

**Pierre Bayle**  
**The Enlightenment and Religious Tolerance**

Mount Nebo Royal Arch Chapter No. 20

Companion Joel Thomas Bundy

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I Samuel 13:14 ... the Lord hath sought him a man after his own heart...

“It takes an extraordinary amount of confidence in one’s own beliefs to burn another human being at the stake because of them.”

Michel de Montaigne

Dr. James Anderson was a Presbyterian minister in Piccadilly after the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. We do know that he was a Master of a Lodge in 1722, and according to Anderson himself, the year earlier the Grand Master, the Duke of Montagu asked 14 men to write the Constitutions. It is more likely that Anderson undertook the writing of his own accord. There are charges and resolutions, and these are based on the old charges, mainly what we call the “Gothic Constitutions.” The 1723 edition was printed by Brother Benjamin Franklin and was the first printed Masonic work in America. There is much to say about Anderson’s Constitutions, and that could be a complete lecture in an of itself. For tonight, we will focus on two of the charges from 1723 that were to be read about with the making of all new brothers.

I. Concerning GOD and RELIGION.

A Mason is oblig’d by his Tenure, to obey the moral law; and if he rightly understands the Art, he will never be a stupid Atheist nor an irreligious Libertine. But though in ancient Times Masons were charg’d in every Country to be of the Religion of that Country or Nation, whatever it was, yet ’tis now thought more expedient only to oblige them to that Religion in which all Men agree, leaving their particular Opinions to themselves; that is, to be good Men and true, or Men of Honour and Honesty, by whatever Denominations or Persuasions they may be distinguish’d; whereby Masonry becomes the Center of Union, and the Means of conciliating true Friendship among Persons that must have remain’d at a perpetual Distance.

## II Of the CIVIL MAGISTRATES SUPREME and SUBORDINATE.

A Mason is a peaceable Subject to the Civil Powers, wherever he resides or works, and is never to be concern'd in Plots an Conspiracies against the Peace and Welfare of the Nation, nor to behave himself undutifully to inferior Magistrates; for as Masonry hath been always injured by War, Bloodshed, and Confusion, so ancient Kings and Princes have been much dispos'd to encourage the Craftsmen, because of their Peaceableness and Loyalty, whereby they practically answer'd the Cavils of their Adversaries, and promoted the Honour of the Fraternity, who ever flourish'd in Time of Peace. So that if a Brother should be a Rebel against the State he is not to be countenanced in his Rebellion, however he may be pitied as any unhappy Man; and, if convicted of no other Crime though the Loyal Brotherhood must and ought to disown hi Rebellion, and give no Umbrage or Ground of political Jealousy to the Government for the time being, they cannot expel him from the Lodge, and his Relation to it remains indefeasible.

And what of this, even the “behavior after the lodge is over and the brethren not gone.”

You may enjoy yourself with innocent Mirth, treating one another according to Ability, but avoiding all Excess, or forcing any Brother to eat or drink beyond his Inclination, or hindering him from going when his Occasions call him, or doing or saying anything offensive, or that may forbid an easy and free Conversation, for that would blast our Harmony, and defeat our laudable Purposes. Therefore no private Piques or Quarrels must be brought within the Door of the Lodge, far less any Quarrels about Religion, or Nations, or State Policy, we being only, as Masons, of the Universal Religion above mention'd, we are also of all Nations, Tongues, Kindreds, and Languages, and are resolv'd against all Politics, as what never yet conduct'd to the Welfare of the Lodge, nor ever will.

Where did this type of tolerance come from? Why did Dr. Anderson write this in his constitutions? Keep in mind the back and forth of the English religious landscape over the hundred years prior. England was Catholic until Henry VIII formed the Church of England, which was strengthened by King Edward VI, reversed back to Catholicism by Queen Mary, then again to Protestantism by Queen Elizabeth, with much blood being lost on both sides through martyrdom, including Mary. By the time King James II came to power in 1685, as he was Catholic, there was great concern that he would turn England back into a Papist state. When his son was born, this

appeared all but certain, and he was overthrown during the Glorious Revolution of 1688 with the invasion of William of Orange and his Dutch fleet. One year later in 1689 the infamous Bill of Rights was introduced, giving men increasing liberties, much aligned with the thinking of John Locke. Locke wrote about religious toleration, being influenced by the events on the European continent with the 150 years of the European Wars of Religion following the Protestant Reformation. According to Locke, however, this toleration was to extend not to Catholics or atheists, but only to Protestants. It was his feeling that this group should be allowed to practice their religion in their own way. His was an attempt to find a solution to religious wars. Even so, ongoing animosity continued in Europe, particularly in France, largely from the Catholic Church towards Protestant minorities, specifically the French Huguenots.

Pierre Bayle was one such Huguenot, who spent much of his life fleeing from the persecution of King Louis XIV. Bayle was born into a French Calvinist family in 1647. After going off to university at a Jesuit college in Toulouse, he converted to Catholicism, but after 17 months, reaffirmed his Calvinist faith. Because of this, he was branded a heretic because he had known the truth of the Church, but then rejected it. He was the chair of philosophy at the University of Sedan, but the university was suppressed by King Louis the XIV and Bayle and many of his community fled to Rotterdam, Holland. His brother, however, was captured and died in the prisons of the King. During this time of life, Bayle formulated his views on tolerance, despite his personal suffering, or perhaps because of it. He felt that to coerce another person's conscience to change their religious views was a prideful display of arrogance that was the antipathy of true Christian love and humility, harkoning back to similar views of the Catholic apologist Michel de Montaigne. For Bayle, religious toleration extended beyond the Christian, to all other religious beliefs as well. It was, according to Marlies Galenkamp, toleration to the max.

While in Rotterdam, Bayle wrote his masterpiece the *Dictionnaire historique and critique* in 1697, only a couple of decades before Anderson's Constitutions. We now know that this was the most widely held book in French private libraries during the following century, and this and other works were best sellers during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. His philosophy was that of skepticism and tolerance and he was a leading thinker of the Calvinist community. To those who knew him, he was a deeply pious man and he taught in Protestant seminaries until his death in 1706. He felt that there were limits to human reason and that we were incapable of understanding true knowledge. As such he was critical of Descartes who felt one could know truth if starting from clear and distinct ideas. Recall Plato and his *Allegory of the Cave*, where one could also find Truth, but only with the light from the supreme good. Bayle thought that men needed to depend on faith, because human reason had to be humbled, a concept known as

fideism. Bayle argued in erudite fashion that human reason was non-rational and if examined carefully led to a rejection of Christian belief. To him, human reason and faith were incompatible.

How did he posit that said human reason was insufficient, and that man instead required a dependency on faith? These ideas he ironed out in his *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, and is illustrated best in how he described King David. Those of the Judaea-Christian faith know well the story of David. He slew Goliath and was anointed King of Israel. He was beloved by God, his name even meaning beloved. From the passage in Samuel previously quoted, when considering David, *the Lord hath sought him a man after his own heart*.

But despite this, Bayle pointed out in his writings that David was a sinner, an adulterer, a liar, polygamist, thief, and murderer. When reviewing the story of Hushai, one of David's best friends, he writes, "An honest man would rather lose a crown than be the cause of his friend's damnation." To Bayle, how God could find King David as "beloved" speaks to the mystery of salvation, and that to human reason it is unknowable. For a Calvinist who believes in the election of the saints as espoused in their dogma of predestination, who could know why God would save one man and damn another? How could one man who is pious not receive sanctification, while another, even a murderer, be elected by God? Human reason fails to comprehend.

Even within the Calvinist community, some thought his ideas dangerous, and it should be stated that one generation later, his ideas were appropriated by those in the French enlightenment. His thoughts of deep religious piety became ideas of the freethinker, the rationalist, and he was even called the friend of atheism and the enemy of Christianity. This because of his polemical arguments over David, and subsequent ones regarding religion and virtue. In these he argued that your religion did not make you virtuous, and that virtue could stand independent of one's faith, or even of any faith at all. His philosophy was to disentangle religion from morality.

Many French Calvinists felt that there would be an outward mark manifest by certain types of behavior on God's elected, but here Bayle disagreed. Even sinners could be saved by God, and virtuous people damned. To him, salvation was a mystery that could not be understood by man. As Royal Arch masons, don't we pray to keep inviolably the mysteries unfolded to us? According to Dr. Alan Kors, professor at the University of Pennsylvania, Bayle set out to show that by "natural light" David was a sinner, but only through revelation in scripture do we know that he was beloved by God. How could man reason this incompatibility? Bayle would posit- only through faith.

This wasn't the only area of great disagreement between Bayle and those of the reformed church. Due to the persecution of the French monarchy, many felt that it was appropriate to work to oppose and overthrow the King himself. Recall the concept of the divine right of Kings. This idea grew out of the Old Testament when David refused to raise a hand against King Saul because at that time Saul was the anointed of God. With King James I, he himself stated the following in a 1610 speech to parliament:

The state of monarchy is the supremest thing upon earth, for kings are not only God's lieutenants upon earth and sit upon God's throne, but even by God himself they are called gods. There be three principal [comparisons] that illustrate the state of monarchy: one taken out of the word of God, and the two other out of the grounds of policy and philosophy. In the Scriptures kings are called gods, and so their power after a certain relation compared to the Divine power. Kings are also compared to fathers of families; for a king is truly *parens patriae* [parent of the country], the politic father of his people. And lastly, kings are compared to the head of this microcosm of the body of man

King Louis XIV promoted the theory of the divine right of Kings as well. For the French Huguenots who had been persecuted and driven from their homes, they felt that the monarchy deserved to be overthrown, this being espoused by one of their leaders, Pierre Jurieu. After all, wasn't King Louis a murderer, a thief, an adulterer? Didn't he lose his rights as King by rejecting God's laws? But then think back to King David- wasn't he also a murderer, thief and adulterer, yet God said he was a man after His own heart? Again, Bayle felt that human reason was too weak to understand, and that we have to depend on humility, tolerance, faith and the lights of our own conscience.

In summary, Pierre Bayle felt that religious tolerance should be shown to all. His arguments were that faith and reason were incompatible with each other. Secondly, that everyone should have freedom of conscience, even if they are mistaken in those beliefs. He felt that one could eventually find the right path, much as he had done, converting again to his Calvinist beliefs. Thirdly, one's behavior, not one's beliefs, should be regulated by law. One expert on Bayle, Goodman Tannenbaum, wrote that, "Whether they be papists in Protestant states or Protestants in Catholic states, to keep people chained up like animals or to deprive them of rights of citizenship...is wrong. Bayle would protect minorities from the efforts to block their free exercise of religious rites." When it comes to the state, Bayle differed from Locke's views on tolerance. Although they both felt there should be a separation of state from church, Locke felt there should be strict separation between the two, with the church and

state having equal footing, whereas Bayle felt that the religions should be controlled by the state, even though the King was no longer divine, but only a secular authority.

How should such tolerance be applied? In English Freemasonry, following the Glorious Revolution only a few decades earlier, seeing the persecution of so many across the channel on the continent, there was little inclination for subsequent uprisings or further religious persecution. Religious quarrels were avoided. Ideas from the enlightenment such as sociability, religious tolerance and knowledge were embraced, but radical ideas were shunned, such as the overthrow of the government. This was the more moderate enlightenment, not the radical views that led to the violent and turbulent French Revolution later in the century. These were the ideas that made theological disputes less attractive, with the benefits of religious thought outweighing the issues of the dogma itself. Men came together guided by principles of brotherly love, relief and truth. On the principle of brother love, Freemasonry unites men of every country, sect and opinion, and conciliates true friendship among those who might otherwise remain at a perpetual distance, such as might occur due to different religious beliefs. We find ourselves unified into one sacred band or society of friends and brothers. Whether Christian or Jew, Hindu or Buddhist, Muslim or Druze, we can all be good men, we can call each other Brother.

I'll leave you with a quote from one of my favorite authors, Paulo Coelho, who summed up this entire lecture with the following simple phrase-

“In order to have faith in his own path, he does not need to prove that someone else's path is wrong.”

I bid you peace,

Joel Bundy

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