

## **Pierre Bayle, Commentaire philosophique, 1686 (2 extracts)**

Pierre Bayle, who fled from France in 1681, published his *Commentaire philosophique sur ces paroles de Jésus-Christ* in 1686 under a pseudonym. He denounced the intolerance which pervaded even more in France now that Louis XIV had just revoked the Edict of Nantes and refuted the argument of those for whom a religion (being Romain Catholicism) could justify violent coercion.

In the first extract, taken from the very beginning of the book, he makes a plea against the prejudices tied to tradition and asks that the human, rising above his own interests, goes in search of reason (the 'primitive light') which alone is universal. ((It is only by means of this, explains Bayle throughout the *Commentaire* that religious violence may be ended.)

In the second extract, Bayle develops a concrete example : the Protestants themselves (as he claims) should accept religious pluralism, for the only weapon with which truth can fight others is reason (Bayle here extends one of the arguments Castellion had advanced a century earlier).

But as Passion and Prejudice do but too often obscure the Ideas of natural Equity, I shou'd advise all who have a mind effectually to retrieve 'em, to consider these Ideas in the general, and as abstracted from all private Interest, and from the Customs of their Country. For a fond and deeply-rooted Passion may possibly happen to persuade a Man, that an Action, which he dotes on as profitable and pleasant, is very agreeable to the Dictates of right Reason: The Power of Custom, and a turn given to the Understanding in the earliest Infancy, may happen to represent an Action as honest and seemly, which in it self is quite otherwise. To surmount both these Obstacles therefore, I cou'd advise whoever aims at preserving this natural Light, with respect to Morality, pure and unadulterate, to raise his Contemplations above the reach of private Interest, or the Custom of his Country, and to examine in general, Whether this or that Practice be just in it self; and whether, might the Question now be put for introducing it in a Country where it never was in vogue, and where it were left to our choice to admit or reject it; whether, I say, we shou'd find upon a sober Inquiry, that it's reasonable enough to merit our Suffrage and Approbation? I fancy an Abstraction of this kind might effectually disperse a great many Mists which swim between the Eyes of our [70] Understanding, and that[50] primitive universal Ray of Light which flows from the Divinity, discovering the general Principles of Equity to all Mankind, and being a standing Test of all Precepts, and particular Laws concerning Manners; not excepting even those which God has afterwards reveal'd in an extraordinary way, either by speaking immediately to Men, or by sending 'em inspir'd Prophets to declare his Will.

[Part I, Chapter 1]

If any one therefore wou'd know my Opinion in particular, concerning those Protestant States which allow but one Religion; I answer, That if they act purely from a regard to the suppos'd Falseness of the Opinions of other Religions, they are wrong; for who has requir'd this at their hands? Is Falshood to be overcome by any other Arms than those of Truth? Is not attacking Errors with a Cudgel, the same Absurdity as attacking Bastions with Syllogism and Harangue? Sovereigns therefore who wou'd discharge their Duty aright, ought not to send forth their Soldiers, their Hangmen, their Tipstaffs, their Life-[229]guard-men, their Pursuivants, against those who teach Doctrines different from their own; but slip their Divines, their Ministers, their

Professors at 'em, and order 'em to endeavor with all their Might, the Confutation of the obnoxious Doctrines: but if these Means are not sufficient to silence their Adversarys, or bring 'em over to the Religion of the Country, they shou'd e'en let 'em be quiet, and for the rest, [191] content themselves with their obeying the Municipal and Politickal Laws of the State. So much for what concerns those Doctrines which Protestants consider simply as false; this Falseness gives 'em not the least Right of treating their Subjects ill.

[Part II, Chapter 5]

Source: Pierre Bayle, *Commentaire philosophique*, 1686.

English translation at <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/bayle-a-philosophical-commentary-on-these-words-of-the-gospel>