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*Comparatism, Asiatic religions and ideas of tolerance
in early XVIIIth century European culture*

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1. In some famous pages in one of the most influential books of the age of Enlightenment, the *Traité sur la tolérance* (first published in 1762), Voltaire proposed to European learned public a concise and provocative universal map of tolerance. Europe and Asia were contrasted through a direct denunciation of the intolerance and violence frequently experienced in Christian religious history in Europe, whereas Asiatic tolerance was held up as an overall and homogeneous positive example.

«Allez dans l'Inde, dans la Perse, dans la Tartarie – he wrote –, vous y verrez la même tolérance et la même tranquillité».¹

It was an intentionally provocative image whose main purpose was to show up the great scandal of a religion whose original ethical pillars were fraternity and love of one's fellowmen and whose actual consequences, in the ecclesiastical and civil history of Christianity, were oppression, violence, cruelty and intolerance, as the recent *affaire Calas*, from which the *Traité sur la tolérance* originated, clearly displayed.²

To achieve his purpose, Voltaire proposed the somewhat surprising scenario of a uniformly diffused tolerance throughout the Asiatic world. This picture actually included all Islamic Orient - from the Sunnite Othoman Empire to the Shiite empire of Persia, to Moghul India, following the careful and precise descriptions of these political systems and societies made by learned French voyagers like Jean Chardin, Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, François

¹ Voltaire, *Traité sur la tolérance*. Introduction, notes, bibliographie, chronologie par R. Pomeau, Paris, Garnier Flammarion, 1989, p. 50.

² See particularly *Voltaire et ses combats*, sous la direction de U. Kölving et C. Mervaud, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 1997, 2 voll., and N. Cronk, ed., *Etudes sur le "Traité sur la tolérance" de Voltaire*, Oxford, The Voltaire Foundation, 2000. A masterly work on Voltaire's religious problem is still R. Pomeau, *La religion de Voltaire*, Paris, Nizet, 1969.

Bernier and others. It included China, whose knowledge was made more precise mainly thanks to the patient and careful work of generations of Jesuit Fathers; and it included Japan as well, in spite of the expulsion of Westerners and the atrocities against missionaries and people converted to Christianity. For Voltaire, whose interpretation is mainly grounded on the work of the learned German physician and traveller Engelbert Kaempfer,³ Japanese people were indeed «les plus tolérants de tous les hommes».⁴ If violence was used against the missionary presence, if expulsion and closure to Western influence were the dramatic outcome of the first age of the encounter between Christianity and Japan, this was not the result of Japanese intolerance, in Voltaire's interpretation, but the legitimate and wise reply - for the safeguarding of civil institutions and state - to the Intolerant infection introduced by Christian missionaries, mainly Jesuits. In brief, the missionary spirit that Voltaire had depicted in a previous work (the *Siècle de Louis XIV*) as an authentic madness, a «fureur des prosélytes», displayed the face of a particular European disease, «une maladie particulière à nos climats», never known in all the Asiatic world.⁵

2. I'll come back, at the end of this paper, on some implications of Voltaire's statement. At the moment, and for introducing what I'm going to say, it's important to emphasize that one of the crucial elements of Voltaire's attitude about this issue is the passage from a notion of tolerance as a political and juridical tool for managing religious differences - inside the Christian framework, divided into bitterly conflicting families from the age of protestant Reform, and considering also non-Christian religions - towards a concept of tolerance as a universal value; tolerance, using Voltaire's words, as «apanage de l'humanité»,⁶ which excluded the idea of Truth for a sole Religion, accepted the legitimacy of the variety of religious beliefs - following a general deistic approach - and opened on this

³ Engelbert Kaempfer, *Histoire naturelle, civile, et ecclesiastique de l'empire du Japon : composée en Allemand par Engelbert Kaempfer, docteur en Médecine à Lemgow ; et traduite en François sur la Version Angloise de Jean-Gaspar Scheuchzer*, A La Haye, chez P. Gosse et J. Neaulme, 1729, 2 tt.

⁴ Voltaire, *Traité sur la tolérance* cit., p. 51. See also Voltaire, *Essai sur les moeurs et l'esprit des nations*. Introduction, bibliographie, relevé de variantes, notes et index par R. Pomeau, Paris, Garnier, 1963, 2 tt.; t. II, chap. CXCVI.

⁵ Voltaire, *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, in ID., *Oeuvres historiques*. Texte établi, annoté et présenté par R. Pomeau, Paris, Gallimard, 1957, p. 1109. «Jamais ces peuples - Voltaire wrote - n'ont envoyé de missionnaires en Europe; et nos nations sont les seules qui aient voulu porter leurs opinions, comme leur commerce, aux deux extremités du globe ».

⁶ « Qu'est-ce que la tolérance? c'est l'apanage de l'humanité. Nous sommes tous pétris de faiblesses et d'erreurs; pardonnons-nous réciproquement nos sottises, c'est la première loi de la nature », (Voltaire, *Dictionnaire philosophique*. Texte établi par R. Naves. Introduction, relevé des variantes et notes par J. Benda, Paris, Garnier, 1954; « Tolérance », p. 401).

ground a new scenario of universal peace and fraternity. All this has been clearly pointed out and analysed by a well-established and authoritative scholarship.

What I proposed to observe with a deeper insight - in some essays and in a recent book I wrote on this subject⁷ - is the important role that observation of Asiatic societies and cultures played for this delicate and important passage, and the various presence of Oriental subjects and examples in the general and articulated discourse on tolerance that leads to the disruptive and provocative pages written by Voltaire.

For giving some examples of this involvement between “Orientalism” and ideas of tolerance it is necessary to go back a few decades before the publication of Voltaire’s *Traité*.

Between the end of the XVIIth and the beginning of the XVIIIth century the experience of diversity and the reflection on “other” cultures (from American “savages” to ancient and modern Eastern cultures and political realities) became more intense in Europe. It’s one of the main characteristics of what Paul Hazard, in a masterly work, called the “crisis of European conscience”⁸; a definition often discussed, and also criticised from many points of view, that anyway preserves, in my opinion, a strong usefulness for Modern intellectual history, because it clearly points out a critical stage in which certainties and convictions coming from tradition were challenged, where orthodoxy was more insistently attacked by various forms of heterodox culture, where skepticism, pyrrhonism and relativistic attitudes fostered a common ground of incertitude and intellectual anxiety that opened the way to new trends in European culture. It’s a period of strong intellectual instability and tensions, that involves all the different cultural areas of Europe and whose main character is given by an intense circulation of men and ideas supported by the development of new forms of cultural sociability, such as Masonic lodges or the periodical press, and a growing and flourishing publishing activity. This new scenario of European cultural life, and its main tensions, are well exemplified by the intellectual profile of Pierre Bayle, or by another major figure of this period, Montesquieu, at the time when he wrote his first disruptive work, the *Lettres Persanes*, in 1721. The development of a mature Enlightenment culture - so difficult to define as an homogeneous intellectual reality but anyway an historical reality, conceived as a common identity by many European men of letters, notwithstanding their different philosophical, political, economical, religious opinions - directly comes from the fertile fermentation of these years.

⁷ R. Minuti, *Orientalismo e idee di tolleranza nella cultura francese del primo '700*, Firenze, Olschki, 2006.

⁸ P. Hazard, *La crise de la conscience européenne*, Paris, Fayard, 1961 (I ed., 1935).

It is not easy, for explaining the Oriental interest growing between the end of the XVIIth and the beginning of the XVIIIth century, to accept the meaning of “orientalism” proposed by Edward Said in a famous and really seminal book for all post-colonial studies,⁹ because in this period the emerging of a conceptual category of “Orient” for justifying an ideology of possession and domination - as was maybe more evident for the European, and generally Western, culture of the XIXth century, and as it’s extended by Said to the previous period as well - doesn’t seem to clearly and satisfactorily describe the plurality of reasons of interest for the Oriental world (from historical erudition to philosophical inquiry, to religious interest) and, moreover, the fact that observations and reflections on Asiatic cultures and societies really produce issues that push European culture towards the forging of new conceptual tools, as the analysis of the idea of tolerance clearly shows. In other words, the general intellectual and ideological framework expressed by the term “Orient”, at least in the period we consider, cannot be seen as the only application of an artificial conceptual tool for colonial and imperial purposes; in fact, in this general framework, and in a quite opposite direction, an effective action inside European culture was produced from which new conceptual tensions and a new cultural scenario arose.

Obviously “Orient” is not a real object but an intellectual artefact and a term that includes many different intellectual approaches and representations in a conceptual unity (or a “style of discourse”, to use Said’s terminology), and what is mainly important in Said’s work, in my opinion, is the stressing of this fact. We could only add to this statement that every historical concept has the same character of an intellectual artefact: just as for “Orient”, the same can be said for “Middle-Ages”, for instance, or for “Renaissance”, or indeed for “Modern-Age” as well. These intellectual artefacts are indispensable for the historical discourse and narration, as conceived in Western tradition since the Humanistic age. What is important is not only to say that some concepts are artefacts (all historical concepts are intellectual artefacts, where ideology, philosophical and political assumptions variously play an important role) but to distinguish between conceptual tools - that can be changed, corrected, replaced if they prove or seems to be unsatisfactory - and historical facts and processes; so, inside the artificial concept of “Orient”, in European culture of the early XVIIIth century, there is a plurality of erudite, philosophical and historical inquiries, political and religious problems concerning all the Asiatic realities that actually stimulate European men of letters towards new and diverse directions.

⁹ E. Said, *Orientalism*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978.

3. At the turn of the XVIIIth century a variety of cultural materials relating to the “oriental” field of interests - observations of travellers, linguistic studies, historical reconstructions, philosophical and religious reflections - are proposed to European culture directly involving the crucial theme of tolerance. For evaluating some of the main sides of this fascinating and problematic connection, a first important point of reference is undoubtedly given by missionary literature. European missionaries, and mainly the Jesuit fathers, were the people most responsible - not the only ones, but undoubtedly the most important - for the widening of European knowledge on the Asiatic world (from cartography to the study of languages, history and science, and so on), as is largely known. In some of the works produced by the great Jesuit cultural enquiry in this period we can find many interesting reflections on the interpretation of Asiatic politics and societies and the idea of tolerance.¹⁰ This is particularly true for one of the most influential works for the spreading of the image of Chinese culture and history in European culture, that is the *Nouveaux Mémoires sur l'état présent de la Chine*, written by the learned French Jesuit Louis Lecomte and published in 1696.¹¹ A work, directly and heavily involved in the “quarrel of Chinese rites”,¹² that was a fundamental work of reference until the publication of the great *Description de la Chine* by Jean-Baptiste Du Halde in 1735,¹³ and still later.

¹⁰ Among the many references on this general topic see particularly: V. Pinot, *La Chine et la formation de l'esprit philosophique en France (1640-1740)*, Genève, Slatkine Reprints, 1971 [I. ed. Paris, P. Geuthner, 1932]; A. H. Rowbotham, *Missionary and Mandarin. The Jesuit at the Court of China*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, Univ. of California Press, 1942; R. Étiemble, *Les Jésuites en Chine. La querelle des rites (1552-1773)*, Paris, Julliard, 1966; *Actes du 1^{er} Colloque international de sinologie (Chantilly, 20-22 septembre 1974)*. *La Mission Française de Pékin aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1976; J.W. Witek *Controversial Ideas in China and Europe: a biography of Jean-François Foucquet, S.J. (1665-1741)*, Roma, Institutum Historicum S. J., 1982; J. Gernet, *Chine et christianisme*, Paris, Gallimard, 1982; *Actes du III^e Colloque International de Sinologie. Appréciation par l'Europe de la tradition Chinoise à partir du XVII^e siècle (Chantilly, 11-14 septembre 1980)*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1983; D. E. Mungello, *Curious Land: Jesuit Accommodation and the Origins of Sinology*, Stuttgart, Steiner, 1985; ID., ed., *The Chinese Rites Controversy. Its History and Meaning*, Nettetal, Steyler, 1994; ID., *The Great Encounter of China and the West, 1500-1800*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999 (see also II ed., *ivi*, 2005); D. F. Lach and E. Van Kley, *Asia in the Making of Europe*, III, *A Century of Advance*, 4 tomi, Chicago and London, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993; J. Osterhammel, *Die Entzauberung Asiens. Europa und die asiatischen Reiche im 18. Jahrhundert*, München, Beck, 1998; J.-P. Rubiés, *The Concept of Cultural Dialogue and the Jesuit Method of Accommodation: between Idolatry and Civilization*, «Archivum Historicum Societatis Jesu», LXXIV, 2005, pp. 237–280.

¹¹ Louis Lecomte, *Nouveaux Mémoires sur l'état présent de la Chine*, Paris, J. Anisson, 1696, 2 vols.

¹² See J. Davy, *La condamnation en Sorbonne des "Nouveaux Mémoires sur la Chine" du P. Le Comte*, «Recherches de Science Religieuse», XXXVII, 1950, pp. 366-397.

¹³ Jean-Baptiste Du Halde, *Description géographique historique, chronologique, politique, et physique de l'empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie chinoise*, Paris, Le Mercier, 1735, 4 tt.

In Lecomte's treatment of these topics, expressed in many significant passages of his *Nouveaux Mémoires*, we can distinguish two separate levels. In the first place Lecomte tried to justify and defend Jesuits' tolerance towards Chinese rites on the basis that they were not religious but civil rites ; for this reason Jesuits didn't deserve any theological reproach and their accommodating attitude could only produce enormous advantages for the propagation of Christian faith. This is an attitude commonly shared by Jesuits Fathers and, as is well known, was the core of the "quarrel of rites".

But there is also another interesting side of the problem, not so often considered, that is the evaluation of Chinese imperial tolerance towards foreign religions and mainly towards Christianity. The famous 'edict of Tolerance' of the Emperor Kang-hsi (1692) which gave freedom of preaching to Christian missionaries, was indeed a great success of Jesuits' diplomacy but its interpretation should be carefully evaluated. In fact, it's not the general politics of tolerance towards all kinds of religions that deserves Lecomte's appreciation; on the contrary, this was, in Lecomte's pages, a traditional fault of Chinese imperial politics that showed a substantial indifference towards all religions. It was in fact the work of Providence that permitted the use of a defective tool such as tolerance for including also the only true religion, Christianity, and this was the first step for the establishing of a perfect monarchy grounded on religious truth and beyond a faulty and indifferent tolerance. In other words, and to summarize what we can find also in other Jesuits works of this time - by Charles Le Gobien,¹⁴ for instance, or Joachim Bouvet,¹⁵ or others - , the traditional meaning of tolerance as endurance and sufferance (very far from the value later attributed to this idea by Voltaire, as we have seen) and the interpretation of tolerance as a delicate tool that imposed to be careful for not confusing truth and falsehood in religion, are clearly expressed. This proposed, on another side, the great value of doctrinal intolerance, conceived as the impossible acceptance of an equal value between "true" and "false". The value of tolerance thus had to be investigated in connection with its goals and not in absolute terms; it was very useful if one considered, in the Chinese case, the great goal of Christian propagation in the world, but it was not acceptable at all if considered as an absolute and universal value, which could produce indifference and relativism.

¹⁴ Charles Le Gobien, *Histoire de l'édit de l'empereur de la Chine en faveur de la Religion Chrestienne: avec un éclaircissement sur les honneurs que les Chinois rendent à Confucius et aux Morts*, Paris, J. Anisson, 1698.

¹⁵ Joachim Bouvet, *Portrait historique de l'empereur de la Chine, présenté au Roy*, A Paris, chez Estienne Michallet, 1697.

4. It's important, in my opinion, to pay attention to this point, that involves some important and lasting elements of Catholic thought, because it enables us to better perceive the great difference between this meaning of tolerance and what deistic culture, in the same decades, proposed to the learned public of Europe, still mainly observing the varieties of religions exhibited by the Asiatic world and, what is still more interesting, mainly using the same Jesuit sources.

A precise instance of this attitude can be seen in Marquis d'Argens *Correspondance philosophique*, and above all in his *Lettres chinoises*, published in five volumes between 1739 and 1740.¹⁶ D'Argens, particularly admired by Voltaire, is a hero of the extreme wing of radicalism and deistic view of religion in the first half of the XVIIIth century.¹⁷ What he tried to show in this work is that all institutionalised and historical religion is madness, an artificial building of absurdities and oddities managed by the interest and hypocrisy of priests of all kinds; from this general point of view there was not a substantial difference between the great monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) and all kinds of idolatries. What could be saved in every religion, and mainly in Christianity, was only a moral content, devoid of all metaphysical and dogmatic implications. So, on the Western and Christian side, it was the original evangelical content that should be considered - following the roots of the protestant critics on Catholicism and giving them a strong deistic turn, as was frequent in the intellectual Dutch freethinker milieu of this period - and, on the East side of world's religions, it was Confucianism that deserved most attention and admiration, as a moral philosophy that was able to produce the best effects for civil life, and as it was more consistent with a rational view of religion.¹⁸ It's worth noting that this deistic admiration of Confucius (in similar terms we can find it in the writings of Voltaire and other *philosophes*)¹⁹ is quite parallel to the Jesuit admiration - we could say a consequence, as the principal sources for the knowledge of Confucianism were produced by Jesuit Fathers, from the great Matteo Ricci to all the Jesuit sinologist tradition - but that the core of the interpretation of Confucianism was quite different. For Jesuit fathers, in essence, the liking for Confucianism

¹⁶ Jean-Baptiste de Boyer, marquis d'Argens, *Lettres chinoises, ou Correspondance Philosophique, Historique et Critique, entre un Chinois Voyageur et ses Correspondans à la Chine, en Moscovie, en Perse et au Japon*. Nouvelle Edition etc., A La Haye, Pierre Paupie, 1755, 6 tt.

¹⁷ See R. Minuti, *Orientalismo e idee di tolleranza* cit., pp. 257 ff.

¹⁸ Confucius is portrayed as «le plus grand homme qu'ait produit l'univers» (*Epître dédicatoire aux Manes de Confucius*, in Boyer d'Argens, *Lettres chinoises* cit., t. I, p. [I]), and his moral religion, «belle, simple et naturelle» (*ivi*, t. I, chap. IX, p. 74), is highly praised.

¹⁹ See D. E. Mungello, *Confucianism in the Enlightenment: Antagonism and Collaboration between the Jesuits and the Philosophes*, in *China and Europe: Images and Influences in Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. by T. H. C. Lee, Hong Kong, Chinese University Press, 1991, pp. 99-127.

and the similarities between it and Christianity showed at the same time the inadequacy of Confucianism, and the need of Christian revelation for becoming the true Religion; for the deistic view, Confucianism was the expression of the right limits in which every religion should be maintained, avoiding the will to establish absolute values of religious Truth and judging with the same rational method all religions of the world. This attitude produced a quite different view of tolerance, because in deistic case tolerance was a real absolute and universal value, grounded on the idea that every man has the same questions concerning nature, life and death, the causes of all things, and so on, and that every answer to these questions can only be precarious and uncertain, considering the natural bounds of human reason. So reasonableness and moral content should be the only method for judging every religion in the world. It's following this thread of thought that we directly arrive at the Voltairian interpretation of tolerance as "apanage de l'humanité" from which I started out.

5. I have chosen to pay particular attention to these two selected examples, Lecomte and d'Argens, to show how different meanings and evaluations of the same term of tolerance could be given in the European culture between the end of the XVIIth and the first decades of the XVIIIth century, in connection with the reflection on Asiatic cultures, religions and societies.

Around the middle of the XVIIIth century the publication of the *Esprit des Lois*²⁰ by Montesquieu gave, from this point of view as for many other major topics of political culture, a new important contribution. The extent of Montesquieu's interest for Asiatic societies and cultures has often be remarked by scholarship. Since the publication of *Lettres Persanes*, in 1721,²¹ various documents concerning Oriental societies - in this work mainly Islamic societies - were perused by Montesquieu and, at the same time, his reflection shows an attention for the general problem of religion that is not secondary nor easy to explain.²² In

²⁰ Montesquieu, *De l'Esprit des Lois*. Introduction, chronologie, bibliographie, relevé de variantes et notes par R. Derathé, Paris, Garnier, 1973, 2 voll.

²¹ Montesquieu, *Lettres Persanes*, édition dirigée par J. Ehrard et C. Volpilhac-Augier, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation / Napoli, Istituto italiano per gli studi filosofici, 2004.

²² See particularly, among the various contributions on this subject, L. Bianchi, "Montesquieu e la religione" in *Leggere l'Esprit des Lois. Stato, società e storia nel pensiero di Montesquieu*, a cura di D. Felice, Napoli, Liguori, 1998, pp. 203-227; Id., *La funzione della religione in Europa e nei paesi orientali secondo Montesquieu*, in *L'Europe de Montesquieu. Actes du Colloque de Gène (26-29 mai 1993)*, Napoli, Liguori / Paris, Universitas / Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 1995, pp. 375-387; Id., *Histoire et nature : la religion dans l'Esprit des Lois*, in *Le temps de Montesquieu. Actes du colloque international de Genève (28-31 octobre 1998)*, Genève, Droz, 2002, pp. 289-304; R. Shackleton, *La religion de Montesquieu*, in Id., *Essays on Montesquieu and the Enlightenment*, ed. by D. Gilson and M. Smith, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 1988, pp.109-116; Id., *Montesquieu. A Critical Biography*,

fact, in *Lettres Persanes* the trend towards a libertine view of religion is stronger; the denunciation of Catholic - as well as Islamic - intolerance is more consistent with some important threads of French philosophical culture of this time; the reflection on the legitimate religious varieties which can express human belief in God can be linked to various deistic opinions of this time. But concluding that Montesquieu's thought on religion is clearly deistic is quite hazardous. It's a subject that goes beyond the limits of my paper, but it's sufficient to say that he never renounced his Christian convictions, that members of Catholic clergy were among his most confident friends until the end of his life, that he always refused the radical approach of other major *philosophes* of his time, mainly Voltaire. Inside this intellectual framework, doubts, fluctuations, questions are frequently present in his writings, above all in his *Pensées*²³. What is important to consider for our subject is that a substantial difference between *Lettres Persanes* and *Esprit des Lois* concerns precisely the religious issue.

Montesquieu in *Esprit des Lois* refuses explicitly (in chapter 9 of book XXV) to consider the philosophical and theological problem of religion and limits his attention to political analysis.²⁴ Thus Montesquieu's comparatism in *Esprit des Lois* does not concern theological principles but only the social and political consequences of all different religions, each observed from the point of view of the effects that each religion can have for civil order, political stability and, for remembering some fundamental concepts of his analysis, from the point of view of consistency with the nature and principles of each government. Various examples of ceremonies and rites of Asiatic religions were used for this goal: from Islam - that is considered as a perfect complement to despotism but which, at the same time, can give some stability to a form of government that systematically inclines to instability - to Chinese rites - where Montesquieu sees the great source of the extraordinary stability of Chinese despotic system - to the various, sometimes extravagant, rites of many Asiatic idolatries, always considered from the point of view of their social and political effects.²⁵

Oxford, Oxford Un. Press, 1961, pp 337-355; S. Cotta, *La funzione della religione secondo Montesquieu*, «Rivista internazionale di filosofia del diritto», XLIII, 1966, pp. 582-603; P. Kra, *Religion in Montesquieu's Lettres Persanes*, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 1970; M. Régaldo, *Montesquieu et la religion*, Bordeaux, Académie Montesquieu, 1998; R. Kingston, *Montesquieu on Religion and on the Question of Toleration*, in *Montesquieu's Science of Politics. Essays on the Spirit of Laws*, ed. by. D. W. Carrithers, M. A. Mosher, and P. A. Rahe, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2001, pp. 375-408; R. Minuti, *Orientalismo e idee di tolleranza* cit., pp. 331 ff.

²³ *Oeuvres complètes de Montesquieu publiées sous la direction de M. André Masson*, 3 tt., Paris, Nagel, 1950-1955; t. II (1950), *Pensées*, pp. 1-677.

²⁴ « Nous sommes ici politiques et non pas théologiens ; et, pour les théologiens mêmes, il y a bien de la différence entre tolérer une religion et l'approuver », (*De l'Esprit des Lois* cit., t. II, p. 160).

²⁵ « Il convient qu'il y ait quelque livre sacré qui serve de règle, comme l'Alcoran chez les Arabes, les livres de Zoroastre chez les Perses, le Védam chez les Indiens, les livres classiques chez les Chinois.

This, in general, marks the novelty of Montesquieu's approach to the study of religion. There is not a fundamental problem of true and false religion in *Esprit des Lois*, but it is not because Montesquieu asserts that religion is just foolishness and that we should limit our religious convictions to moral values, but because he has decided not to consider the philosophical and theological problem and limit his attention to the political problem. All this produces a new approach to the problem of tolerance as well. Tolerance is, consistently with this approach, a political problem and not an absolute value, and as a political problem it must be considered in connection with different political realities. This produces one of the most controversial and surprising assertions of Montesquieu, in book XXV, chap. 10, of *Esprit des Lois* : « Quand on est maître de recevoir dans un État une nouvelle religion, ou de ne la pas recevoir, il ne faut pas l'y établir; quand elle y est établie, il faut la tolérer ».²⁶ That is to say that tolerance is mainly a political tool, which must be managed considering the political structure of the system and its stability ; so, if we are convinced that a new religion can introduce seeds of intolerance, division and social conflict into a political system, the introduction of this new religion should be avoided. But if a religion is already a component of a society, intolerance and expulsion could produce worse effects, and so tolerance - I wish to stress that in this case the meaning comes back to the traditional sense of suffrage and endurance - must be practiced, as a delicate tool conceived for the common good. To say a word concerning true and false religion is not a problem that must concern political institutions. It's evident how this approach was important for all the following reflections on the relationships between state and religion.

6. Montesquieu's political analysis gave an original and extremely influential contribution to the study of religions and it shows a particular side of the possible uses of religious comparatism.

What is particularly interesting to observe, between the end of the XVIIth and the first decades of the XVIIIth century, is the increasingly developing interest in the comparison of ancient and modern, European and non-European religions; an interest that is uniformly

Le code religieux supplée au code civil, et fixe l'arbitraire », (*De l'Esprit des Lois* cit., l. XII, chap. 29 ; t. I, p.227).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, l. XXV, chap. 10; t. II, p. 161.

present in Christian and Catholic analysis of ancient and non-European religions as in deistic and radical interpretations.²⁷

In the first place we can at least recall the name of Richard Simon, and his *Histoire critique du vieux Testament* (1678)²⁸ or the *Moeurs des sauvages américains comparées aux mœurs des premiers temps*, published by Father Joseph François Lafitau in 1724.²⁹ In the second respect we should mainly remember an important compilation published in seven great volumes between 1723 and 1737, that is the *Cérémonies religieuses de tous les peuples du monde* published in Amsterdam by Jean Frédéric Bernard with the splendid illustrations of the celebrated engraver Bernard Picart;³⁰ a work destined for a large public, which made extensive use of Jesuitic and other sources, which very recently has earned increasing attention from the scholarly world.

There are many reasons for the new interest of scholars in this work, for a long time seriously neglected. The first one is undoubtedly the iconographic apparatus and the use of images for diffusing an extensive knowledge on religious manners and ceremonies of all people, for which this major work can be considered as a significant example of XVIIIth century “visual anthropology”; on another side, what deserves attention is the operation of collecting and adapting many heterogeneous sources - from missionary documents to travellers’ writings, to other works of erudition - with a systematic insertion of comments, digressions, notes, for supporting the main philosophical and ideological purposes of this encyclopedic work, which, for its general project and for its style, can be rightly considered as a document of Enlightenment culture.³¹

²⁷ See P. Hazard, *La crise de la conscience européenne* cit. ; R. H. Popkin and A. Vanderjagt, *Scepticism and Irreligion in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, Brill, Leiden, 1993 ; *Le comparatisme en histoire des religions*, sous la direction de F. Boespflug et F. Dunand, Paris, Cerf, 1998.

²⁸ Richard Simon, *Histoire critique du Vieux Testament*, Paris, Vve Billaine, 1678 ; see G. G. Stroumsa, «Richard Simon: From Philology to Comparatism», *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte*, v. III, München-Leipzig, K. G. Saur, 2001, pp. 89-107.

²⁹ Joseph François Lafitau, *Moeurs des sauvages américains comparées aux mœurs des premiers temps*, Paris, Saugrain l'aîné, 1724 ; see A. Motsch, *Lafitau et l'émergence du discours ethnographique*, Paris, PUPS, 2001.

³⁰ *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde. Représentées par des Figures dessinées de la main de Bernard Picart, avec une Explication Historique, et quelques Dissertations curieuses*, A Amsterdam, chez J. F. Bernard, 1723-37, 7 voll.

³¹ See particularly O. Faliu, «Bernard Picart dessinateur et graveur», in *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde dessinées par Bernard Picart*, Paris, Herscher, 1988, pp. 9-30 ; M. C. Jacob, «Bernard Picart and the Turn toward Modernity», *De Achttiende Eeuw*, n. 37, 2005, 1, pp. 3-16 ; S. Berti, «Bernard Picart e Jean-Frédéric Bernard dalla religione riformata al deismo. Un incontro con il mondo ebraico nell'Amsterdam del primo Settecento», *Rivista Storica Italiana*, a. CXVII, III, 2005, pp. 974-1001 ; P. von Wyss-Giacosa, *Religionsbilder der frühen Aufklärung*.

As for the *Cérémonies*' philosophical and ideological purposes, it's quite clear the general deistic and anti-Catholic trend of this comprehensive work, as mainly expressed by the important *Dissertation sur le culte religieux* which opens the first volume, published in 1723.³² The main issue pointed out in this *Dissertation* is the universality of religious sentiment, the universally diffused idea of something beyond human beings and nature, and the various interpretations that this common sentiment produced in different cultures and ages. This made possible the compilation of an annotated inventory of rituals and ceremonies that followed these different interpretations, for marking their oddities and often the fact that they were a simple product of manipulation of priests of various kind, but always for remembering the original and genuine quest of human kind and for stressing that atheism never was the general character of human societies. Against many observers and scholars who saw in Asiatic world - for instance in Siamese or Chinese societies - extensive examples of atheism, the *Cérémonies* insisted on the fact that their idolatries were anyway the expression of a religious belief and that they should be considered as answers - even if odd or foolish, especially compared with the simple, clear and illuminating Christian evangelical message - to the same human quest. Ceremonies and rituals, in other words, were the visible documents of human frailty and necessity of expressing, often in complicated and odd ways, human belief in a superior agent.³³ This is the core of Bernard and Picart *Cérémonies*' deistic assumption and it's on this ground that a general message of tolerance and acceptance of religious diversity can be considered as one of the main goals of this great work.

If it often expresses criticism against Catholicism it must be noted, at the same time, that - mainly for what concerns the great Jesuits' contribution - this criticism is often

Bernard Picarts Tafeln für die Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde, Zürich, Benteli Verlag, 2006. The *Cérémonies* was the subject of a recent conference in Los Angeles (*At the Interface of Religion and Cosmopolitanism: Bernard Picart's Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde (1723-1743) and the European Enlightenment*, organized by M. C. Jacob and W. Mijnhardt, (6-8 December 2007), whose proceedings are currently in press. For the *Cérémonies* in the context of the culture of the "crisis of European conscience", see G. Ricuperati, *Comparatismo, storia universale, storia delle civiltà. Il mutamento dei paradigmi dalla « crisi della coscienza europea » all'Illuminismo*, in *Le passioni dello storico. Studi in onore di Giuseppe Giarrizzo*, a cura di A. Coco, Catania, Edizioni del Prisma, 1999, pp. 511-580.

³² *Dissertation sur le culte religieux*, in *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde*, Tome Premier, cit., pp. III-XXXVIII.

³³ If anybody, Bernard wrote, wants « faire passer les Chinois et les Américains pour des Athées, il faut dire, que tous les Idolatres de l'Antiquité étoient aussi des Athées, puisqu'en suivant pié-à-pié l'argument de ceux qui portent l'accusation d'Athéisme contre les Chinois etc. on les forcera d'avouer que l'accusation d'Athéisme ne tombe que sur le défaut qui se trouve dans l'idée que tous les Peuples Idolatres se sont faites de la Divinité », (*Dissertation sur les cérémonies religieuses des Peuples de la Chine et du Japon*, in *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses des peuples idolatres*, Tome second, Seconde partie, Amsterdam, J.- F. Bernard, 1728, nota (c), p. 193.

combined with explicit appreciation. The Jesuit reviewers of *Journal des Trévoux* precisely marked this point.³⁴ So, once it had been purged of many disrespectful remarks concerning the Catholic church, and many digressions and annotations which gave too much support to deistic or relativistic assumptions, an adaptation of this great work could be made to give new support to Catholic orthodoxy; from this conviction arose the editorial project of the *Histoire générale des cérémonies, moeurs et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde*, compiled by the abbés Antoine Banier et Jean Baptiste Le Mascrier, published in Paris in 1741.³⁵

7. Thus Bernard and Picart's *Cérémonies* provide another important example of the observation of non-European religions - Asiatic religions have a considerable place in this work, mainly in the two volumes of *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses des peuples idolâtres*, published in 1723 and 1728 - and of the use of the comparative method for strengthening and diffusing an idea of religious tolerance.

The passage from the XVIIIth century comparative observation of religions - a field which has various facets and includes some other major philosophers we cannot consider in this paper, as David Hume for instance, whose materialistic approach to religion in his *Natural history of religion* opened a different and quite perturbing new scenario - to the new comparative history of religions which was mainly developed in the XIXth century, is a subject, sometimes recalled by scholarship, which deserves, in my opinion, deeper investigation.

A final point I wish to single out, coming back to something I said at the beginning and for concluding this paper, is that the attention for the varieties of expressions of civil and religious tolerance which we found in many writings of the XVIIth and XVIIIth centuries concerning Asiatic societies and cultures - a subject which was amplified by Voltaire in his *Traité sur la tolérance* - is not only an interesting problem of intellectual and cultural history of Europe in the Modern age, but can be seen as a direct solicitation for another kind of investigation. I mean a research into the different ways which different cultures conceived and applied the acceptance of "otherness" inside their social and political systems; the different ways of expressing it in different languages (language is always a central issue in

³⁴ See *Journal de Trevoux*, Avril 1731, art. XL, pp. 737-738.

³⁵ *Histoire générale des cérémonies, moeurs et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde; etc. [...] par M. l'abbé Banier [...] et par M. l'abbé Mascrier*, Paris, Rollin fils, 1741, 7 voll.

the study of interaction between European and non-European peoples); the different ways of conceiving what in European language was expressed by the term of “tolerance”, as a political tool or an universal value for social life. I’m convinced that a more careful study of what we could call the “tolerance of the others”, could not only introduce new issues for the study of XVIIIth century culture, but could become an important agenda for our contemporary conscience, in a world where the new phenomena of globalisation increasingly and dramatically require material but also conceptual answers to new problems of peace and social justice, acceptance of diversity and otherness, and deeper respect for the values of human life.