself has told us that:

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life . . . Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. (John 3:16, 18)

Here Jesus makes belief in him as the Messiah, as the Son of God and our Redeemer, both necessary and sufficient for salvation. But (pace Locke) we do not punish heretics to achieve the salvation of the

---

3 Cf. ‘Montaigne, like all true skeptics, is tolerant . . . ’ in Hugo Friedrich and Phillipe Desan (eds.), Dawn Eng (tr.), Montaigne (University of California Press, 1991), 109. Alan Levine’s recent Sensual Philosophy, Toleration, Skepticism and Montaigne’s Politics of the Self (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2001), provides a much more complex account of the relation between Montaigne’s skepticism and his toleration, but not one I find satisfactory in the end.

4 My persecutor’s rationale is a blend of considerations adduced by Aquinas (Summa theologiae II-II, qu. 10–11), Calvin (Declaratio orthodoxae fidei, in Opera quae supersunt omnia, 59 vols. [Braunschweig, 1863–1900], vol. viii, to whom I owe the metaphor of the wolves and the lambs), and Pascal (in the wager argument).

heretics, for we know full well that a saving faith must be voluntary. We punish them to preserve the faith of those believers who might be led astray if the heretics were allowed to spread their poison. What we do may seem cruel, the opposite of Christian love; but the people who are really cruel are the ones who would permit heresy: in their squeamish desire to spare the wolves, they put the little lambs at risk of eternal torment. Forcibly repressing heresy is a necessary evil, amply compensated by the good it does overall. Christian love requires us to look to the good of those who might become heretics if we did not protect them.

Moreover, even if we were to grant—what we cannot really believe without impiety—that there is some uncertainty in our faith, nevertheless what we believe must be at least highly probable. If we take into account both that probability and the infinite gains and losses which are at stake, persecution is a perfectly rational course of action. The intense suffering of the heretic as he is being burned alive may be horrible to watch, but that’s precisely why it is an effective deterrent to others who might be tempted to spread doubt if we were more lenient. Moreover, that finite suffering is trivial by comparison with the infinite suffering God himself will justly inflict on the heretic in hell. Call this line of thought: ‘the persecutor’s wager’.6

Objection: the persecutor’s wager, as here formulated, concedes only some modest degree of doubt about the faith (and that only for the sake of the argument); since Montaigne is a pyrrhonian, his skepticism is much more radical than that. Not only is nothing certain, nothing is even more probable than not. The pyrrhonian’s mottos are: ‘since equal reasons are found on both sides of the same subject, we should suspend judgment on each side . . . it is no more this way than that . . . both sides seem equally likely’ (II, xii, ‘Apology for Raymond Sebond’; V-S 504–5; F 373–4; S 562–3). Will the persecutor’s response work, if the skepticism is that radical?

Reply: Perhaps not. But is it necessary to go so far into doubt to avoid the persecutor’s wager? If we need to become pyrrhonians to justify toleration, we are in trouble. Most people find full-strength pyrrhonism impossible to accept. Is it, for example, really no more probable than not

6 I owe the label ‘Persecutor’s Wager’ to Craig Duncan, a former graduate student at the University of Michigan, who has been working independently on a more formal treatment of this issue, which I hope he will soon publish. I’m also indebted to Craig for the Calvin reference in the preceding note.
that Montaigne lived in the sixteenth century and wrote the essays
we attribute to him? You can say, of course, that the denial of these
propositions is equally probable on the evidence. But can you believe
that? If you are honest with yourself, I think you’ll concede that you
think the propositions affirming Montaigne’s existence and authorship
are at least somewhat more probable than their denials.

Moreover, it is not clear what the implications of pyrrhonism would be,
even if we could accept it. In Montaigne it seems to be combined with
views which look hostile to toleration. In the ‘Apology for Sebond’ (II, xii)
pyrrhonism leads to a form of fideism:

In a thing so divine and so lofty, and so far surpassing human intelligence, as
is this truth with which it has pleased the goodness of God to enlighten us,
it is very necessary that he still lend us his help, by extraordinary and privileged
favor, so that we may conceive it and lodge it in us. I do not believe that purely
human means are at all capable of this; if they were, so many rare and excellent
souls, so abundantly furnished with natural powers in ancient times, would
not have failed to arrive at this knowledge through their reason. It is faith
alone that embraces vividly and surely the high mysteries of our religion. (V-S 440–1,
my emphasis; F 321; S 492)7

With this fideism comes conservatism in religion:

I do not change easily, for fear of losing in the change. And since I am not cap-
able of choosing, I accept other people’s choice and stay in the position where
God put me. Otherwise I could not keep myself from rolling about incessantly.
Thus I have, by the grace of God, kept myself intact, without agitation or
disturbance of conscience, in the ancient beliefs of our religion, in the midst
of so many sects and divisions that our century has produced. (V-S 569; F 428;
S 642)

Montaigne’s aversion to change in religion extends also into politics:

It is very doubtful whether there can be such evident profit in changing an
accepted law, of whatever sort it be, as there is harm in disturbing it . . . a gov-
ernment is like a structure of different parts joined together in such a relation
that it is impossible to budge one without the whole body feeling it . . . I am
disgusted with innovation, in whatever guise, and with reason, for I have seen
very harmful effects of it. (I, xxiii, ‘Of custom’; V-S 119; F 86; S 134)

7 The French for the italicized sentence is: ‘C’est la foy seule qui embrasse vivement et
certainement les hauts mystères de notre Religion.’ So here, at least, Montaigne would seem to
concede that faith may be certain.
He then offers the Protestant Reformation as an example of a disastrous novelty. For most of Montaigne’s adult life his country was torn apart by a bitter civil war between a Catholic faction, which wanted no toleration of the Protestant heretics, and a Protestant faction, which would have been no more tolerant of Catholic idolatry had it gained power. Throughout most of this period the monarchy tried to mediate between the factions, offering the Protestants limited toleration, within a France still officially Catholic. Montaigne refers repeatedly to the harmful consequences of this war.

Sometimes Montaigne’s conservatism seems to be a matter of temperament, at other times an application to religion of the classic pyrrhonian solution to the problem of how one should live under conditions of radical uncertainty: ‘The most plausible advice that our reason gives us is generally for each man to obey the laws of his country’ (‘Apology’; V-S 578; F 436; S 652). In ‘Of custom’ this is called ‘the rule of rules, the universal law of laws . . . that each man should observe those of the place he is in’. (I, xxiii; V-S 118; F 86; S 133). Sometimes Montaigne appears to be an extreme conservative:

What seems to me to bring as much disorder into our consciences as anything, in these religious troubles that we are in, is this partial surrender of their beliefs by Catholics. It seems to them that they are being very moderate and understanding when they yield to their opponents some of the articles in dispute. But besides the fact that they do not see what an advantage it is to a man charging you for you to begin to give ground and withdraw, and how much that encourages him to pursue his point, those articles they select as the most trivial are sometimes very important. We must either submit completely to the authority of our ecclesiastical government, or do without it completely. It is not for us to decide what portion of obedience we owe it. (I, xxvii, ‘It is folly to measure the true and false by our own capacity’; V-S 181–2; F 134; S 204)

If we assume that doing without ecclesiastical authority altogether is not really a live option, this leaves only total submission. There are similar statements in the ‘Apology’, where the option of releasing ourselves from authority is not mentioned.8

---

8 e.g. ‘People who judge and check their judges never submit to them as they ought. How much more docile and easily led, both by the laws of religion and by political laws, are the simple and incurious minds, than those minds that survey divine and human causes like pedagogues!’ (V-S 506; F 375; S 564). Similarly: ‘Reason does nothing but go astray in everything, and especially when it meddles with divine things. Who feels this more evidently than we? For even though we have given it certain and infallible principles, even though we light its steps with
Now if Montaigne’s skepticism calls for him to obey the laws of his country, and to submit totally to the authority of the Church established there, and if that Church holds that heresy, and unbelief generally, are not to be tolerated, then toleration will not be a consequence of skepticism. Since both these conditions seem to be satisfied—i.e. his skepticism does seem to require him to obey the laws of his country, and to submit to the authority of an intolerant church—it is surprising that he should have acquired a reputation for tolerance, and indeed, perhaps be a major figure in the development of arguments in favor of toleration.

MONTAIGNE AS A REVOLUTIONARY:
WITCHCRAFT AND MIRACLES

In spite of the conservatism I have so far highlighted, Montaigne can still be quite critical of his coreligionists:

I have in my time seen wonders in the undiscerning and prodigious ease with which peoples let their beliefs and their hopes be led and manipulated in whatever way has pleased and served their leaders, passing over a hundred mistakes one on top of the other . . . I am no longer amazed at those who are hoodwinked by the monkey tricks of Apollonius and Mohammed . . . I had observed this to a supreme degree in the first of our feverish factions; this other, which has been born since, in imitating it, surpasses it. (III, x, ‘Of husbanding your will’; V-S 1013; F 775; S 1146)

The first of these factions is the Huguenots; the second, the Catholic League, which arose in opposition to the Huguenots. Montaigne expresses similar sentiments in the essay ‘Of Freedom of Conscience’ (II, xix; V-S 668; F 506; S 759).

The Montaigne who appears in such passages is clearly not so conservative and conformist as the Montaigne we met earlier. Indeed, Sayce entitles his chapter on Montaigne’s political philosophy ‘The Conservative and the Revolutionary’. What could possibly justify calling Montaigne the holy lamp of the truth which it has pleased God to communicate to us, nevertheless we see daily how, when it strays however little from the beaten path and deviates or wanders from the way traced and trodden by the Church, immediately it is lost, it grows embarrassed and entangled, whirling round and floating in that vast, troubled and undulating sea of human opinions, unbridled and aimless’ (V-S 520, F 386–7, S 581). On this issue see Jean Starobinski, Montaigne in Motion, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: Chicago University Press 1985), 282, and David Lewis Schaefer, The Political Philosophy of Montaigne [PoliPhil] (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1990), 15 n.
a revolutionary? Quite a few things, as it turns out. First, not only does he disapprove of killing witches, he appears not to think that they should be punished at all, because it is beyond our power to tell who is truly a witch:

The witches of my neighborhood are in mortal danger every time some new author comes along and attests to the reality of their visions. To apply the examples that the Holy Writ offers us of such things, very certain and irrefragable examples, and bring them to bear on our modern events, requires greater ingenuity than ours, since we see neither their causes nor their means... God must be believed in these things, that is truly most reasonable; but not, by the same token, one of us, who is astonished at his own narrative (and he is necessarily astonished unless he is out of his senses), whether he tells it about someone else or against himself. (III, xi, ‘Of cripples’; V-S 1031; F 788–9; S 1166)

So even where there is a voluntary confession of witchcraft, it is more reasonable to suppose that the witch is crazy than that she really has supernatural powers (V-S 1032; F 790; S 1168–9). This may not seem a terribly revolutionary idea. Nowadays sane, educated people, in our part of the world, do not believe in witchcraft, however much biblical evidence there may be for its reality. But in the sixteenth century even someone as generally skeptical as Jean Bodin took it quite seriously.9

Witchcraft is connected with other matters not so easily dismissed as relics of ancient superstition. What would make someone a real witch, if there were any real witches, would be the possession of supernatural powers, combined with the disposition to use them for evil ends. Montaigne does not doubt that there are people who have evil dispositions; what he doubts is the evidence that anyone has supernatural powers:

My ears are battered by a thousand stories like this: ‘Three people saw him on such--and--such a day in the east; three saw him the next day in the west, at such and such a time, dressed thus’. Truly, I would not believe my own self about this. How much more natural and likely it seems to me that two men are lying than that one man should pass with the winds in twelve hours from the east to the west! How much more natural that our understanding should be carried away from its base by the volatility of our untracked mind than that one of us, in flesh and bone, should be wafted up a chimney on a broomstick by a strange spirit! (‘Of cripples’; V-S 1031–32; F 789; S 1168)

9 In his De la dénonomanie des sorciers (1580), which argued for the repression of witches, and gave tests for detecting them. See Marion Leathers Daniels Kuntz, introduction to her translation of Bodin’s Colloquium of the Seven about Secrets of the Sublime (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), pp.xxxiv–xxxvii.
This argument comes very close to, and may well have suggested, Hume’s famous critique of testimonial evidence for miracles. Hume will ask: ‘Which is more probable, that the witnesses should be lying or mistaken, or that the event they testify to should have occurred?’\(^{10}\) His initial answer is that when the event is a violation of the laws of nature (as a miracle is, by definition), and hence, contrary to what experience has uniformly taught us, it must always be more probable that the witnesses are mistaken or lying than that the event they report occurred, no matter how strong the testimonial evidence is. This sounds too dogmatic for Montaigne;\(^{11}\) but it is hard to see how Montaigne could fail, if he were at all consistent, to be as skeptical about miracles as he is about witchcraft.

Now Montaigne is not noted for his consistency. But in this instance he does apply a very Humean kind of reasoning to miracle stories also:

I have seen the birth of many miracles in my time. Even when they are smothered at birth, we do not fail to foresee the course they would have taken if they had lived out their full age... the first persons who are convinced of a strange initial fact, as they spread their story, feel from the opposition they meet where the difficulty of persuasion lies, and go and calk that place with some false patch. Besides ‘by the innate desire in men to foster rumors diligently’\(^{12}\) we naturally scruple to return what has been lent to us without some interest and addition from our own stock... this whole structure goes on building itself up and shaping itself from hand to hand, so that the remotest witness is better instructed about it than the nearest, and the last informed more convinced of it than the first. It is a natural progression. For whoever believes anything esteems it a work of charity to persuade another of it, and... does not fear to add, out of his own invention, as much as he sees to be necessary... to take care of the resistance... (‘Of cripples’; V-S 1027–8; F 786; S 1162)

This is reminiscent of that part of Hume’s essay in which he argues that the testimony we actually get for miracles never meets the highest standards. Montaigne’s question now is: ‘What are the characteristics of human nature which lead men to fabricate and accept marvelous stories on slender evidence?’\(^{13}\) Like Hume, he suggests that our natural love of

---

\(^{10}\) See Section X of the Enquiry concerning Human Understanding, Part I.

\(^{11}\) In the end it is also too dogmatic for Hume. Near the end of Section X he concedes that if the miracle is not alleged to provide the foundation for a religion, very strong testimonial evidence could make it likely that a miracle had occurred. Cf. the Selby-Bigge edition of the P.H. Nidditch edn., Enquiry concerning Human Understanding (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 127–9.

\(^{12}\) Montaigne’s quote is from Livy, XXVIII, xxiv.

\(^{13}\) The passage continues in a similar vein: ‘It is a marvel from what empty beginnings and frivolous causes such famous impressions ordinarily spring. That in itself hampers investigation.
wonder, and desire for the admiration which can result from being able to persuade others of the events we testify to, gives us a standing motive to be credulous and to exaggerate.

Questioning the occurrence of miracles is a more serious matter than questioning the reality of witchcraft. Perhaps not many educated believers today would insist on our accepting at face value the biblical texts which imply a belief in witches. But belief in the miracle of the resurrection of Jesus is still central to the faith of most Christian denominations even now, and was much more so in the sixteenth century. What would become of such belief if we judged it by the same criteria we apply to other historical claims? This was not a question you could safely raise in the sixteenth century. But it is a crucial question for Christians today, and often answered in a way which would have gratified Hume.14

So it may come as a surprise that Montaigne did not get in more trouble with the authorities than he did. When the question of Montaigne’s religious orthodoxy is raised, it is often pointed out that the Essays were ‘passed with minor objections by the papal censor in Rome in 1581’ (Sayce, Essays, 206). From Montaigne’s Journal we know what some of the objections were:

having used the word ‘fortune,’ having named heretical poets,15 having excused Julian [the ‘apostate’ emperor] . . . the idea that anyone who prays ought to be free of evil impulses at the time; item, esteeming as cruelty whatever goes for while we are looking for powerful and weighty causes and ends, worthy of such great renown, we lose the true ones . . . In such researches a very prudent, attentive and subtle inquirer is needed, impartial and unprejudiced. To this moment all these miracles and strange events hide themselves from me’ (V-S 1029; F 787; S 1164; Frame’s translation slightly modified).

14 See, e.g. Gerd Lüdemann: ‘A consistent modern view must say farewell to the resurrection of Jesus as a historical event’ (What Really Happened to Jesus (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 130). Lüdemann is a radical Protestant theologian, not in good standing in his own communion. But John Meier’s A Marginal Jew, 3 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1991), published with the imprimatur of the Catholic Church, reaches a similar, if more delicately stated, conclusion. In Meier’s account, the ‘historical Jesus’ is ‘the Jesus whom we can recover, recapture or reconstruct by using the scientific tools of modern historical research’ (I.1). He omits treatment of the resurrection, ‘not because it is denied, but simply because the restrictive definition of the historical Jesus I will be using does not allow us to proceed into matters that can be affirmed only by faith’ (I.13, 197).

15 In the essay ‘On presumption’ (V-S 661, F 502, S 731) Montaigne had mentioned Theodore Beza (Calvin’s successor at Geneva) on a list of good contemporary poets. In subsequent editions he retained the reference, but added an allusion to Beza in which he described him (without explicitly naming him) as the author both of ‘verses excelling in beauty and in licentiousness’ and of ‘the most contentious work on theological reform that the world has feasted on for a long time’ (V-S 989; F 756; S 1119).
beyond plain death; item that a child should be brought up to do anything, and
other such things . . . (F 955–6)\textsuperscript{16}

This list does not profess to be complete. Still, we might wonder why Montaigne’s treatment of miracles is not on it.

There is a straightforward explanation for this omission: the miracle and witchcraft passages I’ve been quoting all come either from later editions, and were not part of the text the censor examined in 1581. The passages which discuss miracles in the 1580 edition are not nearly as skeptical as those I’ve quoted from the later editions. In general the first edition passages are cursory and at most mildly skeptical.\textsuperscript{17} If this is right, then after his encounter with the censors Montaigne said more that might have offended than he had said before—on this topic, at least.

**MONTAIGNE, THE SPANISH AND THE PORTUGUESE**

For all his conformism, Montaigne is a critic of his society in many respects. He deplores the way the conquistadors treated the native populations of the western hemisphere when they first explored those regions:

What an improvement that would have been, and what an amelioration for the entire globe, if the first examples of our conduct offered over there had set up between them and us a brotherly friendship and understanding. How easy it would have been to make good use of souls so fresh, so famished to learn, and having, for the most part, such fine natural beginning! On the contrary, we took advantage of their ignorance and inexperience to incline them the more easily toward treachery, lewdness, avarice, and every sort of inhumanity and cruelty, after the example and pattern of our ways. (III, vi, ‘Of coaches’; V-S 910; F 695; S 1031)


\textsuperscript{17} An interesting A-edition passage favorable to the occurrence of miracles can be found in I, xxvii, ‘It is folly to measure the true and the false by our own capacity’, where Montaigne says that rejecting miracles as impossible presumes more knowledge of the powers of God than we are entitled to presume. (V-S 180; F 133; S 202; Villey notes that where the A & B editions refer to the powers of God, the C edition refers to the power of nature.) But a C addition argues that we should neither believe rashly nor reject easily. In the category ‘mildly skeptical at most’ I would put I, xxi (V-S 99; F 70; S 111–12) and I, xxxiv (V-S 221; F 163; S 248). I note here the following interesting C additions, some of which are more Spinozistic than Humean: I, xxiii, ‘Miracles arise from our ignorance of Nature’ (V-S 112; F 80; S 126); II, xii, ‘Nature is One and constant in her course’ (V-S 467; S 521; F 343); III, v, ‘I believe in miracles only in matters of faith’. (V-S 855; F 650; S 964–5). For a C addition apparently accepting of miracles see I, xxxii (V-S 121; F 88; S 137).
Montaigne makes it clear that, whatever the professed motivation for this conquest may have been, its real motivation was greed: ‘Whoever set the utility of commerce and trading at such a price? So many cities razed, so many nations exterminated, so many millions of people put to the sword, and the richest and most beautiful part of the world turned upside down, for the traffic in pearls and pepper!’ (III, vi, ‘Of coaches’; V-S 910; F 695; S 1031). The Church to which Montaigne professes total submission bears some responsibility for these crimes. The Spanish based their claim to tribute on the fact that the Pope, the Vicar of God on earth, had granted their king dominion over all the Indies, so that the conquistadors might carry Christianity to the New World.

The kind of relativism Montaigne often endorses inevitably encounters problems when one culture meets another. In ‘Of cannibals’ Montaigne had claimed that: ‘we have no other test of truth and reason than the example and pattern of the opinions and customs of the country we live in. There is always the perfect religion, the perfect government, the perfect and accomplished manners in all things’ (I, xxxi; V-S 205; F 152; S 231). But by the end of that essay he uses the cannibals point of view to make criticisms of French society with which he himself clearly sympathizes. The issues Montaigne explicitly mentions are the French custom of passing the monarchy to a young boy when his predecessor has left no adult children and the gross disparity between rich and poor in French society. Why, the cannibals ask, do ‘so many grown men, bearded, strong and armed . . . submit to obey a child?’ Why do the poor, ‘emaciated with hunger’, endure the affluence of the rich, ‘gorged with all sorts of good things’?

18 I, xxxi; V-S 213–14; F 159; S 240–1. But Montaigne says that the cannibals made three points, the third of which he has forgotten. In ‘Anatomy of the Mass: Montaigne’s “Cannibals”’ (PMLA, 117 (2002), 207–21) George Hoffmann argues that the third thing which amazed the cannibals (which Montaigne had not forgotten, but chose to leave implicit) was that ‘Europeans should condemn them for eating their prisoners of war, when Europeans were willing to go to war in the first place over the right to eat their god’. Hoffmann observes that the accusation of theophagy was prominent in sixteenth-century Protestant criticism of Catholicism, and points to a number of internal signs that this essay was intended to suggest skepticism about the Catholic interpretation of the Eucharist.

19 These questions are reminiscent of the general questions raised about political authority by Montaigne’s friend, Etienne de la Boétie, in his Discours de la servitude volontaire, ed. Simone Goyard-Fabre (Paris: Flammarion, 1983). A critic of the customs of one culture need not come from another culture, and Montaigne knew this.
Similarly, in the essay ‘On coaches’ (III, vi), Montaigne uses the confrontation between the Spanish and the natives as a way of criticizing the European society of his day. He portrays the natives as men of good judgment and character, not children or mere savages: they do not find the Spanish to be the men of peace they claim to be; their king must be very needy, if he must beg for tribute; their Pope must be a man who loves dissension, if he takes from one, to give to another, property which is not his to give; they have little gold, and do not value it, preferring happiness and contentment. ‘As for one single God, the account had pleased them, but they did not want to change their religion, having followed it so advantageously for so long’ (V-S 911, F 695, S 1032). In saying this, of course, they are only following ‘the Law of Laws’. They will not change their ways, even in the face of threats.

Montaigne then describes at length the treatment the Spanish accorded the kings of Peru and Mexico, who did have gold. Throughout the natives are portrayed as honest, courageous, and noble; the Spanish as cruel, greedy, and cowardly. Montaigne puts no stock in the claim that they were acting from religious zeal:

These accounts we have from the Spaniards themselves. They do not merely confess to them, they boast of them and proclaim them. Could it be in order to witness to their justice or to their religious zeal? If their intention had simply been to spread the faith, they would have thought upon the fact that it grows not by taking possession of lands, but of men, and that they would have had killings enough through the necessities of war, without introducing indiscriminate slaughter, as total as their swords and pyres could make it, as though they were butchering wild animals, merely preserving the lives of as many as they intended to make pitiful slaves, to work and service their mines. (III, vi, ‘Of Coaches’; V-S 913; F 697; S 1034)

We should acknowledge that the Spanish conquest of the New World was controversial within the Church. Some Spanish Thomists—notably Francisco Vitoria and Bartolomé de las Casas—condemned it, arguing,

---

20 I am puzzled, however, by the conflict between this passage and one in the ‘Apology’ in which Montaigne attributes the spiritual tranquility of the Brazilians to the fact that they ‘spent their life in admirable simplicity and ignorance, without letters, without law, without king, without religion of any kind’ (V-S 491, my emphasis, F 362, S 547).

among other things, that the Pope, whose authority was purely spiritual, had no right to grant the new world to anyone, and that the conquistadors had no right under natural law to treat the Indians the way they did.

But this Thomist critique of the Church is dry, legalistic, and limited. Vitoria, for example, will allow that if the barbarians obstruct the Spaniards in their propagation of the Gospel, the Spaniards, after first reasoning with them to remove any cause of provocation, may preach and work for the conversion of that people even against their will, and may if necessary take up arms and declare war on them, insofar as this provides the safety and opportunity needed to preach the Gospel. And the same holds true if they permit the Spaniards to preach, but do not allow conversions . . .

For Vitoria the most important consideration is that the method of evangelization used should not be destructive of the end it is supposed to achieve, the propagation of the Gospel. If it is, the evangelists must use some other method. ‘My fear’, he writes, ‘is that the affair may have gone beyond the permissible bounds of justice and religion’.

Montaigne’s critique of the conquistadors occurs in Book III, among the essays added to the 1588 edition. It was not part of the edition ‘passed with minor objections by the papal censor . . . in 1581’. In the edition Montaigne was preparing when he died, he made further additions relevant to the issue of forcible conversion in an essay which had been part of the first edition. The proposition here is that ‘any opinion is powerful enough for somebody to espouse it at the cost of his life’ (I, xiv, ‘That the taste of good and evil depends in large part on the opinion we have of them’; V-S 53; F 35; S 55). All religions are capable of this. Montaigne’s example is the Jews. When Ferdinand and Isabella banished them from their lands, King John of Portugal sold them sanctuary in his territories at eight crowns a head, on condition that they would have to leave by a particular day, when he would provide vessels to transport them to Africa. The day duly arrived after which they were to remain as slaves if they had not obeyed; but too few ships were provided; those who did get aboard were treated harshly and villainously by the sailors, who, apart from many other indignities, delayed them at sea, sailing this way and that until they had used up all their provisions and were forced to buy others from them at so high a price and over so long a period that they were set ashore with the shirts they stood up in. When the news of this inhuman

---

23 Ibid. 286.
treatment reached those who had remained behind, most resolved to accept slavery; a few pretended to change religion.  (V-S 53; F 35; S 55)

John died in 1495 and as Montaigne proceeds to report, his successor, Emmanuel I, initially set the Jews free when he came to the throne. Then he changed his mind, gave them a time within which they had to leave the kingdom, and assigned three ports for them to leave by:

he hoped . . . that they would be brought to [conversion] by the hardship of having to expose themselves as their comrades had done to thievish seamen and of having to abandon a land to which they had grown accustomed and where they had acquired great wealth, in order to cast themselves into lands foreign and unknown. But finding his hopes deceived and the Jews determined to make the crossing, he withdrew two of the ports he had promised, in order that the length and difficulty of the voyage would make some of them think again—or perhaps it was to pile them all together in one place, so as the more easily to carry out his design, which was to tear all the children under fourteen from their parents and to transport them out of sight and out of contact, where they could be taught our religion.  (V-S 53–4; F 36; S 55–6)

The result of this policy, Montaigne observes, was a dreadful spectacle . . . the natural love of parents and children, together with their zeal for their ancient faith, rebelled against this harsh decree: it was common to see fathers and mothers killing themselves or—an even harsher example—throwing their babes down wells out of love and compassion, in order to evade the law.  (V-S 54; F 36; S 56)

When their time ran out, some returned to slavery, and some ‘became Christians’. But Montaigne is naturally suspicious of the sincerity of the conversions produced by these methods. ‘Even today, a century later, few Portuguese trust in their sincerity or in that of their descendants, even though the constraints of custom and of long duration are as powerful counselors as any other’ (V-S 54; F 36; S 56).

Forcible conversion was part of Montaigne’s family history. His mother came from an originally Jewish family in Spain, whose members had been forcibly converted to Christianity. All our evidence suggests that she was a sincere Christian. Custom is a powerful counselor. But many of the ‘New Christians’ did return to Judaism when circumstances permitted. Frame suggests that Montaigne’s maternal ancestry may have been responsible, ‘in some measure . . . [for] his deep tolerance in an age when that was not in fashion . . . [and] a rather detached attitude, typical
of the marranos and natural in them, toward the religion he consistently and very conscientiously practiced’. Montaigne may have been detached toward the religion he practiced. He was not detached toward the suffering his co-religionists had inflicted on the Jews a century earlier.

MONTAIGNE AND THE ROMAN CENSORS

We have looked now at some potentially contentious passages Montaigne added to his Essays after his encounter with the censors, passages they would not have had the opportunity to complain about. Let’s turn to two matters they did complain about. Montaigne’s encounter occurred on his visit to Rome, when the customs authorities confiscated his book. Nevertheless, they seem to have treated him gently, according to the account he gives in his Journal, a work not intended for publication:

The Master of the Sacred Palace had been able to judge them only by the report of some French friar, since he did not understand our language at all; and he was so content with the excuses I offered on each objection that this Frenchman had left him, that he referred it to my conscience to redress what I should see was in bad taste . . . (F955)25

After his enumeration of the contested points cited earlier, Montaigne reports that

the said Master, who is an able man, was full of excuses for me, and wanted me to know that he was not very sympathetic to these revisions, and he pleaded very ingeniously for me in my presence, against another man, also an Italian, who was opposing me . . .

Nearly a month later Montaigne had a second meeting with the Master and his colleague, after which he reported that they

urged me not to make use of the censorship of my book, in which censorship some other Frenchmen had informed them there were many stupid things; saying that they honored both my intention and affection for the Church, and my ability, and thought so well of my frankness and conscience that they left it to myself to cut out of my book, when I wanted to republish it, whatever I found too licentious.26

25 See Smith, Censors, 16; Pléiade, 1228–9.
Montaigne did respect their wishes, at least insofar as he made no attempt to ‘use’ the censure of his book. He did not mention it in subsequent editions of the *Essays*, except briefly and obliquely.27

Perhaps his treatment of the contested passages is also consistent with their wishes, though this seems less clear. One of their complaints, recall, was about Montaigne’s view that ‘anything which goes beyond execution pure and simple is cruel’. In two essays in the 1580 edition—II, xi, ‘Of cruelty’ and II, xxvii, ‘Of cowardice, the mother of cruelty’—Montaigne had raised two main issues about the use of torture: whether it was legitimate to torture condemned people in the process of executing them, and whether it was legitimate to use torture as a method of investigation. Regarding the first, Montaigne had said:

Savages do not shock me as much by roasting and eating the bodies of the dead as do those who torment and persecute them living...all that goes beyond plain death seems to me pure cruelty, and especially in us who ought to have some concern about sending souls away in a good state, which cannot happen when we have agitated them and made them desperate by unbearable tortures. (II, xi, ‘Of cruelty’; V-S 430–1; F 314; S 482)28

It was, of course, at least the occasional practice29 of the Roman Inquisition to add torture to the process of execution. In the first edition Montaigne does not explicitly mention the Inquisition, but he does write that he lives in a time which abounds in ‘unbelievable examples’ of cruelty:

we see in the ancient histories nothing more extreme than what we experience of this every day [in our civil wars]. But that has not reconciled me to it at all. I could hardly be convinced, until I saw it, that there were souls so monstrous that they would commit murder for the mere pleasure of it; hack and cut off other men’s limbs; sharpen their wits to invent unaccustomed torments and new forms of death, without enmity, without profit, and for the sole purpose of enjoying the

27 Cf. III, x, ‘Of husbanding your will’ (V-S 1013, S 1145, F 775), where he writes, in defense of his practice of sometimes finding good qualities in people whose views he opposed, that ‘I did not concede to the magistrate himself that he was right to condemn a book for having named a heretic among the best poets of the age’. He does not, however, name the magistrate; if we did not have his *Journal* we would not know that he was referring to the papal censor.


29 Cf. Smith, *Censors*: ‘The Roman Inquisition had a particular reason to be concerned about Montaigne’s attack on cruel executions: for it was the policy of the Roman Inquisition, not only to execute certain offenders, but, in admittedly very exceptional cases, to burn them without strangling them first’ (p. 75).
pleasing spectacle of the pitiful gestures and movements, the lamentable groans and cries, of a man dying in anguish . . . (V-S 432; F 315–16; S 484)30

Montaigne sees savagery and sadism in what the Inquisition does. And he does not back down. In later editions he retained these passages, and strengthened them by adding further examples.

Regarding the use of torture as a means of investigation, the situation is more complicated. In the first edition Montaigne limited himself to arguing that it is an unreliable method:

Why should pain make me confess what is true rather than force me to say what is not true? . . . if a man who has not done what he is accused of is able to support such torment, why should a man who has done it be unable to support it, when so beautiful a reward as life itself is offered him? . . . It is a method full of danger and uncertainty. (II, v, ‘Of conscience’; V-S 368–9, S 414, F 266)

Again, it was at least the occasional practice of the Inquisition to use torture as a method of inquiry.31 Montaigne retains this passage in subsequent editions, but strengthens it in two ways.

First, he complains, not only about the ineffectiveness of torture as a method of inquiry, but also about the injustice of it: ‘This results in a man whom the judge has put to the torture, lest he die innocent, being condemned to die both innocent and tortured’ (II, v, ‘Of conscience’; V-S 369, S 414, F 266).32 Second, as the editions succeed one another, Montaigne becomes progressively less inclined to excuse the practice. In the 1580 version of the essay ‘Of conscience’, after several sentences on the ineffectiveness of torture, culminating in the question ‘What would you not say, what would you not do, to avoid such grievous pain?’ Montaigne concluded the essay with the abrupt concession: ‘But it is at any rate the best [method] that human weakness has been able to devise’. In 1588 this becomes: ‘But it is at any rate the least evil that human weakness has been able to devise’. And in 1595, Montaigne distances himself even from this judgment: ‘But it is at any rate, they say, the least evil that human weakness has been able to devise’. Then he adds an extended passage elaborating on the barbarity of using torture to discover the truth.

30 For a parallel passage, also from the first edition, see I, xxxi, ‘On cannibals’ (V-S 209, F 155, S 235–6).
31 Cf. Smith, Censors: ‘It is conceivable . . . that he has in mind the practice of the Roman Inquisition in his own day, which did indeed torture for this purpose, although, apparently, in very rigidly-defined circumstances and, in practice, in a very small minority of cases’ (p. 81, my emphasis).
32 Screech points out that Montaigne is here indebted to St Augustine (City of God, XIX, vi) and to Vives (in his commentary on the City of God).
So regarding torture, Montaigne’s response to the censors is to strengthen the passages about which they had complained. This is true even if we consider only the way the passages from the essay ‘Of conscience’, present in the 1580 edition, were changed in subsequent editions. It is even more true if we add the passages dealing with the Spanish treatment of the American Indians and the Portuguese treatment of the Jews, where Montaigne uses the later editions to amplify his condemnation of the use of cruelty to advance the cause of religion.

This does not sound like a man who is practicing the total submission to the Church which he elsewhere preaches. Perhaps the conclusion we should draw is that his encounter with the censors had taught him just what the limits of the Church’s toleration were in his case. At any rate, we have seen much already to justify Sayce’s characterization of Montaigne as being (in some moods at least) a revolutionary.

MONTAIGNE AND JULIAN THE APOSTATE

I conclude my consideration of Montaigne’s response to the censors by examining his treatment of Julian, the Roman emperor known to Christian historians as ‘the Apostate’. Julian reigned in the middle of the fourth century, after Constantine had made Christianity the official religion of the Empire. A nephew of Constantine, he was raised as a Christian by Constantine’s son, Constantius II, who was also Julian’s immediate predecessor as emperor. At some stage Julian seems to have developed a preference for paganism. When he became emperor, he declared himself a pagan and—what makes him particularly important for our story—proclaimed a policy tolerating all religions, including not only pagan religions, but also the various forms of Christianity, both orthodox and heretical. The accusation against Montaigne was that he had ‘excused’ Julian.

33 I recommend the discussion of this essay in David Lewis Schaefer, PoliPhil, 145–7. I am substantially in agreement with Schaefer, but have a few points of my own to add.

34 Montaigne doubts the propriety of this epithet, since he thinks that Julian was never really a Christian at heart, that he merely pretended to be, in obedience to the laws (II, xix, ‘Of freedom of conscience’,V-S 670, S 761–2, F 308).

35 At this stage it was still not clear which form of Christianity was orthodox. Constantine (if he had any real views about the doctrine of the Trinity) had presumably been an Athanasian. But Constantius II was an Arian. Had he lived longer, that heresy might have become orthodoxy.
The primary text here is a short essay, ‘Of freedom of conscience’ (II, xix). In the opening paragraph, Montaigne observes that good intentions, pursued immoderately, can lead to vicious actions. His initial example is the Catholic League, whose members sometimes acted with the good intention of preserving the religious unity of the kingdom, but often behaved brutally in their pursuit of that goal (and often had less worthy agendas). Next he cites those Christian leaders who, once backed by the authority of the state, attempted to destroy many of the works of pagan authors, among them those of Tacitus, whose works have not survived intact because of ‘five or six idle sentences contrary to our belief’. Montaigne deplores this ‘excess . . . [which] did more harm to letters than all the bonfires of the Barbarians’ (V-S 668; F 506; S 759).

Montaigne offers a third example of inordinate zeal: those Christian historians who completely condemned all the actions of the Roman emperors who were ‘our adversaries’. Julian enters as his example of an emperor hostile to Christianity whom these historians wrongly maligned. Most of the remainder of the essay consists in an enumeration of Julian’s many virtues and a discussion of what Montaigne concedes to be his great vice, his religious views.

What did the censors object to in this? Did they, like the early Christian historians whom Montaigne criticizes, object to seeing any virtue at all in an enemy of the Christian religion? That is what Malcolm Smith suggests: ‘The principle involved in Montaigne’s praise of Julian’s statesmanship is the same as that in his praise of Beza: acceptance of the Roman Catholic faith does not entail dismissal of the personal merits of those who reject it’. But sensing that this may seem insufficient, Smith also proposes that the censors may have been reacting as well to Montaigne’s criticism of the early historians who tried to suppress Tacitus, and more generally, to his opposition to the idea of burning books because of their content. That is: they were objecting to his opposition to their profession of censorship.
Both these suggestions seem quite plausible. But I don’t think they tell the whole story; there is more for the censors to object to in this essay than that. First, it understates what Montaigne did in this essay to say merely that he gave Julian credit for his merits, while acknowledging his error in the matter of religion. He is in fact extremely laudatory of Julian, who, he says, was a very great and rare man . . . whose soul was deeply died with the arguments of philosophy, by which he professed to regulate all his actions . . . there is no sort of virtue of which he did not leave very notable examples . . . [chastity] of many very beautiful captive women he would not even look at one . . . [justice] although out of curiosity he informed himself of the religion of those who appeared before him, nevertheless the enmity he bore to ours carried no weight in the scales; he made many good laws . . . [patience, in his reaction to the abuse he received from a Christian bishop] . . . [temperance] in full peacetime he ate like a man who was preparing . . . himself for the austerity of war . . . [excellence in every kind of literature] . . . a great commander . . . [courage] we have hardly any memory of a man who faced more risks or who more often put his person to the test . . . He owed to philosophy the singular contempt in which he held his own life and all human things . . . as he was dying he said, among other things, that he was grateful to the gods . . . because they had not willed to kill him by surprise, having long before informed him of the place and time of his end . . . he thanked them for [granting him a swift death and for] having found him worthy to die in this noble fashion, in the course of his victories and the flower of his glory. (V-S 669–71; F 507–9; S 760–2)

Montaigne does acknowledge that this paragon had some faults. There was one complaint which could be made about his justice: he dealt severely at the beginning of his reign with those who had supported his predecessor. But his principal—nearly his only—fault lay ‘in matters of religion [where] he was altogether vicious’ (V-S 670; F 508; S 761). In his own pagan religion he was extremely superstitious and captivated by the art of divination. And he hated Christianity.

Nevertheless, Montaigne does a good deal to undermine this criticism of Julian. He acknowledges that Julian was an enemy of Christianity, and a harsh enemy. But unlike the Christians of Montaigne’s own day, he was he speaks ill of Christians and Jews, and because they were thinking of prohibiting him’ (Censors, 52).

39 Constantius, who had no children, had made Julian his second-in-command, but Julian’s accession to the throne threatened to be bloody. He had begun a civil war against Constantius when his cousin died.
‘not cruel . . . he was an enemy of Christianity but without shedding blood’ (V-S 669–70; F 507–8; S 760–1). He accepts as good the testimony of only two ancient historians, Ammianus Marcellinus and Eutropius. Both these men were, as he says, eyewitnesses of Julian’s actions, and both were, as he does not say, pagans. He is aware that some of the ancient Christian historians ascribed cruelty to Julian in his dealings with the Christians, but he rejects their testimony as inconsistent with that of his more credible pagan historians. The worst action Ammianus reports Julian as having taken against the Christians was to bar Christian rhetoricians and grammarians from teaching in the institutes of learning:41 ‘It is probable that if Julian had done anything harsher against us Marcellinus would not have overlooked it, since he was well disposed to our side’.

Montaigne also follows Ammianus, in preference to Christian historians, in rejecting the story that when Julian was dying, he said: ‘Thou hast conquered, Nazarean!’ (as Theodoret has it) or ‘Be satisfied, Nazarean!’ (as Zonaras has it). ‘If my authorities had believed that,’ he observes, ‘they would not have overlooked [these words]: they were present in his army and noted the slightest of his final words and gestures’.42 This passage has a special interest, since the only change Montaigne made in the 1580 edition version of the essay was to omit it from the 1588 edition. Perhaps, as Frame, for example, proposes, the omission in 1588 was a reaction to the censors’ criticism. But if, in 1588, he was responding to

40 Mainly Ammianus, since Eutropius’ account of Julian is too brief to be of much use. In the discussion in Chicago it was suggested that Montaigne might also be depending on Jean Bodin’s discussion of Julian in his Method for the Easy Comprehension of History, tr. (Beatrice Reynolds (New York: Columbia University Press, 1945), ch. 4). There certainly are significant similarities between Bodin and Montaigne in their treatment of Julian and I feel sure that Montaigne knew this discussion. Bodin is concerned with the choice of historical authorities, and complains that ‘almost all ecclesiastical writers are animated with such hatred when they write about the adversaries of our religion that not only do they try to tone down their virtues, but they even rend them with scorn’. He cites Julian as an example and commends Ammianus for his objectivity in noting both Julian’s virtues and his vices ‘with the utmost fidelity’. All this is very much in Montaigne’s spirit. Nevertheless, Montaigne’s account contains much detail about Julian which he could not have obtained from Bodin and would have found in Ammianus.

41 The rhetoricians and grammarians were responsible for teaching students the classics of pagan literature. Wishing to reinstate paganism, Julian wanted these classics to be taught by people who believed in the religion they assumed (though Julian interpreted that religion through the perspective of Neoplatonism).

42 This argument from silence may have some weight in the case of Ammianus; but Eutropius’ account of Julian is so brief that it seems very dubious in that case.
the censors by omitting it, he changed his mind when he prepared the 1595 edition. In that edition this passage is restored. Smith comments: 'the reappearance of this subject in the 1595 edition suggests that, on reflection, Montaigne felt no need to sacrifice historical objectivity to pious legend'.

Ammianus does take pains to be an objective historian, carefully recording the virtues and the vices both of the people he admires (as he does Julian) and the people he despises (as he does Constantius). But it is puzzling that Montaigne should call him 'well disposed to' Christianity. Most of Ammianus’ references to the Christians seem fairly neutral. There are passages where he shows some respect for the moral teachings of Christianity, or for the conduct of some Christians. But even those passages are mixed in their overall verdict. The following passage, which occurs in a summing up of Constantius’ good and bad points, seems representative of those in which Ammianus speaks favorably about Christianity:

The plain and simple religion of the Christians he obscured by a dotard’s superstition; and by subtle and involved discussions about dogma, rather than by seriously trying to make them agree, he aroused many controversies; as these spread more and more, he fed them with contentious words. (XXI, xvi, 18)

Other passages are negative enough to occasion surprise that they survived Christian attempts to suppress pagan criticism. He is highly critical of the worldly ambitions of the Christian clergy, describing in some detail the violent conflict between two candidates for the bishopric of Rome, which led to the bloody deaths of many of their supporters. This leads him to reflections reminiscent of Renaissance and Reformation criticisms of later bishops of Rome:

Bearing in mind the ostentation in city life, I do not deny that those who are desirous of such a thing ought to struggle with the exercise of all their strength to gain what they seek; for when they attain it, they will be so free from care that they are enriched from the offerings of matrons, ride seated in carriages, wearing clothing chosen with care, and serve banquets so lavish that their entertainments outdo the tables of kings. These men might be truly happy, if they would disregard the greatness of the city behind which they hide their faults, and live

---

43 Smith *Censors*, 51.

after the manner of some provincial bishops, whose moderation in food and drink, plain apparel also, and gaze fixed upon the earth, commend them to the Eternal Deity and to his true servants as pure and reverent men. (XXVII, iii, 14–15)

It’s clear that Ammianus finds some of the Christian clergy admirable. But it seems an exaggeration to describe him as ‘well-disposed to our side’. If you think, as Montaigne seems to in the ‘Apology for Sebond’ (V-S 442–6; F 322–6; S 493–6), that the true religion ought to be distinguished by the superior moral behavior of its adherents, then this criticism of the Christian clergy would be a criticism of the religion itself.

Also puzzling, prima facie, is that Montaigne should describe Julian as thoroughly vicious in matters of religion, when one of his most important policies was a general toleration of all religions. You would not think that Montaigne would regard that as vicious. But Montaigne knows from reading Ammianus that Julian had devious motives for adopting this policy. Julian had long been a pagan at heart, but did not dare disclose this fact. That is why Montaigne hesitates to call him an apostate. He never really was a Christian. Smith says that Montaigne deplored this dissimulation, but I cannot detect his disapproval. As Montaigne points out, Julian was simply obeying the law until, as ruler, he had the power to change it. His ultimate goal was to restore paganism. Toleration of all religions was a means to that end: ‘Having found the people in Constantinople at odds and the prelates of the Christian Church divided, he had them come to him at the palace and earnestly admonished them to lull these civic dissensions and urged that each man should serve his own religion without hindrance and without fear’ (V-S 671; F 509; S 762). How did this serve the restoration of paganism? Montaigne suggests that Julian hoped that this complete freedom would augment the schisms and factions that divided them and would keep the people from uniting and consequently strengthening themselves against him by their concord and unanimous understanding; for he had learned by experience, from the cruelty of some Christians, that there is no beast in the world so much to be feared by man as man. Those are very nearly his words. (ibid.)

This last sentence is intriguing. Montaigne has been following so closely the passage in Ammianus on which this account is based that it is hard to believe he does not have a copy of the book open in front of him. But

45 Censors, 49.
what Ammianus actually said, in the sentence Montaigne purports to paraphrase so closely, is in fact rather different: ‘he knew from experience that no wild beasts are such enemies to mankind as are most of the Christians in their deadly hatred of one another’ (XXII, v, 4). This is the pagan author whom he described as ‘well-disposed to our side’.

The essay concludes by drawing an apparent contrast between the policies of Julian and those of ‘our kings’:

This is worthy of consideration, that Emperor Julian uses, to kindle the trouble of civil dissension, that same recipe of freedom of conscience that our kings have just been employing to extinguish it. It may be said, on the one hand, that to give factions a loose rein to entertain their own opinions is to scatter and sow division; it is almost lending a hand to augment it, there being no barrier or coercion of the laws to check or hinder its course . . . (V-S 671; F 509; S 763)

This sounds like a criticism of Catherine de Medici and her sons. They had adopted a policy of toleration—with the apparent intention of reducing civil discord—and their policy accentuated the discord. Had they known what Julian had learned from experience about human nature (or at least, about Christians), they would have anticipated the probable consequences of their actions. If you assume that they were not fools, but shrewd politicians, you might infer that they did anticipate the consequences of their actions, and had intentions other than those they professed (e.g. keeping their political enemies divided by religious differences which did not matter to the royal family). But there is, of course, another hand to come: ‘On the other hand, one could also say that to give factions a loose rein to entertain their own opinions is to soften and relax them through facility and ease, and to dull the point, which is sharpened by rarity, novelty, and difficulty’. Why would one say this? Perhaps Montaigne anticipated that in the long run the policy of toleration would cause religious differences not to matter so much. The assumption might be that many people embrace opinions which divide them from others precisely because they enjoy the sense of holding minority views which the majority strongly oppose. Tolerating minority opinions robs them of their principal attraction. As a matter of psychology, I think there may be something in this.

In any case, this hand does not have the last word. Montaigne concludes his essay with the following epigram: ‘And yet I prefer to think, for the reputation of our kings’ piety, that having been unable to do what
they would, they have pretended to will what they could’. This seems to say: Catherine and her sons may have appeared indifferent to the question of which religion their subjects adhered to, but in fact they were good Catholics, who were forced by political circumstances to tolerate religious differences they abhorred. I assume that Montaigne knew the players in this game well enough to know that it wasn’t true. So I take the last sentence to be ironic.

Perhaps Montaigne’s final word on toleration (in this essay) is this: toleration can, and often does, lead to awful civil strife; we are unfortunate if we are in a situation in which it seems to be necessary; but we can hope that, over time, as people become accustomed to living with those with whom they disagree, they may lose interest in their differences.

THE APOLOGY FOR RAYMOND SEBOND

I began this essay by calling attention to a paradox: that Montaigne has a reputation for being an author who advocates toleration, and who may have significantly influenced the gradual acceptance of toleration as a political ideal, but that he is also identified with a pyrrhonist philosophy which seems to lead to a doctrine of conformist submission to an authoritarian, intolerant church.

We’ve now seen many ways in which Montaigne is apparently at odds with that church, and how often he does not practice the total submission he sometimes preaches. He expresses strong disapproval of the punishment of witches, and skepticism about their possession of supernatural powers; he anticipates much of Hume’s critique of belief in miracles; he is a passionate critic of the colonization of the New World and the forced conversion of the native peoples; he is highly critical of the forced conversion of the Jews in Europe; he argues powerfully against the use of torture, both as a means of punishment and as a means of investigation; and he has the highest praise for a pagan Roman emperor, hated by the Church for his attempt to restore paganism. The censors noticed some of these points of conflict when they examined the first edition of the Essays. We can see, by examining the later editions, how Montaigne responded to their polite request to reconsider: he sharpened his criticism again and again.

Now it may be said that criticism of, and disagreement with, the Church does not imply rejection of the religion it represents. Both
Erasmus and Luther were highly critical of the Church of their day; though Luther left the Church, both remained strongly committed Christians. Moreover, Montaigne’s personal conduct, his regular worship at his private chapel, his visits to religious shrines, his encouragement to his Protestant niece to convert to Catholicism, and many other personal details, all testify to his being a faithful son of the Church. This is true. But in matters of this kind, certainty is not to be had, and context is everything. We must seek to form our overall judgment of an author’s character and intentions by as broad a knowledge as we can muster of the whole of his work, of the predecessors by whom he was influenced, of the successors whom he in turn influenced, and of the various pressures which might have inhibited free expression.

So far I have said little about the most famous essay of all, the ‘Apology for Raymond Sebond’, treating it mainly as a work which might provide a rationale for religious tolerance. That is not my final view of the ‘Apology’. I think, in fact, that in the end it may be the most important of Montaigne’s pro-toleration essays. But here interpretation is more than usually difficult and controversial. I cannot hope to deal fully with this work in the final section of an essay which is already long enough. But I do have some suggestions to make about its interpretation.

Donald Frame poses the fundamental question about the ‘Apology’ forcefully when he asks: ‘Did Montaigne betray Sebond?’ His answer was ‘no’, but he acknowledges that there were reasons why you might think otherwise. Sebond had attempted to establish, by natural reason, the fundamental truths of the Christian religion: not merely the existence of God, but every truth essential to man’s salvation. According to Montaigne, Sebond’s critics had made two main objections against him: (1) that ‘Christians do themselves wrong by trying to support their belief with human reasons; [their belief] is conceived only by faith and by a particular inspiration of divine grace’ (V-S 440 (my trans.); F 321; S 491); and (2) that ‘his arguments are weak and unsuited to what he wants to demonstrate’ (V-S 448; F 327; S 500). Montaigne’s ‘defense’ consists in conceding both objections and arguing at length that Sebond’s arguments are no worse than anyone else’s. It’s a mistake to suppose that

46 Romanic Review, 38 (1947), 297–329. Frame poses the issue forcefully, but prejudicially, insofar as his question implies that it would be an act of disloyalty if Montaigne were covertly undermining Sebond’s arguments. Montaigne has no obligation to defend Sebond if he doesn’t agree with him. And given the penalties for dissent in his day, it is unfair to expect him to oppose Sebond too openly.
human reason can establish anything, or even make the propositions of the faith more probable than their denial. The fideism Montaigne embraces in conceding the first objection is appropriate given the general inability of human reason to provide a rational basis for any belief. Pyrrhonism comes to the rescue of rational theology.

Many readers’ first impression of this essay is that that’s a strange way to defend rational theology. In this case, I think, first impressions are right: the ‘Apology’ is, fundamentally, a religiously subversive work, which might well weaken the beliefs of its readers, and which may have been intended to do so. Here’s one reason for thinking this. Toward the end of this long essay Montaigne interrupts his argument to address a warning to his ‘Patroness’, probably Margaret of Valois:

You, for whom I have taken the pains to extend so long a work, contrary to my custom, will not shrink from upholding your Sebond by the ordinary form of argument in which you are instructed every day, and in that you will exercise your mind and your learning. For this final fencer’s trick must not be employed except as an extreme remedy. It is a desperate stroke, in which you must abandon your own weapons to make your adversary lose his, and a secret trick that must be used rarely and reservedly. It is great rashness to ruin yourself in order to ruin another. (V-S 557–8; F 418–19; S 628)

Montaigne emphasizes here that it is extremely dangerous to try to use pyrrhonism to defend Christianity. To appreciate the danger, juxtapose this passage with another, early in the work, where Montaigne explains why Sebond’s book is useful enough to translate and defend at length.

Pierre Bunel had given Montaigne’s father a copy of Sebond’s *Natural Theology*, recommending it as a book very useful for the times in which he gave it to him:

This was when the novelties of Luther were beginning to gain favor, and to shake our old belief in many places. In this Bunel was very well advised, rightly foreseeing by rational inference that this incipient disease would easily degenerate into a loathsome atheism. For ordinary people, who lack the faculty of judging things as they are, let themselves be carried away by chance and by appearances. Once you have put into their hands the foolhardiness of despising and judging the opinions they used to hold in extreme reverence (such as those which concern their salvation), and once you have thrown into doubt and put in the balance any articles of their religion, they soon cast all the rest of their

47 Villey notes that editions which appeared in Montaigne’s lifetime added here: ‘(and everyone is, as it were, of that kind)’. 
beliefs into similar uncertainty. They have no more authority for them, no more foundation, than those you have just undermined; and so, as though it were the yoke of a tyrant, they shake off all those other ideas they received by the authority of the laws or the reverence for ancient usage. (V-S 439) 48

So the claim is that we need Sebond's brand of rational theology to save us from the Protestant heresy; we need to demonstrate the fundamental propositions of Catholic Christianity, because the Protestant critique of the Church will lead to atheism by inducing skepticism about the authority of the Church and of tradition, and hence, about the articles of religion, whose only basis is the authority of the Church and tradition. But if Protestantism is dangerous because it leads to skepticism, and skepticism leads to atheism, it is bizarre to defend Catholic Christianity by means of skepticism. That is as if, fearing that you might have eaten some bad meat, you took as an antidote the most deadly poison you could find.

Is it Montaigne's intention to encourage atheism, or at any rate, a rejection of Christianity? Many of his readers have thought so. Others have argued strenuously that Montaigne is a sincere Catholic, and could not harbor any such intent. Fortunately it is not necessary to resolve this dispute, 49 if our problem is to explain how Montaigne's work contributed to the gradual acceptance of toleration as a political ideal. It will be sufficient for that purpose if Montaigne was widely read as someone who professed an orthodoxy he did not accept in his heart, and widely taken to have provided good reasons for questioning orthodox belief. That much seems to be true: he was so read. 50 And some later thinkers who read him that way found in him a rich storehouse of arguments against Christian belief. 51

---

48 I take responsibility for the translation, which blends suggestions from both Screech (p. 490) and Frame (p. 320).

49 I say 'fortunately' because I think I agree with André Tournon when he writes: 'd’apprécier la foi de Montaigne, c’est l’affaire de Dieu . . . il n’est pas question ici de ce qui pouvait se passer dans le secret de la conscience ou de l’inconscient de Montaigne, mais seulement de ce qui est lisible dans son livre' ('Que c’est que croire', in La question de Dieu, ed. Françoise Charpentier, special issue of the Bulletin de la Société des Amis de Montaigne (1993), 163, 177. I take this to mean that only God can answer this question.

50 This can be verified by consulting the jugements sur Montaigne compiled in Appendix II, vol. iii, of the Villey-Saulnier edition. See particularly the judgments of Port Royal, Bossuet, Pascal, and Malebranche. I count these readings as favorable to my interpretation, not because they see Montaigne as an atheist (a claim I would not insist on), but because they see him as an author fundamentally subversive of the religious status quo.

51 An author who I think responded favorably to Montaigne's critique of religion is Montesquieu, whose Persian Letters I discuss in 'From Locke's Letter to Montesquieu's Lettres' (cited above, n. 58).
That is no doubt one reason why Montaigne's *Essays* were put on the Index less than a century after the censor initially gave them his approval. I think the later judgment shows the result of more careful reflection.

Here are a few more reasons why later readers might reasonably have suspected subversive intent. First note that pyrrhonism, as Montaigne presents it, is a philosophy which requires the suspense of all judgment. When it calls for conformity with the religion prescribed in one’s country, it calls for external conformity only, i.e. it calls for the kind of conformity which Montaigne thinks Julian gave to Christianity before he became emperor. Internal assent is a matter which Montaigne’s ‘fideism’ says must be supplied by a special act of divine grace, not reached by any act of the human will.

Again, in his treatment of the afterlife Montaigne departs from the pyrrhonist idea that from a purely rational point of view the arguments pro and con are neatly balanced. He makes Plato his target, not any Christian philosopher, but the doctrine he treats as unacceptable to reason is common to Plato and Christianity: that we shall receive either infinite happiness or infinite suffering in the life to come. So Plato is a surrogate for Christianity. Constituted as we are, we are incapable of infinite pleasures and pains. If our natures were different, made capable of these rewards and punishments, we would no longer be the same persons. Moreover, it would not be just to give either an infinite reward or an infinite punishment to humans in the afterlife: the gods themselves are responsible for both our virtues and our vices (V-S 520; F 386; S 580–1), and there is no proportionality between our finite lives and the infinite rewards and punishments which are supposed to lie in store for us (V-S 549; F 411; S 617–18). We are ‘beholden to God alone’ for our belief in immortality. It is not ‘the lesson of nature and of our reason’ (V-S 554; F 415; S 623).

---


54 V-S 518, F 384–5, S 575–9. This is not to say that Montaigne does not subsequently represent Plato as pulling back from this view because of its difficulty. Cf. V-S 549, F 411, S 618.

55 Here I agree with Schaefer, *PoliPhil*, 108.
seems to be, not because reason reaches no conclusion in this area, but because the conclusion it supports is that our souls are so tightly connected with our bodies that they cannot survive them.\textsuperscript{56}

Montaigne departs from pyrrhonism in another way. Although he does frequently endorse the pyrrhonist idea that when we are forced to act under conditions of radical uncertainty, we should follow laws, customs, and tradition (e.g., V-S 505; F 374; S 563), sometimes he rebels against this conformism. Late in the ‘Apology’, shortly after he has written that ‘the most plausible advice our reason gives us...is generally for each man to obey the laws of his country’ (V-S 578; F 436; S 652), Montaigne adds:

How could that ancient God [Apollo] more clearly accuse human knowledge of ignorance of the divine being, and teach men that religion was only a creature of their own invention, suitable to bind society together, than by declaring, as he did...that the true cult for each man was that which he found observed according to the practice of the place he was in? (V-S 579; F 436; S 653)

If there were a true religion, it would have to be universal. Conversely, if we should follow the religion of our country, no matter what country we live in, then religion is a human invention. So when philosophy tells us to follow the laws of our country, Montaigne protests: ‘That is to say, the undulating sea of the opinions of a people or a prince, which will paint me justice in as many colors, and refashion it into as many faces, as there are changes of passion in those men. I cannot have my judgment so flexible’ (V-S 579; F 437; S 653). Following the laws of your time and place can, for example, lead to embracing human sacrifice, which Montaigne clearly regards as vicious (V-S 521; F 387; S 582). Montaigne does not doubt that most people’s opinions are powerfully influenced by opinions held around them. But he suggests that this is the reason ‘the world is filled and soaked with twaddle and lies’ (V-S 539; F 403; S 605).

My reading of Montaigne implies that much of what he wrote he did not believe, and did not intend his readers to accept at face value, and that he needs to be read very cautiously if the radical nature of his message is

\textsuperscript{56} Note that when Montaigne offers us the two reasons which made the opinion that the soul is immortal plausible to the ancient philosophers (who lacked divine revelation) neither is any evidence of the truth of the belief, only of its utility: ‘Without the immortality of the soul there would be no more basis for the vain hopes of glory, which is a consideration with marvelous credit in the world; [and] as Plato says, it is a very useful impression that vices, even if they escape the dim and uncertain sight of human justice, will always remain a target for divine justice, which will pursue them even after the death of the guilty’ (V-S 552–3, F 414, S 622).
to become apparent. This is to say that my reading of Montaigne is Straussian. I know that many Montaigne scholars will find such a reading repugnant. To read our essayist in a Straussian way is to deny him one of his greatest virtues: his sincerity. *C'est ici un livre de bonne foi, lecteur.* Those are Montaigne’s first words to us. How can we not believe a man who goes to such lengths to assure us of his sincerity, confessing those many embarrassing defects other authors would prefer to conceal?

Easily. It is no act of cowardice to exercise caution when the penalty for behaving otherwise is the stake. What better way to secure our confidence than to confess to faults? Montaigne does, I think, provide us with several hints that radical philosophers need to be discreet. Here’s one:

An ancient who was reproached for professing philosophy, of which nevertheless in his own mind he took no great account, replied that this was being a true philosopher. They wanted to consider everything, to weigh everything, and they found that occupation suited to the natural curiosity that is in us. Some things they wrote for the needs of society, like their religions. And on that account it was reasonable that they did not want to bare popular opinions to the skin, so as not to breed disorder in people’s obedience to the laws and customs of their country. (V-S, 511–12; F 379; S 571)\(^57\)

It may be objected that I read Montaigne as a religious subversive only because I myself am an atheist, and am therefore prone to reading my unbelief into authors who lived in times when such views were unthinkable. There may be something in this, though I suggest there is less than you might imagine.

First, I am not myself, without some reservations, an atheist. I know of conceptions of God I might accept (e.g. Spinoza’s). It’s only Christianity and religions like it which I find incredible. It’s certainly right that when I find Montaigne being inconsistent, I tend to resolve the inconsistency in a way which makes his writing come out true, according to my lights. This is an instance of what some people call the principle of charity. I prefer to speak of the principle of respect for the intelligence of the great, dead philosophers. With that emendation, I think this is a sensible way to approach any text. But it’s a defeasible principle, which works for some authors and not others. I think Hobbes’s *Leviathan* is probably best understood as the work of someone who, if not an atheist, was at least deeply subversive of the religion of his day.

\(^{57}\) See V-S 535, F 399, S 600.
I think the same of Machiavelli and Spinoza. So I reject the idea, popularized by Febvre, that atheism was unthinkable in the sixteenth (and seventeenth) centuries. But I think the idea that Descartes was an atheist is quite untenable.

It’s a curious fact, worth our reflection, that Montaigne himself suggests this objection when he writes that: ‘People are prone to apply the meaning of other men’s writings to suit opinions that they have previously determined in their minds; and an atheist flatters himself by reducing all authors to atheism, infecting innocent matter with his own venom’ (V-S 448; F 327; S 500). This is the tone Montaigne normally takes when he discusses atheism, and may suggest that he regards atheism as beyond the pale. Some would infer that he could not himself be an atheist. Nevertheless, it does indicate that Montaigne thought atheists were opponents whom Christians had to reckon with. So he thought the view was thinkable. Moreover, we should not overlook


61 It’s a nice question, which I will not attempt to resolve, what Montaigne means by ‘atheism’. No doubt the term was often used very broadly, not just to refer to the denial of the existence of any god, but to stigmatize virtually any religious view the speaker might disagree with. But I don’t see any evidence that Montaigne uses the term this broadly. My presumption is that he would have counted Epicureanism, with its admission of gods, but denial that they
the tendency of this passage to inoculate Montaigne against accusations of atheism. If atheists are prone to interpret innocent writings as atheistic, then the critic of Montaigne who accuses him of atheism may expose himself to an *ad hominem* reply: ‘you wouldn’t interpret my writing as atheistic if you weren’t an atheist yourself’. Some interpreters might find that response more threatening than I do.

But even if Montaigne did not intend to encourage the secular view of the world which his work did, in fact, encourage, it does seem to me that his espousal of pyrrhonism may have promoted religious toleration in another way. I do not think a moderate skepticism, which says merely that the fundamental doctrines of religion are not completely certain, need have much effect on a believer deliberating about whether he should suppress dissent. As I suggested at the beginning of this essay, he may well reason, along the lines of Pascal’s wager, that with the eternal happiness of the faithful as a prospective reward, and the eternal torment of the unfaithful as a prospective punishment, he should not let minor doubts about the truth of his beliefs deter him from using force to defend them.\(^{62}\) I also suggested that a skepticism as radical as the one Montaigne seems to espouse, a fully general pyrrhonism, is unappealing.

But if Montaigne’s reader comes to accept a limited pyrrhonian skepticism, which applies in the area of religion, where it is most credible, and to think of the non-believer as someone who holds beliefs no less rational than his own, then it may be more difficult to defend a policy of repression. And of course, if he comes to regard the belief in immortality as contrary to reason, and supported only by our desires and its possible utility, then he will not find the persecutor’s wager persuasive at all. In the end these may be Montaigne’s most important contributions to the development of an argument for religious toleration.\(^{63}\)

---

\(^{62}\) I develop this point more fully in ‘Sebastian Castellio’s Erasmian Liberalism’, forthcoming in *Philosophical Topics*.

\(^{63}\) There is a further line of thought which needs to be developed. The prospective persecutor may be concerned, not only with the eternal salvation of the faithful, but also with the moral character of society in this life, thinking that acceptance of traditional Christian beliefs is essential to people’s behaving morally. In the seventeenth century Spinoza and Bayle were to argue that there was no discernible difference between the conduct of Christians and that of Jews, Muslims, and pagans. Montaigne anticipates this argument in the ‘Apology’ (V-S 442–5; F 322–5; S 493–7).