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### From Protestants to Protestors: Pierre Bayle's Argument for Tolerance

Luca Gomez '26  
DePauw University

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## From Protestants to Protestors: Pierre Bayle's Argument for Tolerance

Imagine living in a world in which you could be imprisoned because of your religious beliefs. Pierre Bayle was born into a Protestant family in 1647 in France, where there was a history of religious persecution against Protestants. The 1598 Edict of Nantes granted some freedom to Protestants a half century before Bayle's birth, but it was revoked in 1685. That year, Bayle's brother died in prison as a result of this repression. The following year, he published his famous *Philosophical Commentary* advocating for religious freedom. This work was only the beginning of his rigid defense of religious toleration. In his *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, 1697, Bayle makes a powerful case for religious toleration by legitimizing unconventional ideas and poking holes in those that were mainstream. His writing would go on to inspire Thomas Jefferson, Frederick the Great of Prussia, and philosophers such as David Hume. He heavily influenced the politics of his day and today. Bayle's most significant contribution to the modern world is the method of argumentation he used to advocate for religious toleration.

One way Bayle made a powerful case for toleration was by legitimizing unconventional ideas. His first work, *Letter on the Comet of 1680*, contains important writing about religious toleration. For example, he made a case for the viability of atheism since it would not lead to the disintegration of society predicted by many others. Bayle argued that most people act according to their moral character, not the religious principles they claim to adhere to. And, as summarized by Anthony Gottlieb in *The Dream of Enlightenment*, 2016, Bayle thought that though “[a]n atheist's morality would in one sense be defective...his behavior would probably not be as bad as people feared.”<sup>1</sup> This is especially likely, according to Bayle, because atheists naturally hope for approval and respect from others, which keeps their behavior in check. So, since the

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Gottlieb, *The Dream of Enlightenment: The Rise of Modern Philosophy* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2016), 156.

consequences of widespread atheism are not as bad as people fear, it is not as wicked a theology as seen by most people. One of Bayle's admirers went so far as to say that "it ought not to appear more strange to us, that an Atheist should be a quiet moral Man, than that a Christian should lead a very wicked Life."<sup>2</sup>

Bayle also argued that other religious views were viable because of the nature of the human conscience. He supported religious freedom on the grounds that God gave people a conscience to pursue their own beliefs. If people arrived at a false religion, this was an honest mistake, not a sin. It was for this reason, according to Bayle, that heretics should not be punished for their religious beliefs. He points out that "[e]very heretic is convinced that he is a true believer and that it is others who are heretics."<sup>3</sup> No one can know for certain if their religious beliefs are accurate. This means persecuting people for committing heresies is unrealistic and morally unsound. As noted by Bayle, punishing heretics would result in "endless bloodshed," which is "surely not what Jesus had in mind."<sup>4</sup> Therefore, heretics ought to have the freedom to hold their beliefs, even if those beliefs are rejected by most others.

Another way Bayle made a powerful case for toleration was by finding faults in mainstream ideas. In particular, he was among the first to challenge the authority of religious figures and the Bible. For example, in his *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, he identifies several problematic attributes of David, king of the Israelites. First, he highlights that David was ruthlessly violent and often killed men and women without mercy. Those he spared were forced to fight in his army. Most people in Bayle's day did not find David's behavior particularly problematic; or, at least, it was not enough to deter them from being devoted to their religion.

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<sup>2</sup> Gottlieb, *Dream of Enlightenment*, 158.

<sup>3</sup> Gottlieb, *Dream of Enlightenment*, 160.

<sup>4</sup> Gottlieb, *Dream of Enlightenment*, 160.

Bayle points out the inexcusability of David's behavior, writing that "[i]t is certain that if a private person, no matter how great his birth may be, should behave nowadays the way David did on this occasion, he could not avoid having very dishonorable epithets applied to him."<sup>5</sup>

Bayle also argues that the Bible cannot be fully trusted because it can contain errors. Since the Bible was copied and assembled by humans, it is prone to human error. For example, when a young David fought against Goliath, King Saul, the first king of Israel, asked his general who David was. It did not make sense for Saul to not know who David was since he was already very familiar with the boy. Bayle explains that if this were the case in another book, people would assume that there had been a copying error. He sarcastically notes, however, that "it is necessary to be careful not to have such suspicions when it is a question of the Bible."<sup>6</sup> He uses humor to show that people should hold the Bible to the same level of scrutiny other books are held to.

Today, there has been a substantial increase in normalizing unconventional ideas, as Bayle did, to make a case for toleration. This kind of argumentation has commanded identity politics in recent years. For example, to support the toleration of unconventional gender identities, people advocated for the normalization of pronoun usage. In schools and workplaces, many have been encouraged to introduce themselves with their preferred pronouns to create a more inclusive environment for non-cisgendered people. Instagram and other social media platforms have added places for people to include their preferred pronouns in their account biographies to normalize the usage of pronouns. One Instagram account, @wearegenchange, assures cisgendered people that they "have nothing to fear from [pronoun usage]" and that it

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<sup>5</sup> Pierre Bayle, "The Historical and Critical Dictionary," *HONR 101(B) FYS: The Making of the Modern Mind*, Barbara Whitehead (Greencastle, IN: DePauw University, 2022), 51.

<sup>6</sup> Bayle, "Historical and Critical Dictionary," 49.

“ends [the] stigmatization of pronouns.”<sup>7</sup> The post aims to convince readers that the widespread existence of non-cisgendered people will not have any kind of negative impact on society. Much of today’s conversation about identity politics is similar, centering around breaking down harmful stigma surrounding non-cisgendered people. This has made its way into both casual and professional settings. For example, in 2021, Columbia Sportswear manager Justin Trowbridge was encouraged by his company’s HR department to start including pronouns on employee name tags. Their idea was to make a more inclusive atmosphere in their store. Trowbridge supported the decision, explaining that “If we make everyone feel more included, like they belong, that’s where we’re going to see a new shift in actual diversity.”<sup>8</sup> By showing support for non-cisgendered people in his store, Trowbridge argues that a positive change would come to his store’s environment.

Just like Bayle, another way people today make a case for toleration is by rejecting mainstream misconceptions about minority groups. For example, people commonly cite religious beliefs as their reason for opposing same-sex marriage. Just last month, U.S. Senator Ted Cruz said he would vote against a bill that would codify same-sex marriage at a federal level in the United States. He argued that the bill would be a violation of religious liberty. These are the same grounds that Susan Collins (R-Maine) is using to draft an amendment that would remove protections of same-sex marriage. Proponents of this amendment claim that it is an attack on religious freedom to allow same-sex marriage, which is prohibited in their religions. However, in Bayle’s footsteps, others have disproven these misconceptions in order to make a case for the toleration of same-sex marriage. In a *New York Times* article published this month, Episcopal

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<sup>7</sup> @wearegenchange, “If You’re Cis,” Instagram photo, August 18, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CEC5qJYMLcW/>.

<sup>8</sup> Te-Ping Chen, “Why Gender Pronouns Are Becoming a Big Deal at Work,” accessed October 19, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/why-gender-pronouns-are-becoming-a-big-deal-at-work-11631797200>.

priest Steven Paulikas argues that same-sex marriage is actually an exercise of the freedom to practice one's religion. According to him, the political movement supported by Cruz and Collins aims "not to advance its advocates' religious freedom but to restrict [that of same-sex couples]."<sup>9</sup> Paulikas points out that at least 15 prominent religious movements fully integrate same-sex marriage into their tradition. With this in mind, he argues that it is the God-given right of people to marry someone of the same sex. Thus, the movement supported by Cruz and Collins is constructed on false grounds. Paulikas argues that the ongoing debate is really about "whether [his] God-given right to be married to [his] spouse matters as much in the eyes of the law as someone else's."<sup>10</sup> He argues against the movement in question by highlighting a misconception about religion shared by many of the supporters of the movement—the misconception that same-sex marriage and religion are incompatible. After rejecting it, he redirects the focus of the conversation, arguing with the equal rights framework that the law doesn't acknowledge one of his rights the same way it acknowledges that right in other people.

In conclusion, Pierre Bayle's argumentation for toleration makes a powerful case for respecting individual personal freedoms. In particular, he changed people's minds about religious toleration by normalizing unconventional ideas and pointing out flaws in those that were mainstream. This kind of argumentation can be used to defend other kinds of toleration, too. Today, it is found in identity politics and the debate for same-sex marriage. While Bayle may have lived several hundred years ago, his argumentation for toleration is still influential in political discourse to this day.

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<sup>9</sup> Steven Paulikas, "Same-Sex Marriage Is a Religious Freedom," accessed October 19, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/15/opinion/same-sex-marriage-is-a-religious-freedom.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Paulikas, "Same-Sex Marriage Is a Religious Freedom."

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