

ESSAYS ON PIERRE BAYLE  
AND RELIGIOUS CONTROVERSY

WALTER REX

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MARTINUS NIJHOFF / THE HAGUE / 1965

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ISBN-13: 978-94-010-3563-7

e-ISBN-13: 978-94-010-3561-3

DOI: 10.1007/978-94-010-3561-3

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study was made possible by fellowships from Harvard University, the French Government and the University of California at Berkeley. I wish to thank M. Gagnebin of the Bibliothèque publique et universitaire at Geneva and also the Library of Columbia University (N.Y.) for permission to quote from documents in their collections. A number of scholars have given me assistance: M. Alain Dufour helped me find my way through the manuscripts at Geneva; Mr. Roger Thomas, Librarian of Dr. Williams Library in London, was able to locate several rare pamphlets; Professor Valdo Viglielmo of Princeton aided with his astonishing knowledge of the Scripture; M. le pasteur de Félice of the Bibliothèque de la Société de l'histoire du protestantisme français discussed a number of theological problems with me and did everything possible to facilitate the use of his library; Professors René Pintard and Marcel Raymond offered much-needed encouragement in the early stages of my research; Professors Judd Hubert and Aram Vartanian made useful criticisms on the first draft of the manuscript; Professor Renée Watkins of Smith College helped with revisions; Mme Elisabeth Labrousse and Professors Paul Dibon, Richard N. Popkin and Robert Niklaus saved me from numerous pitfalls at the end. My deepest debt of gratitude is due to Professor Herbert Dieckmann of Harvard, whose insight is largely responsible for whatever good parts there may be in this study, and whose patience has survived the bad.

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## INTRODUCTION

The solitary and erudite figure of Pierre Bayle occupies a position of particular interest in French letters; we are pleased to recognize in his thought the germ of the ideas which reached their fulfillment in the eighteenth century.

His own age does not seem to have been quite ready to receive him. Forced into exile by the Catholics, he was censured and harassed by the Protestants in Holland. It is to be expected that his outspoken enemies would have declared him a danger to religion and morality; yet to his more moderate contemporaries, too, he was sometimes a "problem," and one senses an occasional reserve toward him even in his remaining friends. As for the general public, the *Nouvelles de la République des lettres* may indeed have received the "universal applause" Des Maizeaux said it had, yet there was voluminous criticism also. His marvelous Dictionary, which probably achieved the widest circulation of any of his works during his lifetime, also elicited the most attack, censure and discontent. Moreover, though Bayle had earned fame, he did not have in the eyes of his contemporaries – particularly of those in France – the importance which he has for us today. Other figures seemed still grander than he in the closing decades of the seventeenth century: in philosophy and metaphysics, the enormous system of Malebranche, the last significant attempt in France to establish a synthesis of Christianity and reason, attracted far more admiration, or criticism, than Bayle. In history, polemics and eloquence, he hardly seemed a match for Bossuet; and there was *le grand* Arnauld, whose struggle with the Sorbonne, the King, the Pope and the Jesuits, reflecting a religious crisis which affected the foundations of French Catholicism, seemed to outscale by far the endeavors of the modest – and candidly admiring – philosopher of Rotterdam.

It was not until after his death, when the dominant concerns of the

age ceased to be contained within the confines of Christianity, and when libertinage came more boldly into the daylight, that Bayle became, in retrospect, a hero in his own right, finding a generation that would give him the attention and acclaim he deserved. Bayle and the Enlightenment emerged together in the eighteenth century, quite literally. For the period of the *Lettres persanes* and the *Grandeur et Décadence des Romains*, of the *Henriade* and the *Lettres philosophiques* also saw new editions of the Dictionary, the publication of Bayle's Correspondence, and the printing of the *Oeuvres diverses*—in addition to the treatises in the "Bayle tradition" which circulated secretly in manuscript. The association of Bayle and the Enlightenment proved enduring: his Dictionary found its way into more private libraries than any other single work in the century; it was one of the most significant influences upon the *Encyclopédie*, although the fact could seldom be acknowledged. Bayle had inspired the young Montesquieu<sup>1</sup>; Diderot studied and admired him; d'Holbach carried on the "Bayle tradition" in his writings on religion; Voltaire began to read him very early in his career, and the influence continued throughout his life.<sup>2</sup> And in a sense Bayle's special importance to us lies in his absorption by the *philosophes* into their program of reform. If Bayle is still read today it is above all because we realize that his critical spirit actually became part of the spirit of Enlightenment; that it was his eloquent denunciation of war which carries through into the next century, his arguments against the authority of the Church which seem to prepare the way for later arguments against both Church and king, that it was in part thanks to his writings that religious tolerance began to be achieved in France.

And yet, despite such forceful testimonies to the importance of Bayle in the eighteenth century, it must also be said that the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment did not know him nearly so well as they believed. Indeed in certain respects they were quite mistaken about him.<sup>3</sup>

The "fault" is largely Bayle's; his thought invited misinterpretation. The abundance of paradoxes tantalizingly developed by Bayle himself and which might so easily be removed from context; his famous "method," pitting historical fact or logical objection against established

<sup>1</sup> R. Shackleton, "Bayle and Montesquieu" in Paul Dibon [ed.], *Pierre Bayle, le philosophe de Rotterdam* (Amsterdam and Paris, 1959), pp. 142-148.

<sup>2</sup> H. T. Mason, *Pierre Bayle and Voltaire* (Oxford, 1963).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. W. H. Barber, "Bayle: Faith and Reason" in Will Moore, Rhoda Sutherland and Enid Starkie [editors], *The French Mind: Studies in Honour of Gustav Rudler* (Oxford, 1952), pp. 109-125; and Paul Dibon, "Redécouverte de Bayle" in *idem, op. cit.*, pp. vii-xvii.



“truth” and letting the ensuing process of corrosion run its course; his predilection for dangerous subjects: ridicule of religious superstition, “scientific” explanations of supernatural phenomena, hostile historical disquisitions on the evil role of Christianity, on the “superiorities” of the Mohammedans or pagans; victories in dialogue by the impregnable sceptics over the illogical orthodox dogmatists; his fondness for the virtuous atheists who, by their mere existence in the Dictionary, suggest a privileged solution to the problem of religion – all these things seemed to be waiting for a generation whose intent was to undermine the authority of Christianity.

When the *philosophes* plundered the Dictionary they were free to see in Bayle what they wished and to ignore what was not useful to them. They could overlook Bayle’s attitude toward dreams, magic and sorcery, when he afforded elsewhere such enlightened arguments against superstition; his crisis in pessimism manifested in the articles on evil became relevant to a crisis in optimism after the advent of the influence of the English deists and of Leibniz; they did not have to stop to consider the specific theological traditions and the political considerations which had brought forth the articles on David or Pyrrho, since these texts afforded a convenient springboard from which to attack the Bible in general and Christianity in particular; Bayle’s conservative royalism was thought unimportant, when he asserted so vehemently the prerogatives of the individual conscience. His imagined objections were presumed to be dogma, the static quality of his irony was made transitive, his cautiously tentative exploration of subject matter was given a priori direction, the development of his thought during his lifetime was flattened into a system. In short, the eighteenth century transferred Bayle into their own context – where, to be sure, he seemed to flourish magnificently; only recently have scholars begun to see that Bayle in an important sense belongs elsewhere.

If one rereads Bayle, restoring to him even some of the elements the *philosophes* had to overlook in order to claim him as their own, one finds that his program of reform (if it may be called that) bore little resemblance to that of the *philosophes*, because his aims and assumptions had little in common with theirs. One discovers, logically enough, that Bayle is indeed a seventeenth-century author, and that his thought is defined directly in relation to the intellectual developments of his century and the concerns of his age. His works were not the ready-made “arsenal” the eighteenth century thought they were; they were

a battlefield, embracing in the enormous scope of their erudition the conflicts of an epoch. And Bayle does not belong to the upsurging movement of reform; rather he comes just after another previous peak of intellectual achievement – on the way downwards. He might have enjoyed being the phlegmatic sceptic or the calculating positivist depicted by certain scholars, but he was too involved: he asked more questions than he could answer, could only partially control his dialectic, sometimes knew more than he could cope with, and was far too busy following tempting paradoxes, pulling to pieces the things he believed in, losing his way as he struggled to find incontrovertible proofs to important truths; his reflexes, or starting points, were too traditional – to be much of a success at the role. He himself confessed to intellectual myopia, and the diagnosis is pertinent to his own peculiar mode of thinking in which the two-dimensional machinery of logic seems to determine direction but not outcome, and we are occasionally given that unique experience of watching the frontiers of a thought as it enters the unknown.

In the eighteenth-century image of Bayle it has sometimes been assumed that the traditions dominant in him are sceptical or libertine. He has been thought of as a link in the chain running from the “free thought” of the Renaissance, and from the libertine undercurrents of the seventeenth century, on to the age of Enlightenment. It is pointed out that early in life Bayle was reading, and quoting, authors whose reputation he himself considered questionable – Montaigne, Charron, Naudé, La Mothe le Vayer – and that the Dictionary not only afforded innumerable lessons in scepticism in the author’s famous method, but also transmitted to the succeeding era a mine of information concerning the sceptics, atheists and free-thinkers of the past. There is much that is valuable in the theory; however, at least insofar as it is applied to the early work of Bayle, it is strongly in need of qualification, for, as will be shown, the traditions dominant in the main works prior to 1687 are neither sceptical nor atheist nor libertine: they are Calvinist.

Calvinism in the later seventeenth century was no longer the doctrine of Calvin himself; it was rather the orthodox doctrine, stemming from Calvin but differing more and more from him in emphasis and perspective, as it was reformulated and developed to meet the exigencies of the period between the Synod of Dordrecht and the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes (1618–1685). The period has been somewhat neglected by historians of Calvinism, for the understandable reason

that it produced no great thinkers and no great writers. French Protestantism in this century has seemed a relatively unimportant minority phenomenon, more and more ignored and finally obliterated by the Revocation. Yet it is also true that this unheeded minority was attempting – albeit unsuccessfully – to exist in the same intellectual, social and political order as Catholicism, and that it sometimes followed patterns quite similar to those of its Catholic antagonists. It faced many of the same problems, underwent a number of the same influences, and finally headed toward much the same kind of crisis. It is this orthodox Calvinism, unstified by the past, continually seeking to remain alive to the conflicts of its time, that dominates the early work of Pierre Bayle. It made a dramatic re-entry into the mainstream of French thought through him; and, partly because of the path followed by Calvinism during the course of the century, Bayle not only reflects a minority problem, he speaks for an age.

In the period preceding the Revocation, the confusing mass of controversies between the Catholics and Calvinists had come into focus around two issues: the question of the authority of the Church, and the question of the Eucharist. These two issues involved virtually all the essentials of the dispute between the two sects: the problem of the Church included, for example, not only such obvious issues as the authority of the Pope, the role of the priest and the temporal prerogatives of the representatives of Christianity, it concerned the most basic question of all: that of the nature of truth and the method by which one seeks it. The Eucharist takes one through questions of ritual back to the fundamental problem of biblical exegesis, of the criteria by which to interpret God's Word. It is with these two problems (Church and Eucharist) that one finds Bayle deeply involved in virtually the earliest documents we possess concerning his religious thought. Having been reared a Protestant, and having watched the growing impetus of Louis XIV's "grand design" against the Reformed Religion, Bayle, in 1669, underwent a crisis of doubt concerning the Calvinist doctrine of the Church and was converted to the Catholic faith. The following year doubts concerning the Catholic interpretation of the Eucharist were of major importance in forcing him to change sides once again, bringing him back to Protestantism, at the age of twenty-three. These two theological issues must have been of singular importance to the grave and conscientious Bayle to make him abandon the religion of his family at such a moment, despite the dangers to himself and to his family, and then to retrace his steps.

What is more astonishing is that these same issues were to retain their crucial significance for Bayle for so long a time after his brief sojourn with the Catholics: more than a decade later, in his first major work in French, the *Pensées diverses sur la comète*, Bayle took his stand on the question of the Church and refuted, point by point, the arguments which had formerly caused him to adopt the Catholic faith; after sixteen years, it was still the Eucharistic question as debated by Calvinist theologians which determined the structure and content of Bayle's *Commentaire philosophique* (1686).

Of special importance for Bayle in the question of the Church were the Calvinist arguments refuting the Catholic claim of infallibility, most particularly the arguments against "Antiquity" as a mark of the one true Church. The Calvinist arguments on the matter had all originated in the sixteenth century and did not change very much in Bayle's lifetime: all agreed upon what they were and upon the clear and evident formulæ by which they should be expressed. In France only one seventeenth-century theologian, to my knowledge, took the trouble to think the entire matter through again, spelling out the theoretical implications clearly enough to be understood by a reader unfamiliar with basic theology. In the following pages this version of the theological "commonplace" of Antiquity will be studied as a preparation for an analysis of Bayle's *Pensées diverses*.

The Eucharist, a delicate and complicated problem, was more subject to outside influence and change during this period; and it is in the Eucharistic controversies that one sees Calvinism evolving with the age, gradually growing away from the spirit (if not the letter) of the doctrine of Calvin, and indeed managing to effect, within the framework of "orthodoxy," a kind of revolution. The second part of this volume will trace the progress of certain of these controversies; for, what emerges from them toward the end of the century is Bayle's theory of religious tolerance.

Both the *Pensées diverses* and the *Commentaire philosophique* were known to the eighteenth-century *philosophes*, but of course neither of these works enjoyed the reputation of the *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, the most influential work ever to come from the Refuge in Holland. And among the numerous articles in its five folio volumes, few attained the celebrity of Bayle's denunciation of the crimes of "David," the Old Testament king-prophet, in the article of that name (1695). Applauded, imitated and embellished by the anti-Christians in France, attacked and re-

futed by true believers in Germany, England, France and Geneva, to everyone, pious and impious alike, it seemed clear that Bayle's portrayal of David's misdeeds was a daring attempt to destroy the reputation of the ancestor of Christ and to undermine the authority of the Scripture.

Yet here again it seems that the eighteenth century was mistaken in its judgment of Bayle's motives. For although "David" is indeed a "controversial" article, with far-reaching theological implications for Christians, the stand Bayle took in his article and the criticisms he made were related to the immediate conflicts of his own time, grave problems reflecting the extraordinary pressures which political events had brought to bear upon the Huguenots in exile in the decade following the Revocation. Bayle wrote "David" in the midst of a war against his homeland and under the threat of changes which seemed destined to affect virtually every aspect of the society around him. And in sum, if the tone of his article seems bitterly ironic and if he strikes his blows with cruel and deadly aim, it is because Bayle felt so keenly the issues in which he found himself engaged. The third part of this volume will study them.