Pierre Bayle: Enlightened through Reason and Faith

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As a member of a marginalized Christian sect within France, Pierre Bayle was an ideal apologist for religious toleration—a freedom he did not believe should be limited to those of his sect. Ironically, it was this liberal application of religious freedom that left him marginalized in his own Christian community, albeit embraced by future philosophs. Even in retrospect, studies of Bayle often place him on the ideological peripheries of seventeenth-century society, often without definitively affixing one ideological or intellectual label to him, apart from that of master dialectician. Thus, if the most effective way of understanding the place of thinkers in the Enlightenment is by assessing the nature of their inquiries, Bayle, as this universally acknowledged dialectician, would be the consummate Enlightenment thinker.

Nevertheless, the purpose of this paper is not to ensure Bayle’s enshrinement in the Enlightenment pantheon; rather it is to consider both the mutually transformative relationship between his worldview and his historical context, and, conversely, his worldview’s infusion of new ideas into that context—ideas that would inspire thinkers beyond his time. That the religious dimension of this historical context consumed Bayle—his preoccupation with matters of morality is undeniable—could be a testament to the confined space for intellectual inquiry during his lifetime, or it could indicate the extent to which Bayle found morality a salient subject for intellectual inquiry.

Bayle is best known for his logical defense of toleration and his criticism of the illogical nature of superstition. With this in mind, one could cast him as a thinker equally preoccupied with reason as religion. Nevertheless, in final analysis, while his worldview may not have allowed for the necessary tie between faith and reason, in his work the two were symbiotic;
while his defense of the freedom of conscience in matters of religion was aided by his logical argumentation, his religious experiences gave him an impetus for using his reason to argue for the sanctity of faith.

The historical development most pertinent to our discussion of Bayle is that of the Protestant Reformation. This is true not only because Bayle was, specifically, raised as a Protestant and despite a short-lived experiment with Catholicism, professed to be a Protestant until his death, but also because the Protestant Reformation prompted a sociological shift that would advance the centrality of the individual, generally: when Martin Luther challenged the Catholic Church on matters of dogma and practice, via the Ninety-Five Theses, it was not only audacious because of his explicit condemnation of an institution foundational to society—especially since he was questioning its legitimacy as the true church—but because he based his condemnation on his own interpretation of the Bible, thereby removing the perceived necessity of the institution as a means of knowing God’s will. In effect, he claimed that the individual could approach God, and that God could implant truth in his heart, without an intermediary apart from Christ.

Bayle would pose an analogous challenge to the Protestant establishment: he would emphasize personal revelation over established dogma, and question the Protestants’ interpretation of the Bible. Luther’s two most prominent grievances against the Catholic Church were its doctrinal emphasis on works over faith, and its worship of saints (instead of recognizing the inherent sainthood of all believers) and the Virgin Mary, which he likened to idolatry. In essence, an outcome of the Protestant Reformation was to elevate the status of all Christians
and, in theory, all people, by leveling the ecclesiastical and moral hierarchy. Bayle carried that mantle in a more subtle manner, as this paper will attempt to show; but his conflict with the Protestant establishment was due to his unorthodox conception of ethics—particularly his arguments that atheists and believers have an equal impulse for evil and have the same capacity for outward morality as believers—as well as his theologically anomalous advocacy of fideism, which held that reason and faith are not interdependent.

This paper will first outline varying scholarship on Bayle’s defining characteristics, and then examine selected parts of two of Bayle’s works, his *Historical and Cultural Dictionary* and *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of the Comet*, for the purpose of identifying common views concerning the nature of faith and religion, in relation to reason. These together will serve as a springboard for my discussion of Bayle.

It is Bayle’s skepticism—manifested in his relentless questioning of established wisdom and his capacity to join criticism and approval within a single exposition—that has led to a debate among scholars about how to categorize him. If fact, Bayle’s person and work have provoked disparate responses from scholars. For example, we will look at the work of Elizabeth Labrousse and Barbara Sher Tinsley, which place Bayle in a religious framework, and Howard Robinson and H.T. Mason, who prefer to place Bayle in a secular framework (although the latter’s conclusion regarding Bayle blurs the line between these two frameworks).

A noted authority on Bayle, Labrousse traces the trajectory and nature of his intellectual and theological views in her work *Bayle*.¹ She maps his movement to the peripheries of French

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seventeenth-century society: he became vilified by Catholics for his heretical reconversion to Protestantism, by Calvinists for his extension of toleration to atheists, and by rationalists for his fideism. She explores the influence of Cartesian thought, fideism and skepticism on Bayle’s presuppositions. Additionally, she assesses some of the beliefs he vociferously criticized and upheld, thereby drawing attention to prominent features of his worldview. Labrousse stresses the role of his religious fideism, as opposed to metaphysical skepticism, on his perception of the constraints of reason. Furthermore, Labrousse regards his polemic against idolatry as springing not from an anti-Christian, but anti-Catholic, inclination. Labrousse sees his skepticism as a tool provided him by religion, while other scholars see it as a tool he used to deconstruct religion.

Tinsley’s work *Pierre Bayle’s Reformation*, which surveys Bayle’s dictionary entries on fourteen Reformers, provides a study of Bayle’s theoretical and practical relationship to the Reformation. In understanding what Bayle chose to emphasize and deemphasize about Reformation thought, one can better appreciate his unique position as both an adherent to Protestantism, and yet a critic of it. She makes the case that “Bayle’s intellect shaped his reaction to the Reformation,” even though he accepted most of the Reformed theology. She points out his close attention to the character of the Reformers, and notes that his favorite reformer was Melanchthon, whose “manner and morals were above reproach,” and whose “faith and flexibility” he admired. This fixation on ideas and how these ideas are acted upon

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4 Tinsley, 324.
reemerges in his discussion of toleration, his attack on superstition, and his own general outlook on faith.

Another approach is to emphasize Bayle’s skepticism as the definitive mark of his existence—as Robinson does, even devoting a part of a chapter of his work, *Bayle the Sceptic*, to discussing the possibility of Bayle being an atheist. He writes that Bayle’s “counsel, that Christians submit to revealed truth, was certainly not taken to heart by Bayle himself….It was merely a means of warding off the orthodox.” In this view Bayle’s was an intellectual pursuit; he found inspiration in the endless toying with existential and ethical questions. This view is useful in its discussion of Bayle’s skepticism, although Bayle surely saw skepticism as serving a constructive purpose within the Christian faith.

H.T. Mason, in his comparative study of Voltaire and Bayle, argues that Voltaire consistently subscribed to Baylean thought on religion. The differences are as informative as the similarities between the two, though. Mason holds that Voltaire believed that religion’s rewards and punishment system could generate social order. This is a line of thought divorced from Bayle’s emphasis on faith-driven, not fear-driven, piety. Mason’s is a useful comparison, because Voltaire is often associated with a radical approach to religion. Voltaire held that religion is necessary to civilization; an external constraint, while Bayle considers religion an internal force. Mason perceives a progressive quality in Bayle, one that even Voltaire did not possess—a broad-mindedness in regard to religion and morality—but he cannot deny that Bayle was less skeptical about the merits of Christianity than the latter.

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These few above-mentioned aspects of Bayle’s worldview—his religious fideism, his anti-Catholicism and Protestant affinities, his intellectual rigorousness, and his personal understanding of faith—will be explored in a brief readings of two of his works.

Bayle’s Dictionary provided him a unique forum for the discussion of philosophical positions and a sociopolitical cause the proliferation of which would be ascribed to him in perpetuity. He covertly addresses skepticism, atheism, toleration, and heterodoxy in his entries on a range of figures. Bayle’s willingness to include and critically engage with sources unfavorable to the subjects, as well as his editorial biases in the selection of these sources, suggests that he was an individualist who judged others by an internal standard that did not always match their own.7

Just as in his masterwork on toleration, Philosophical Commentary, Bayle did not refrain from undermining one of the most-revered church fathers, Augustine, in his dictionary.8 Setting the stage for a discussion of Augustine’s theological influence, he describes his transition from “Debauchery and Heresy”9 to Catholicism, a lifestyle wherein “he felt himself a good Christian, ready to forsake all for the Gospel.”10 He praises his extra-religious wisdom, in that Augustine posed questions that neither the heterodox Manichean nor the orthodox Catholics could effectively refute, which is a similar position in which Bayle would find himself in regard to Augustine and his theological offspring.11 Bayle notes that Calvinists trace their theology to

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8 The exposition of dictionary entries, both on Augustine and Spinoza, is my own.
10 Ibid., 54.
11 Bayle, Dictionary, 53.
Augustine, but then works to undercut Calvin’s authority, as well as Augustine’s. Moreover, he criticizes Augustine’s support of persecution of non-Christians as leading to “Prejudice, done to the good Cause, by the Authority to This Saint.” He levels this criticism at those Christians, specifically citing the French Refugee ministers, who hypocritically support toleration for themselves and not for others: “If they had been asked, while the Edicts of Persecution were pouring on their Party, what they thought of the Conduct of a Prince, who inflicted Penalties on Those of his Subjects, who desired only the Liberty of serving God according to their Consciences, they would have answered, that it is unjust; and yet, as soon as they are come into another Country, they have pronounced their Anathema against Those, who condemn the use of Penal Laws, in order to suppress Errors.” This mirrors the criticism he levels at the Catholic Church, when he accuses them of hypocritically treating the teachings of Jansenism compared to the teachings of Augustine.

The significance of his criticism of Augustine is not only symbolic, in that he is daring to contest the teachings of one of the most consulted of church fathers, but also practical: in exposing what he considers to be the weaknesses and inconsistencies of Augustine’s misinterpretation of Christ’s command to compel nonbelievers to be saved, he lays the foundation for his defense of toleration.

As a literal and symbolic bookend, he reserves his final, and most extensive, entry for Baruch Spinoza. In footnotes that follow this entry, wherein he succinctly describes Spinoza as “a Jew by birth, who forsook Judaism, and at last became an Atheist,” Bayle elaborates on his

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12 Ibid., 66.
13 Ibid, 64.
14 I will expand on this further in the paper.
pantheistic philosophy, or the belief that “the whole universe is but one substance, and that God and the world are but one Being.” 15 He sets out to prove that this is not a novel philosophy and, furthermore, that it translates into a sort of pagan belief present in the East Indies, which holds that “there is nothing real and effective in anything which we think we see, hear, smell, taste or touch: this world is nothing but a kind of dream, and a meer [sic] illusion, because that multitude and great variety of things, that appear to us, are but one and the same thing, viz. God himself.” 16 He dismisses this belief as absurd, a seemingly ironic stance for a champion of toleration. At the same time, his criticism of these philosophical ideas is based on rational thinking—at the end of the entry, he seeks to disprove Spinoza’s teachings on substance and accidents by arguing that “several persons have assured me that this doctrine, even considered without relation to religion, appears very contemptible to the greatest Mathematicians of our days.” 17

Bayle also draws a parallel between Spinoza’s philosophy and that of a leader of a Chinese sect 18, “that Foe,” who, “[a]t seventy-nine years of age...began to declare his Atheism.” In keeping with his favorable assessment of atheists, Bayle does praise Spinoza’s character, stating “he said nothing in conversation but what was edifying. He never swore; he never spoke disrespectfully of God; he went sometimes to hear sermons....he used wine very moderately, and lived an abstemious life....He was certainly not covetous of money.” 19 In its entirety, this entry reflects Bayle’s emphasis on the application of reason to one’s perception of the world,

15 Ibid., 291.
16 Ibid., 298.
17 Ibid., 312.
18 Although his dictionary contains entries on Japan, China, and India, it is unclear how much exposure he had to Asian culture.
19 Ibid., 306-07.
but it also exposes the reflection of his own personal, religious struggle in his consideration of Spinoza’s intellectual and philosophical development. Spinoza looms as Bayle’s alter ego: he inverted Bayle’s religious and philosophical methodology, subjecting the Scriptures to his rational inquiry rather than disassociating the rational and religious spheres.

Bayle’s preoccupation with people’s characters, his effort to rein in his semi-sensationalist tendencies (in refraining from including all the sordid details of a person’s life), and his attempts to ensure that his last word on a figure was one that appealed to a reader’s reason appear clearly when reading his dictionary. His close attention to not only the ideas that people express, but how they choose to act on them, marks the Dictionary, and is in line with both his rational and visceral opinions on faith. A tension exists between his approbation of upstanding conduct, even if it seems concessional at times, and his commendation of valuable ideas. What are the readers to assume? Was Spinoza, despite his erroneous philosophical conclusions, a better model for living than Augustine, who found truth, but misinterpreted it? Bayle is not denying the worth of the original teaching which Augustine held; he is condemning its implementation. Can the ideal third alternative exist: truth rightly held and practiced?

Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet, the work that established Bayle as one of the preeminent Enlightenment thinkers, as well as earned him the censure of fellow Protestants, sheds light on Bayle’s understanding of the impulses which guide the actions of religious and secular men. In this work, Bayle takes the opportunity to cast a wide net of inquiry over a range of moral, theological, sociological, and intellectual subjects, both tangential
and immediately relevant. \footnote{Pierre Bayle, \textit{Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet}, translated by Robert C. Bartlett (Albany: State University of New York, 2000). Bayle praises digressions when referring to his fictitious correspondent, suggesting that the imagination is restricted by a strict focus to one subject. (5)} His approach to discussing the comet, which appeared in 1680, and created widespread panic among the European peoples, is a succession of scientific, philosophical, and theological refutations to which the layman could subscribe. He argues that the comets have no influence on events, and do not consistently coincide with negative events, considering that “the years believed to have been poisoned by the influences of comets are noteworthy for as much great good fortune in some places of the world as at any other time whatever.”\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 41.} Furthermore, he questions whether one can judge if an event is good or bad, because, as in the case of wars—and he cites the war between the Spanish and Portuguese in 1668, which coincided with the appearance of a comet, as an example, among others—each of the belligerents can subjectively interpret the significance of events. After giving the reader a brief synopsis of unfortunate events in the history of Europe, he demonstrates that they are unrelated to the appearance of comets. In fact, he claims that the manifestation of the supernatural in the natural would be detrimental to people’s morals, as it would lead to idolatry. \footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 77.}

Despite his manifold digressions, central claims do arise. He demonstrates that comets are unrelated to any coterminous terrestrial misfortunes, natural or otherwise. He does so by applying logic to universal observation, namely by showing that the appearance of comets has been followed by both good and bad events, and so cannot consistently be attached to misfortune. Even when they coincide with misfortune, it is superstition, not reason, that
intimates that the two are related, for he asserts that it is fallacious to assume one event follows another without physical evidence of their relation. Moving beyond the physical to the metaphysical, he argues that God would not have made comets bad omens: neither experience nor theology bear it out, for their appearance has often been unseen except by the searching astronomer and, additionally, God would not create supernatural signs whose appearance would lead to behavior which detracts from his glory and is therefore idolatry.

Couched in his discussion on comets is a consideration of atheism, wherein he states: “When one compares the morals of a man who has religion with the general idea one has of the morals of this man, one is altogether surprised to find no conformity between these two things.”23 This hearkens back to the paper’s earlier juxtaposition of Augustine and Spinoza—although it must be noted that Bayle did not consider Augustine holistically flawed. He addresses this seeming paradox between religion and morals with this observation:

The conscience knows in general the beauty of virtue, and forces us to agree that there is nothing more laudable than good morals. But when the heart is once possessed by an illegitimate love; when we see that, by satisfying this love, we will taste pleasure and that by not satisfying it, we will be plunged into regret and unbearable disquiet, there is no light of the conscience that may hold sway, we no longer consult anything by passion, and we judge it necessary to act *hic et nunc* against the general idea we have of our duty. This shows that there is nothing more subject to illusion than judging the morals of a man by means of the general opinions with which he is imbued.

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23 Bayle, *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet*, 164.
He saw this paradox at work in Christians who, in the metaphysical abstract, should be—equipped with a divinely-directed conscience—able to master their “vicious inclinations,” but instead “do not guide [them]selves by the lights of the conscience.”24 This is not to deny the intrinsic potential of Christianity, singular among religions, to teach a man how to “fight against his passions, and of making him virtuous,”25 but the greatest impediment remains humans’ tendency to only consult self-serving passions, or what he terms the “illegitimate loves.”

At the same time, atheists could be tolerated, even “absolved,” not because of their conclusions, but because of how they reached these conclusions. He holds to the view of inherent infallibility, but modifies it: inherent deviancy is joined with a capacity for reason. But reason is divorced from faith, and in this way the faithless atheist could through reason overcome his lack of virtuousness, while sidestepping religion. However, this did not mean that Bayle was indifferent to the role of faith or the Christian religion.

Although he believed morality was independent of religion, he was judging value systems as a theist, because he defined morality as internal (even if environment plays a role),26 derived from a divine source (even if the recipient does not acknowledge it), and essential to measuring the worth of an individual in society. Applying this logic he argued that if atheists were moral, even if they did not understand the source of their morality, they should be tolerated.

24 Ibid., 167.
25 Ibid, 162.
26 Mason, 90.
In numerous instances, when arguing that “faith in a religion is not the rule of the conduct of man,” he makes an exception for those “led by the spirit of God.”27 It is a distinction worth noting—despite the opinion of certain scholars, like Robinson, that this is a token concession to the orthodox believers, and, essentially, a means of detracting from his true convictions—because it is a use of Biblical jargon emphasizing divine inspiration over reason that closely corresponds to his general outlook on religion. However, Bayle is unyielding in his criticism of Christians, repeatedly directing at them the accusation of idolatry. Bayle was dissatisfied with idolatry, insincerity, and irrationality. The infiltration of irrationality into religion corrupted people’s morals and made them unproductive members of society. In light of this, atheism, if a belief was rationally reached and sincerely held, was free of the faults that Bayle found in theism. He wrote that it was “[b]etter to be ignorant of god than to denigrate Him.”28

While his discussion of the comet and idolatry addresses the lack of internal constraints in individuals, Bayle is also famous for his discourse on toleration—one which could be viewed as a discussion of external constraints. Bayle formed enemies among his fellow Protestants by defending toleration for people adhering to all philosophical systems. Labrousse describes his logic as follows: only God “who searches the loins and the hearts of men can tell infallibly if an error is innocent or not. Conscience, being the voice of God within each of us, is sacred, and the real offence against the Divinity is to persuade a man to forsake what his conscience tells him is true—and therefore, for him, is true.”29 Ultimately, in promoting universal toleration, he was

27 Bayle, Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet, 178.
28 Mason, 83.
29 Labrousse, 84.
arguing for the loosening of external constraints on morality, in favor of strengthening people’s
ability to heed their internal constraints, that is, conscience. Thus, perhaps, the purpose of his
litany of admonitions directed at idolatrous believers in *Reflections* was purposed to spur them
on in holy thinking and living. Rationally, he could not understand how humans, not being
omniscient, could make judgments on the output of another individual’s conscience; however,
because he believed, based on his own experience, in the merits of the Christian faith, he
wanted to redirect believers to a reliance on that conscience, rather than on their own
irrationally formed idols.

The primary importance of situating Bayle in the current of Enlightenment thought,
whether chronologically or intellectually, is that doing so helps us understand the environment
in which his ideas originated. Bayle’s “mental horizon was a Reformation backdrop that in less
than two centuries had dictated the rearrangement of the political, social, literary, and religious
scenery of western and central Europe.” 30 He took advantage of the freedom that the
Reformation had advocated. This was the tradition that informed his worldview, while also
providing material for dissent. It is important to understand Bayle as religious thinker, not just
as a skeptic.31

Furthermore, for Bayle, religion had a largely personal dimension. What emerges from
his writings, in subtle form and often entangled in dialectic, is his intuitive appreciation for the
Christian faith. Beyond its personal significance, his approach to and theoretical application of
this faith was that of a purist. He was a committed Protestant, who understood faith to be a

31 Labrousse, 11.
private, personal experience, and as such interpreted its meaning not abstractly, but with its personal relevancy in mind.

Grappling with matters of religion and faith exceeded an intellectual exercise, as Robinson would have it; they intersected with his existence and forced him to confront them. He addressed evil and divine Providence, subjects intensely and infamously scrutinized by Calvin, in part because of the death of his brother, Jacob, who was imprisoned because of Bayle’s “heretical” writings. The Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, “which effectively legalized the persecution of Protestants in Catholic France and refused their claim to French citizenship,” as well as his reaction to Huguenot refugees’ belligerence against religious outsiders, led him to write extensively on toleration. 32

Bayle’s attack on idolatry was itself a manifestation of Protestant scruples, even if it was unintentional. His argument is quintessentially Protestant: he is restoring a faith-based religion. The Protestant critique of Catholicism is that it was a merit-based faith: the Catholic lives an outwardly obedient life because they fear divine punishment (a propos of this, the panic invoked by the appearance of the comet was largely guilt-induced, in that people were anticipating punishment). Similarly, Labrousse states that Bayle’s Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet was “a thinly disguised piece of anti-Catholic polemics: ‘idolatry’ was the term Protestants used for worship of the Virgin, the saints, holy relics and the adoration of the Host.” 33 Furthermore, in keeping with Luther’s negative appraisal of the Catholic Church, Bayle, in his Dictionary entry on Augustine, berates the Catholic Church. The most stinging observation

32 Hochman, 3.
33 Labrousse, 56.
was made on the Church’s incongruous treatment of the teachings of Jansenism and Augustine, which he argues have similar doctrine: “And yet the Church of Rome, with her pretended Infallibility, lets this whole Matter pass without Censure. If she condemns Jansenism, she is obliged to declare, at the same time, that she does not condemn St. Augustine; this is to undo with one hand, what is done with the other.”34 The thrust of his argument is his defense of the “Privilege of an erring Conscience,”35 and, by extension, his unveiling of the Church’s hypocrisy and irrationality, in that it held to one doctrine, but peremptorily rejected similar doctrines because they posed a challenge to its hegemony.

Nonetheless, although his Protestant upbringing undoubtedly shaded his perception of life, the tenets of Protestantism were not so entrenched in his psyche as to render him unable to posit another faith, thereby renouncing his family’s faith. Nor did his acceptance of one faith cripple his will or capacity to consider opposing viewpoints. Even his conversion and subsequent reconversion demonstrate an interest in confronting and unraveling the theological complexities of Christianity. And his skepticism, or the exercising of doubt, was useful toward this end. In essence—and his tense relationship with the figures of the Reformation speaks to this—questioning the strictures of the Christian religion created by its adherent, as well as condemning the behavior of these unfaithful followers, was a means of strengthening the religion, thereby providing a justification for himself, and for others, to place their faith in a God who was infallible, even his followers were not. He wanted to understand Christian theology on his own terms—using the freedom of conscience—because the nature of faith required that he

34 Bayle, Dictionary, 61.
35 Ibid., 62
be convinced of the theology. By the same token, if Bayle had reached a place of faith, then positing the merits of other religions could only strengthen his own position, as it had the potential to lead to a personal dialectic process of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis.

However, embedded in his defense of toleration, and his disparagement of idolatry, is an apology for the dichotomous reality of reason and religion. He embraced fideism believing that, if as a rational being, one must only accept things “in conformity with reason,” then being unable to rationally explain religious mysteries would force an admission of mutual exclusivity between religion and reason, and thus a denial of the former. Bayle stressed unadulterated faith, and it is on these grounds that he embraced fideism; he wanted no other incentive for accepting Christianity outside of a faith birthed by divine revelation. His views on atheism were not a form of rebellion against God, as much as being mindful of God’s holiness. Bayle reasoned that it would be less displeasing to God if a human would deny his existence or any of his attributes, than if the individual ascribed false attributes to him. He would rather err on the side of ignorance in regard to religion, although he vigilantly pursued rationally-supported knowledge in other areas.

This inability to reconcile faith and reason seems problematic, though, in that his discussion of theology is painstakingly logical. In essence, this approach to theology is an attempt to make it rational and compel religious adherents to be as rational as possible. Perhaps distinguishing between faith and religion might prove useful in this regard. Religion, as an institutionalized set of beliefs based on a certain theology, is essentially composed of ideas, and in order to comprehend and follow these ideas they must be made logical. However, faith

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36 Labrousse, 57.
has a visceral origin: reason can aid one in an understanding of God, but it cannot provide the compulsion to trust in him. In this way faith is not irrational, because it is founded on a belief that can be logically expressed, but neither is it solely the product of that rational argumentation.

Unfortunately, his emphasis on the independence of faith and reason led him to be “called not only an unbeliever, but an atheist,” or “an atheist cloaked in the dress of a believer.”\(^\text{37}\) Although being classified as an atheist might have been a badge of honor for some future intellectuals, it remained a mark of opprobrium in the seventeenth century. Nevertheless, Bayle argued in a religious framework. He himself wrote in a preface to his work on the comet, that he does not “ask for a judge other than theology...against the presages of comets, the same weapons belonging to piety and religion that have been used until now in favor of these presages.” He battled theologians with their weapons, because in this way he could appeal to people who found the natural philosophers, comics, and astrologers useless. In fact, there is no one source cited more in his work than the Bible, although he does reference a number of scholars both of antiquity and of his time.

At the same time, he states that “God did not propose, by drawing the pagans out from their shadows and introducing them into the kingdom of his marvelous light (to make use of the expressions of Scripture) to make them better philosophers than they were before, to teach them the secrets of nature, to fortify them against prejudice and popular errors in such a way that they were incapable of succumbing to them.”\(^\text{38}\) In essence, he is arguing that faith does

\(^\text{37}\) Hochman, 2.
\(^\text{38}\) Bayle, *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet*, 106.
not make a believer more rational. One cannot tie the two. Furthermore, as he previously argued, Christians often find themselves living lives (in good part because they are acting without reason) more shameful than those without any faith. The Christians, in being irrational, practice their faith without virtue, while atheists, in being rational, outclass the former in virtue.

So then, what is the worth of Christianity for this advocate of reason? Bayle describes the purpose of the Gospel to be: “to make known the true God and his son, God and man, who died and was resurrected for us, and to fill the heart of man with love of God and holiness, to make the worship of idols cease, and to destroy the empire of vice.” 40 This is an expression of a faith in line with Protestant orthodoxy that has a direct impact on one’s lifestyle.

On the one hand, his recently-published correspondence bear evidence of his holding a more prejudiced view of other religions, Catholicism particularly, than his public writings attest. Addressing one family member about the Catholic conversion of another, he writes, ‘I would like to know how you live with this gaggle of relatives who have left the true Church, “having loved this present world.”’ At other times he writes of converted Catholics as having ‘secret ambitions’ and ‘hidden motives.’ 41

On the other hand, his correspondence also shows a wavering hope in divine Providence as projected in the Calvinist theology. Thomas H. Lennon takes this to mean, in accordance with Labrousse, that Bayle, although adhering to Christianity, did not take the same comfort from his faith after his brother Jacob’s death as before. The number of enemies he made among

39 Mason, 80.
40 Bayle, Various Thoughts on the Occasion of the Comet, 105.
orthodox believers left him little reputation to maintain by adhering to the faith, so the fact that he did not abandon it speaks to a personal conviction that sustained his faith, even as incentives for religiosity or dogmatism had faded. Some of the last words he penned before dying were a letter to a pastor friend: ‘I die a Christian philosopher, convinced of and filled with God’s goodness and mercy.’ \(^\text{42}\) Labrousse notes that these words mirrored those of the Muslim philosopher, Averroes, but adds that however “laconic” Bayle’s profession may be, it remained a “profession of religious faith,”\(^\text{43}\) an unprompted testament to a deeply personal association with the foundational tenet of Christianity.

Bayle wanted to retain his faith, even though, from observation and an interest in rational thinking, he could not approach this personal and private element of his worldview in the rational manner which was his preference in most affairs. That two seemingly divergent camps, orthodox Protestants and unorthodox philosophers of the Enlightenment, claim that Bayle was an atheist, speaks to the changing dominant worldview among European intellectuals: the individual had gained centrality. However, this was also the impetus for the Protestant Reformation: the individual can approach God, without a human mediator, and can be approached by God, through revelation. Bayle reflects this idea in advocating toleration; however his ideas about ethics were also an outgrowth of his faith.

Bayle worked within the Protestant framework. He wanted religion, based on revelation, to endure, while at the same time criticizing Christians. His criticisms proceeded from his faith that Christianity could only be successful if ultimate authority—consider his

\(^{42}\) Labrousse, 47.
\(^{43}\) Ibid.
defense of toleration—and adulation—consider his censuring of idolatry—belong to God. This inspired views that would be taken as radical in future years.

Considering his advocacy of reasoned religion, and the rational restriction of overzealous religious adherents, and his simultaneous interest in seeing that the Christian faith be strengthened, even through the use of skepticism, should we see his greatest contribution to be his view of reason or his view of religion?

Bayle positioned himself as a skeptic, someone who allowed his readers to reach answers after he had asked many questions. It is appropriate that this greatest of dialecticians should provoke questions, even centuries later. Perhaps, this is his greatest legacy. However, one should not discount the importance of considering the relevancy of one aspect of his life i.e. faith, to his person and thinking. Whereas his work gave force to the paradigm-shifting intellectual movement leading into the eighteenth century, he was fundamentally a product of his time—albeit a free-thinking agent—and, perhaps, this should be more often acknowledged.

It was in negotiating the terms of religion that he reached faith (with the help of divine revelation), and this impulse to approach truth on an individual basis did have some origin in Bayle’s religious heritage, the Protestant Reformation. Furthermore, in trying to renegotiate the strictures that the Christian religion had placed on the mind and will of those, both within and outside of its flock, he was not trying to weaken the religion, but, rather, make it a creed that

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44 Labrousse (90) writes, “The history of ideas shows that, once removed from its original socio-historical context, and read as the vehicle of a universal message, a work exerts its greatest influence not through the mechanical repetition or the exact reflection of its ideas, but through the ambiguities, misconceptions, and anachronisms which find their way into its interpretation. The posthumous influence of Bayle’s ideas provides a particularly striking example of the workings of this law.”
would draw people into the truth he had discovered through faith, by means of an unconstrained conscience, rather than force them into insincere obedience.