

NRC HANDELSBLAD

De gehele tekst van de Pierre Bayle Lezing van Jonathan Israel

Suddenly, the Netherlands is in uproar - culturally, politically, socially and in every respect. Since the killing of Theo van Gogh, one finds deep shock and abundant signs of distress on all sides. The feeling in the Netherlands at the moment is seemingly one of a deep cultural crisis revolving around the question of toleration which until recently was a basic, unquestioned, taken for granted, pillar of the Dutch sense of identity. People talk obsessively about the latest demographic projections wondering what will happen in their main cities in another ten or fifteen years if the no solution to the looming clash of values is found. Even before Van Gogh's murder, foreign television programmes such as one screened in England last summer were asking whether in the last year or two the Dutch had transformed themselves into quite another people from that which Europeans had long been accustomed to, changed their spots so to say, and all at once become inhospitable and mean-minded towards newcomers and non-whites, hostile to immigration, deeply anxious and - it has begun to be said - actually intolerant. Practically everyone in the Netherlands is now discussing whether the long-established, familiar Dutch tolerance of the post-World War II era was in reality naïve, unthinking, complacent and blind to the social problems which it is now seen to have created.

This imparts to the philosophy of Pierre Bayle, and of the Radical Enlightenment more generally, I believe, a very special relevance, centrality and topicality in Holland today, although the intelligent lay reader could easily be forgiven for assuming quite the contrary since none of our journalists, commentators and pundits, amid all the debate, have said anything at all about him. Indeed, it seems to me as a long-standing friend and admirer of the Netherlands but also someone who feels that in the present context there is justification for reacting to the present Dutch cultural crisis not just in a firmly critical but even in a rather unsympathetic way, that the universal ignoring of Bayle in Dutch society is almost as pregnant with symbolism and relevance to the present crisis of identity as Bayle's philosophy itself. For the glaring modern Dutch failure to make anything of Bayle - one of the three greatest philosophers along with Spinoza and Descartes to have worked predominantly in the Netherlands - in their general culture, education and public awareness can be taken as a classic symptom of the malaise besetting contemporary Dutch society, that is of the wider ignorance and failure to appreciate the real nature of the ideas of toleration, personal freedom, equality and freedom of expression which Spinoza and Bayle not only pioneered in the late seventeenth century but worked at over many years and developed into a highly sophisticated social and cultural doctrine.

Dutch Golden Age culture looked at from a broad international perspective is certainly the most important contribution of the Netherlands to the development of the modern West. Yet when one considers the systematic and still fashionable down-playing of the Dutch Golden Age - and especially the ideas and debates of the Golden Age - in Dutch education, journalism and general culture since the 1960s it is obvious that most Dutchmen simply assumed that the best Dutch attitudes, and above all toleration, personal liberty and freedom of expression, are straightforward simple matters that come almost automatically to anyone who grows up in Dutch society, that they are things that don't need to be explained historically, understood in their cultural context or explicated and justified philosophically. Supposedly, they can just be taken for granted. This ignorance and failure, I might add, has been strongly reinforced in recent years by the government-driven attack on the humanities in the high schools and universities and the Thatcherite obsession so pervasive in western Europe today with favouring so-called 'practical' vocational studies, especially business, law and technological subjects while cutting back everything that contributes to cultural, civic and historical understanding.

Here, I insist, is the true naivety, the real complacency, the superficiality and ignorance which have caused so much harm. History and the humanities receive less and less attention, a form of cultural suicide in my view which leaves education ministers, and government figures in general, absolutely no right whatever to complain about the upsurge of a new barbarism, philistinism and fanaticism. I personally have met a great many intelligent Dutch teenagers who have never heard of Spinoza or Bayle, who have not been taught anything really about the Dutch Golden Age at school or at home and have no idea why Holland used to be regarded internationally as a specially precocious and enlightened case in the development of the modern concepts of equality sexual and racial and freedom of

expression. If Spinoza is downplayed, Bayle is almost completely ignored. Now the Dutch face a cultural crisis and a crisis of identity. But rather than blaming others, or showing resentment towards outsiders, I think that there is an excellent case for insisting that the Dutch have absolutely nobody to blame but themselves. For it seems that the office-holders, mayors and the general public have not understood, or bothered to cultivate, their own tradition of toleration, and especially not its philosophical grounding and this, I believe, is precisely what has caused and is causing the really major damage.

Bayle next to Spinoza developed the most comprehensive and sophisticated theory of toleration and individual liberty of the Golden Age and one that extended considerably beyond any other European toleration theory of the age including that of John Locke, the best-known English toleration theorist. Bayle's toleration theory is not only very different from Locke's, and much wider, but also, and this arguably is the most crucial point, is an entirely secular conception of toleration and individual freedom whereas Locke's, by contrast, is justified basically on theological and Christian grounds. But what, the reader may well ask, is so relevant about Bayle's conception of toleration and individual liberty for us to day? The answer is not just that it was comprehensive and secular but still more that it contended that toleration and individual freedom are extremely fragile, vulnerable and difficult things that are heavily dependent on an intellectual grasp of the interrelationship between personal freedom, equality and liberty of expression, on the one hand, and of religion, politics and toleration, on the other. Bayle like Spinoza, thought that most people will always believe in theological doctrines based on revelation and miracles rather than rational criteria and venerate their theologians whom they consider to be closer to God rather than those who hold the highest offices of the state. Consequently, it is generally those who interpret theological doctrines according to accepted traditions who exert the greatest authority over the people.

Both thinkers regarded this simple social and cultural fact as extremely dangerous - indeed by far the greatest danger to toleration, individual liberty and freedom of expression. Theological power they deemed a constant and overwhelming threat to anyone who chooses to think independently and critically and dares to disagree with whichever theologians are followed by the largest and strongest segments of a given society so much so that Bayle considered it a more or less complete waste of time to discuss toleration, personal freedom or freedom of expression, as well as politics more generally, unless the main focus of discussion is on how to restrain the power of theology and the power of theologians to coerce the individual, overthrow governments, destroy critics who challenge theological positions. In other words, he conceived that the main threat to an orderly society based on the rational principles of Enlightenment to be the fundamental division and strife caused by theological rivalries and authority.

The central aim of Bayle's toleration theory as of much of the rest of his philosophy is to detach morality and freedom of thought from faith as much as possible which leads him to approach the whole question of toleration very differently from such famous contemporaries as Locke, Jean le Clerc or Jean Barbeyrac. Since his aim is to ground our moral system exclusively on 'la lumière naturelle', natural reason or 'philosophy' entirely detached from theology, he unhesitatingly proclaims a freedom of conscience and conversation which far transcended what the moderate mainstream Enlightenment of late seventeenth and eighteenth century considered permissible. Indeed, it is possible to say that while Bayle angrily repudiated Isaac Jaquelot's charge that his philosophy, having divorced faith from reason actually, if not explicitly, subordinates faith to reason, the content of Bayle's social, political and toleration theories and especially his views on justice and morality, in fact amply substantiate Jaquelot's characterization of his thought.

Consequently, in Bayle's toleration theory there is no privileging of particular forms of belief over other sorts of opinion and, in contrast to Locke, the Christian is by no means assumed to possess some higher or prior moral superiority to non-Christians - a central principle of the Radical Enlightenment. In the *Supplément* to his main treatise on toleration, published in the year of the Glorious Revolution, 1688, Bayle went so far as to argue that if, as some commentators still maintained in his time, the Christian faith is justified in its ancient, medieval and early modern tradition of advocating the use of coercive force to compel non-Christians to submit to the Church, then the Graeco-Roman pagan authorities before Constantine were surely even more justified in persecuting the Christians, since Christian doctrine down to Constantine not only disrupted the public cults upheld by the state, publicly defying the laws of the time, but by authorising coercion in matters of faith also publicly rejected and abjured 'la religion naturelle, les lois de l'humanité, de la raison, et de l'équité'.

Realization of the implications of a toleration theory like Bayle's, based solely on philosophical reason and notions of 'equity', and allowing no a priori validity to theological doctrines, had by the early 1690s already provoked something of an outraged reaction. Before his dismissal from his professorship in, in 1693, the Rotterdam Gereformeerde kerkeraad drew up a detailed list of objections to his views based on his anonymously published *Pensées diverses* of 1683, which, by that date, Bayle openly acknowledged as his. Fifteen 'extravagant propositions' were pin-pointed, and formally condemned by the Rotterdam kerkeraad at its gathering of 28 January 1693, all of which reflect Bayle's adamant refusal to assign any innate moral superiority to Christian (or any other) theological positions and insistence on basing social justice purely and absolutely on 'philosophical' reason alone.

Especially condemned by the Rotterdam Dutch Reformed consistory, in its report to the city government, in March 1693, was Bayle's thesis that nothing was ever less of an inconvenience to society than 'atheism' which is why God enacted no miracles to curb it. Nearly as outrageous to mainstream opinion at the time, were his maxims that atheism is not a greater evil than idolatry; that everything in Nature being uncertain 'it is best to keep to the faith of one's parents and profess the religion we learn from them'; and that, as the original French puts it, 'l'athéisme ne conduit pas nécessairement à la corruption des mœurs'. Also totally unacceptable was Bayle's notorious proposition that - as the Rotterdam assembly expressed his view - in Dutch 'een societijt van atheïsten ook wel gereguleert kan zyn' and that the ancient Jewish Sadducees, though denying immortality of the soul, were morally worthier than the Pharisees, ideas which again all imply that those doctrines which are most widely believed in in society are not only not necessarily the basis of a well-ordered society but are positively apt not to be.

The public disputes surrounding Bayle from the early 1690s down to the years shortly after his death need to be examined by intellectual and cultural historians rather more than they have thus far. For this complex controversy clearly reveals that the modern historiography has often tended to misconstrue -especially perhaps by failing to pay enough attention to his post-Dictionnaire writings - what Bayle is actually saying and how his immediate contemporaries understood his words. In particular, there has not until recently been enough emphasis placed on the anti-theological implications of his arguments. It was with good reason that soon after his death, in 1706, Bayle's intellectual legacy was again formally condemned by the Dutch Reformed Church at the gathering of the South Holland Synod, meeting at Leerdam, in July 1707. Delegates from the Rotterdam classis declared that Bayle's books 'behelsen vele schadelycke stellingen tegen God's Woord en de gantsche Christelycke Godsdienst strydende' urging the Synod to press for his books to be banned outright by the States of Holland. This was a collective judgment made by both Dutch and (in the background) Huguenot preachers and laymen residing in Bayle's immediate urban milieu and was certainly much closer to the mark in pin-pointing Bayle's true intentions than some modern scholars' - I have in mind here especially Elizabeth Labrousse's, Walter Rex's and Richard Popkin's - in many ways rather eccentric and in any case highly implausible claim that Bayle was genuinely the sincere Calvinist as he professed to be.

Assuredly, matters never went to the point that the States banned Bayle's books. But from their point of view, they were entirely correct in wanting to do so. Indeed, immediately before and after his death, practically all Dutch and Dutch Huguenot commentators, whether judging his ideas from liberal Cocceian and Arminian, or more orthodox Calvinist, viewpoints, condemned it as fomenting the spread of 'atheism' and altogether subversive of Christian positions. Nor by any means was this the opinion only of Protestants. Le Clerc rightly noted that the French Jesuits, despite their fierce hostility to himself and such Protestant colleagues as Jaquelot, nevertheless wholly agreed with their reading of Bayle's *Réponse aux questions d'un provincial*, as essentially anti-Christian and a justification of philosophical 'atheism'. Paolo Mattia Doria, in the 1740s, may have been a little extreme in styling Bayle even more 'atheistic' than Spinoza; but his reasoning, namely that in his writings, Bayle purposely eliminates all distinction between 'religione e superstizione' was absolutely correct. In short, in dramatic contrast to much modern scholarship, most scholars between Bayle's death, in 1707 and the 1750s unhesitatingly linked Bayle with Spinoza and radical thought against Locke, Le Clerc and Voltaire and rightly so.

Historical context, it should be noted, was fundamental to Bayle's toleration argument. For his strongest card was precisely the unresolved confessional deadlock prevailing in Europe since the Reformation. 'Bayle's reciprocity argument for religious toleration', as one scholar aptly expressed it, 'turns on the frightful results of the Wars of Religion'. By demonstrating that religious persecution and attempts to impose religious uniformity by force wreak terrible havoc to life and property, he persuades the reader that the religious intolerance which justified the Wars of Religion is morally

wrong and can not therefore be advocated by God, Christ or, justifiably, by any Christian ruler or church. The words of the Apostle Luke (XIV, 23) "contrains-les d'entrer" [compel them to enter], as Bayle renders them in his *Commentaire philosophique*, of 1686, could be piously proclaimed by any of the rival churches so that were Christ's admonition here to be understood literally, he observes, all Christian sects would be absolutely justified - and all equally so - in attacking and endeavouring to slaughter and exterminate the rest, resulting in a vast and manifestly irrational state of violence, devastation, misery and hatred.

Bayle's toleration theory, in other words, rests squarely on the pseudo-fideist argument that there is no way rationally to ascertain which is the true faith - or whether there is a true faith. All believers by definition are convinced that they uphold the true faith, and that faith is our chief guide in the world; but as there is no way of rationally demonstrating that one's faith is the truth to somebody who believes otherwise, everybody's faith is for the interim, even if not ultimately, equally valid or invalid and hence simultaneously someone else's 'superstition'. This argument provides the basis of Bayle's famous doctrine of the 'conscience errante'. Since one can not know or prove, through reason, the truth or falsity of a particular religion, or the legitimacy or illegitimacy of any given sect, there is no rational means of showing someone who believes in false or even wholly ridiculous doctrines that everybody else rejects that their beliefs are mistaken. Were one to take his 'fideism' seriously it would reduce his system to glaring and fundamental inconsistency: for it would mean, as the early eighteenth-century Neapolitan philosopher Paolo Mattia Doria (1662-1746) points out, that what is most important in human life is always wholly indistinguishable from 'superstition' something which Bayle unhesitatingly condemns as absolutely the worst and most pernicious of all plagues, a position which is manifestly absurd.

Consequently, the only reasonable course is to grant the same freedom of conscience, and religious practice, to dissenting minorities, including those whom virtually everyone thinks utterly mistaken in their beliefs, as one accords to believers in what one considers the true faith. Thus, it is not from contemplating religion but rather examining history and moral philosophy, according to Bayle, that we learn that reason can never justify persecution and that intolerance, to cite the heading of the second chapter of the *Commentaire philosophique*, is always and unalterably 'contraire aux plus distinctes idées de la lumière naturelle'. Indeed, in Bayle, it is never theological doctrine, love or forbearance which blocks persecution but solely and exclusively the intrinsic injustice, rationally demonstrated, of oppressing the innocent. In contrast to Locke's theological toleration, toleration in Bayle rests exclusively on the principles of equity and secular ie. non-theologically explicated or rooted morality which, however, can at any moment all too easily be obscured or negated by theological doctrines.

A key component of Bayle's toleration is his argument that while it can not have been Christ's intention that the Church should persecute, all major churches without exception have in practice systematically persecuted those who oppose them, indeed been traditionally and explicitly intolerant. Remarkably boldly given he was writing in the United Provinces, he explains in the *Supplément* that his thesis that the spirit of persecution has generally speaking prevailed more among the main established churches 'depuis Constantin, que parmi les hérétiques' applies not only to the Greek, Catholic, Lutheran and Anglican establishments but also the Reformed Church. It is, contends Bayle, an outrageous thing that, in sixteenth-century Geneva, those who sought to reform the Church after its 'perversion' by the papacy had, instead of upholding freedom of conscience or what Bayle calls 'les immunités sacrées et inviolables de la conscience', adhered instead to 'le dogme de la contrainte'; and that in the birth-place of the Reformed Church, the Calvinists went so far, in 1535, as officially to suppress the Catholic faith, expelling from the city everyone who refused to convert. Only the Socinians and Arminians, held Bayle, are truly free of intolerance; but these are both tiny, fringe churches. Hence, he concludes, the doctrine of tolerance is only recognized and upheld, as he puts it in, 'quelques petits recoins du Christianisme qui ne font aucune figure', while the tradition and doctrine of intolerance 'va partout la tête levée'. While Bayle attacks the Socinians for being theologically more muddled and inconsistent than the other churches, as is well known, at the same time, rather typically, he maintains that rationally and morally the Socinians were nevertheless more upright and just than the rest. In Bayle, moral status never has anything to do with faith or belief.

Central to Bayle's system of political and moral thought is his implication that established churches possess no more, and in important respects actually have less, claim to validity than tolerated fringe churches. For Bayle's toleration, unlike Locke's, has nothing to do with exemption from church structures which otherwise retain their standing, prestige and authority intact and was in reality less a theory of toleration - given that he recognised no established or public church in his schema - than a universal freedom of conscience entailing mutual Christian, Muslim and Jewish forbearance, Catholic

acceptance of Protestants, and vice versa, and all major churches being compelled by the secular authorities whether they liked it or not to acknowledge as equals the lesser dissenting churches. Nor was it only Socinians, Jews and Muslims who could, within Bayle's framework, claim rights of conscience and thereby benefit from his freedom of conscience but equally indifférents, Saint-Evremondistes and Deist freethinkers and, in principle, 'atheists' despite Bayle's *de rigueur* but (seemingly) deliberately feeble disavowal. In the circumstances of his time, he had to deny that his theory was a charter for 'atheists', as his opponents claimed it was, but he does so only perfunctorily, remarking that if the secular authorities deem 'atheism' incompatible with their laws they can always ban it. But this feeble proviso did not change the fact that in principle Bayle's theory provides no justification under which atheists, agnostics, Spinozists, Confucianists or anyone else scorned by the main theological blocs could be denied toleration or outlawed.

A key feature of Bayle's philosophy and of his running dispute in his last years with such theologians as Jean le Clerc, Isaac Jaquelot and Jacques Bernard, was his thesis that all consensus gentium and consensus omnium arguments are totally fallacious and void. In other words, simply because most people believe a particular notion to be true, or even when everyone in a room, country, or even most of the world, believe something is true, this is not an argument for its really being true. On the contrary, human ignorance and superficiality being what they are, Bayle insists, in his *Pensées Diverses*, the fact most people believe something is usually much more likely to be an indication that that particular belief is utterly groundless, has no basis in reality and is rooted in what from a rational point of view are completely ridiculous notions, superstitious fears and absurd wonders and miracles. However, it is precisely these notions, beliefs and doctrines as expounded by theologians, and proclaimed from the pulpit, which the majority of people believe to be true and it is this which makes theology and theologians the greatest, most constant and most deadly threat not only to independent critical thinking, personal liberty, toleration, and freedom of expression but also to the unity and stability of society itself. For it is the people, and consequently the theologians, who alone have the power not just to censure, suppress and eliminate dissenters who openly reject theological doctrines but to persecute and destroy whole dissenting minorities.

The basic lesson of Bayle's philosophy for today, then, is that there is no such thing as a toleration theory which does not focus its attention principally on how theological power, and the beliefs of the multitude are going to be restrained from persecuting and eliminating dissenters and minorities and using theology to inject tension and strife into society. For him, as for us today, that is the central issue. But it is an issue which scarcely anyone in western Europe in a position of political, religious or intellectual prominence really wants to debate. A perfect illustration of this is the new anti-Semitism which has swept across France, Belgium, the Netherlands and to a lesser extent Germany and Britain, since the end of the 1990s and especially since the Fundamentalist attack on the World Trade Center in New York. In France, as in the Netherlands, it was for some time the practice of government, teachers and the police actually to deny that there was any increase in violence and acts of prejudice against Jews, though the reported evidence clearly shows that attacks on synagogues, Jewish cemeteries and on Jews wearing the kipa in the streets, or otherwise recognizable as Jews, have everywhere greatly increased - in France by fourteen times between 1999 and 2004. The French rabbis have been forced to advise their congregants not to wear the kipa in the streets and in much of France it has now become impossible to teach the Holocaust in schools because the students won't stand for it and teachers who try to do so are severely harassed.

Similarly, in Sweden there has been a distinct tendency in the press over the last five years to ignore or trivialize the new general upsurge in western Europe of anti-Semitism. The French, Swedish and the Dutch press all appeared to think they are demonstrating their discretion and good sense by saying as little as possible about this issue while at the same time often encouraging readers to think that the Jewish lobby in the United States and elsewhere do in fact exert an unhealthy influence over the making of American policy, a favourite theme of much of the new anti-Semitic discourse. To the question 'Do the Jews have too much power in France?', it is remarkable that where in 1990 20% of those polled replied affirmatively, in the year 2,000 the same question elicited a 34% affirmative response.

Many people here as elsewhere of course do express feelings of anxiety and regret about the new upsurge of anti-Semitism. But in many cases, they just shrug their shoulders, blaming the phenomenon itself on the actions of the Israeli government and the acts of harassment and violence in Amsterdam on the 'Moroccans' or, in France, North Africans more generally. But from Bayle's point of view and, I think, from what should be ours, blaming the problem on an external circumstance or a particular group is a hypercritical, reprehensible and even rather absurd procedure. What one religious group

thinks about another is actually completely irrelevant. For according to Bayle, the religious beliefs and prejudices of most people always intolerantly reject and condemn those who oppose their theological doctrines, just as orthodox Jews often scorn secular Jews in Israel today, and many believing Christians think non-Christians are damned. To complain that a particular religious stream in our society is biased or intolerant, and conditions its followers to view in a negative light all those who reject their beliefs, and actively combat another group, therefore makes little sense and provides no means of tackling the problem. The role of law, government, media and policing in a society based on the modern western 'enlightened' principles of equality, personal freedom and toleration is precisely to make sure that no theological block of any description should be allowed to translate its biases and prejudices into active harassment, discrimination and violence. Hence from Bayle's point of view, the recent intervention of Evangelical leaders, Catholic bishops and orthodox Jewish leaders in the recent presidential election in the US is a fatal tendency which is bound to undermine democracy itself. Indeed, Bayle asserts that the democratic republic as a system will often prove unworkable because of its proneness to be destabilized and ultimately overthrown by religious leaders. Barring theological concerns and prejudices as far as possible from the public sphere, and education, is thus only way to create political and social stability so that in principle, contrary to what many Dutchman are saying at the moment, Islam as such has only a circumstantial relevance to the cultural crisis.

What matters most is that policing, education and the media should not reflect but rather combat theological biases in society something which in fact they have systematically refrained from doing. On the contrary, in the Netherlands as in Germany, before 9/11 serious discussion of the problem of Islamic fundamentalism was systematically avoided in the name of an utterly mistaken and spurious conception of what toleration is. It is certain that the general western European refusal to discuss the new anti-Semitism was partly motivated by a desire not to offend Muslims. Yet the irony is that the new wave of anti-Semitic prejudice and violence was and is by no means entirely the fault of Muslims living in western Europe. In important respects it is clear that the fault lies rather in a residual non-Muslim anti-Semitism frequently masquerading as vigorous anti-Zionism and opposition to Israel rather than open anti-Semitism. The effect of such latent prejudices and the determination to regard certain topics as taboo, was compounded by an extremely unfortunate intellectual and cultural failure to grasp what the essential conditions for a viable toleration in a multi-cultural society actually are.

All this is eminently illustrated by the sustained press scandal concerning the so-called 'Jenin massacre' of Palestinians by the Israelis in April 2002. The reports of a 'massacre' resulting from the Israeli Operation 'Defensive Shield', in fact a veritable press barrage across the whole of Europe, which later turned out, as *Le Monde* was honest enough openly to admit, to be completely false and illusory - undoubtedly excited a great deal of feeling against the Israelis in Europe and, in the specifically European including the Dutch context, undoubtedly did Israel and the Jews very substantial harm. But this is assuredly not the fault of the Palestinians who, after all are locked in an open political and military conflict with Israel; their hostility is only to be expected. The true scandal and offence, undeniably, though unlike *Le Monde* very few other European newspapers were prepared to admit it subsequently, was that the European - including Dutch - journalists' bias against Israel was so strong, their wish to believe and to persuade others that Israelis act like Nazis and perpetrate massacres of innocent victims so pervasive, that they were willing to trumpet reports of a terrible 'massacre' to the world without bothering to check the basic facts of what happened first. In reality, the so-called 'massacre' at Jenin led to killing, barbarism, and suffering infinitesimal compared with what the Russian army inflicted at the same time in Chechnia; yet remarkably no European reporters accused the Russians of behaving like Nazis or perpetrating bestial atrocities unprecedented since Hitler. In this way a very severe European offence was committed to which hardly anyone was prepared to own up or accept responsibility.

Of course, there is plenty of scope for legitimate criticism of Israel and in Holland most criticism of Israel is not anti-Semitic. However, there is a lot that is and it is very easy to tell the difference. For the latter is characterized as in the reporting of the 'Jenin' massacre by an obvious bias rooted in ancient theological stereotypes and prejudice leading to a vehement insistence on the evil character of the Jews, a distorting fantasy in total defiance of the facts of the case. According to *Le Monde*, after the main uproar had subsided and following the detailed investigation which was conducted, the real number of those killed in Jenin was ascertained to be somewhere between 50 and 80; *Le Monde* concluded that for the honest observer no matter how much he might oppose and dislike Israel and Israeli policy, there was no alternative but to admit most of those who died in the battle were actually fighters that in reality only a minimal number of innocent victims had been killed and that a massive fraud and hypocrisy had been committed. Any objective person can see that compared to Dafur nothing at all happened.

Obviously what had transpired was prejudiced, distorted and biased reporting on a massive scale and at its very worst. Moreover, this kind of anti-Semitism within Dutch and other non-Muslim European society is not just something endemic and thoroughly pernicious but arguably wholly destructive of the principles on which a truly democratic, equitable and free society must rest. For if, as Bayle argues, the basic threat to liberty always stems from the theological beliefs and biases of the people - could Nazi antisemitism have possibly been a potent political weapon without centuries of prior theological indoctrination, teaching people to hate the Jews? - liberty itself stands no chance if government, school teachers and the media not only 'tolerate' but in practice actively collude with those very prejudices and biases.

Hence Bayle, assuredly, has an important lesson for us today - and not least in the context of the present Dutch debate about toleration. To complain that one religious group or another are biased, prejudiced, condemn infidels, do not acknowledge the principle of toleration or respect individual freedom, or equality of the sexes, or incite hatred of other groups totally misses the point and is likely to harm relations between that group and the rest of society. For in terms of theological principle, all religious groups based on revelation and miracles and which subordinate secular thinking to religious authority by definition reject - even if some groups no longer attack dissenters as forcefully as they used to - individual freedom, toleration, equality, secular education and independent critical thinking; they all oppose and condemn homosexuality, sexual freedom of women, and the dependence of the rule of law on reason rather than religious doctrine and all seek to engender hostility in their followers towards adherents of rival churches and creeds.

Everyone must be allowed to believe whatever they want, asserts Bayle, that is part of toleration. But on its own such a stance amounts merely to official indifference and, as such, is assuredly not toleration. Indeed, experience shows that complacently allowing expounders of theological doctrines to amass as much power as they can over their following can all too easily and quickly degenerate into endemic sectarian conflict and persecution. The essence of a true toleration is not what has passed for toleration in Dutch society in recent years but rather a co-ordinated policy on the part of the guardians of the state, education and opinion-forming to neutralize theological hatreds and bias, that is prejudice, discrimination and suppression of unpopular views wherever and whenever such bias rears its head in the form of incitement, hatred and violence. Indeed, neither democracy, nor toleration nor individual freedom can long survive unless government, teachers, media reporters and police do join together in a co-ordinated fashion promptly, consistently and without hesitation to block theological power, and calls from the pulpit, wherever and whenever these seek to mobilize sections of the populace against unpopular minorities, dissenters, homosexuals, women, and independent critical thinkers.

But none of this can be expected to happen without a broad intellectual understanding in society as to what the issues are, what is historically correct and what is not, and how to recognize and delegitimize bias, prejudice and odium theologicum. On this basis, it is possible to argue, as indeed I do, that the real villains of the piece, the real perpetrators of our present cultural crisis, are in reality not the Fundamentalists who have always flourished everywhere and can not be expected to think otherwise than they do, but those who in Britain, Holland and Germany in recent decades have led the 'Thatcherite' attack in the name of 'practical knowledge', vocational skills and veneration of the market place on the humanities, civics and classics. The cutting back of the humanities in the universities and high schools is politically driven and defended in the name of cost-cutting and what people want. But that doesn't alter the fact that it is suicidal and an absolute plague in our society and the main cause of the new philistinism and barbarism which constitutes the true threat. Are not the Dutch as guilty here as the British, Germans and Swedes? Indeed, they are. For as principles toleration, democracy, equality, equity, personal freedom, and liberty of expression - the underpinning of western modernity - can not be defended and preserved except by people who understand what they are, how they arose and why they matter.

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