

CHARLES MONTESQUIEU'S POLITICAL IDEAS ON RELIGION, POWER, AND MODERATION

[AS IDEIAS POLÍTICAS DE CHARLES MONTESQUIEU SOBRE RELIGIÃO, PODER E MODERAÇÃO]

Nguyen Thi Xuan¹

Foreign Trade University, Ho Chi Minh City Branch

ABSTRACT: This article reinterprets Charles Montesquieu's conception of religion not as a peripheral theme in his political philosophy, but as a structural element of his broader reflection on power, law, and liberty. Against readings that portray Montesquieu either as a cautious defender of religious tradition or as an early secularist, this study argues that his position is better understood as a theory of moderation. For Montesquieu, religion is neither a transcendent truth to be imposed nor a mere illusion to be eliminated. It is a social force whose political significance depends on its relationship with institutions, customs, and forms of government. Through a close textual analysis of *The Spirit of the Laws* and *Persian Letters*, this article identifies three interconnected dimensions of Montesquieu's understanding of religion: its moral function, its political ambivalence, and its susceptibility to historical variation. Religion can cultivate civic virtues, but it can also legitimize despotism. It can stabilize societies, but it can also radicalize them. These tensions are not anomalies in Montesquieu's thought; they are its very foundation. By reconstructing Montesquieu's reflections on religion within his broader theory of liberty, this article shows how his work anticipates contemporary debates on pluralism, secularism, and the limits of political authority. Rather than offering a doctrine of religious truth, Montesquieu provides a political anthropology of belief, one that remains strikingly relevant in an age marked by both religious resurgence and secular anxiety.

KEYWORDS: Montesquieu; religion; Enlightenment; political moderation; liberty; pluralism; secularism; power; law

RESUMO: Este artigo reinterpreta a concepção de religião de Charles Montesquieu não como um tema periférico em sua filosofia política, mas como um elemento estrutural de sua reflexão mais ampla sobre poder, direito e liberdade. Contra as leituras que retratam Montesquieu seja como um cauteloso defensor da tradição religiosa ou como um dos primeiros secularistas, este artigo argumenta que sua posição é melhor compreendida como uma teoria da moderação. Para Montesquieu, a religião não é nem uma verdade transcendente a ser imposta nem uma mera ilusão a ser eliminada. Ela é uma força social cuja significância política depende de sua relação com as instituições, os costumes e as formas de governo. Através de uma análise textual minuciosa de *O Espírito das Leis* e *Cartas Persas*, este artigo identifica três dimensões interconectadas do entendimento de Montesquieu sobre a religião: sua função moral, sua ambivalência política e sua suscetibilidade à variação histórica. A religião pode cultivar virtudes cívicas, mas também pode legitimar o despotismo. Ela pode estabilizar sociedades, mas também pode radicalizá-las. Essas tensões não são anomalias no pensamento de Montesquieu; elas são o seu próprio fundamento. Ao reconstruir as reflexões de Montesquieu sobre a religião dentro de sua teoria mais ampla da liberdade, este artigo mostra como sua obra antecipa debates contemporâneos sobre pluralismo, secularismo e os limites da autoridade política. Em vez de oferecer uma doutrina de verdade religiosa, Montesquieu fornece uma antropologia política da crença, a qual permanece notavelmente relevante em uma época marcada tanto pelo ressurgimento religioso quanto pela ansiedade secular.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Montesquieu; religião; Iluminismo; moderação política; liberdade; pluralismo; secularismo; poder; direito

¹ Foreign Trade University, Ho Chi Minh City Branch. Email: nguyenxuanxhnnv@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

Montesquieu is usually remembered for a single idea: the separation of powers. This concept has become so dominant in the reception of his work that it often obscures the broader philosophical terrain from which it emerged (Starobinski, 2024). Yet, beneath his constitutional architecture lies a far more unsettled and profound concern, namely, the question of how human societies are held together, disciplined, and, at times, torn apart (Gilmore, 2022). Religion, in Montesquieu's thought, occupies a central place in this inquiry. Unlike many of his Enlightenment contemporaries, Montesquieu did not wage war on religion. Nor did he seek to rescue it from critique. He neither preached atheism nor defended theological orthodoxy (Resnick, 1987). Instead, he treated religion as a political and social phenomenon, something that must be understood not in terms of metaphysical truth, but in terms of its effects on human conduct, institutional stability, and the fragile equilibrium of freedom. What makes this position difficult to categorize is precisely what makes it philosophically rich. Montesquieu refused to reduce religion to a single function. He did not see it merely as an instrument of domination, as later materialist critiques would suggest. Nor did he interpret it as the ultimate source of moral order, as conservative thinkers often claim. Religion, for him, was neither sacred nor profane by essence. It was contingent, historical, and structurally ambiguous (Manent, 2017).

This ambiguity is not accidental. It reflects Montesquieu's deeper conviction that no social force, whether religion, law, or custom, should ever be allowed to become absolute. Absolutization, in his view, is the true enemy of liberty. Montesquieu's reluctance to absolutize religion must be understood within the broader architecture of his political philosophy. His central problem was never the legitimacy of belief, but the dangers of concentration, of power, of authority, of moral monopoly. Just as he famously argued that political power must be divided to prevent tyranny, he similarly implied that no single moral or spiritual authority should dominate the social field without restraint. In this sense, his reflections on religion are not an appendix to his theory of liberty; they are an integral part of it (Schaub, 2017).

Religion, for Montesquieu, participates in what might be called the hidden infrastructure of political life. Laws alone do not govern societies. Institutions alone cannot secure obedience. Even force, when isolated from moral legitimacy, becomes unstable (Spector, 2023). What binds individuals to a political order is a complex web of beliefs, habits, sentiments, and expectations, many of which are shaped, directly or indirectly, by religious traditions. To ignore this dimension would be to misunderstand how political orders actually function. Yet Montesquieu was acutely aware that this same force could easily turn against liberty. When religion aligns itself too closely with political authority, it ceases to act as a moral horizon and becomes instead a tool of domination. When it claims exclusive access to truth, it erodes the conditions of pluralism. When it sanctifies power, it dissolves the distinction between obedience and virtue. For Montesquieu, these were not abstract dangers. They were historical realities, visible in theocratic regimes, religious wars, and

systems of despotic rule (Rahe, 2009).

This double character of religion, its capacity to sustain social cohesion and its potential to legitimize oppression, constitutes the core tension of Montesquieu's thought. He did not attempt to resolve this tension by choosing one side. Instead, he theorized it. He made it the object of political reflection. It is precisely here that Montesquieu diverges from many Enlightenment narratives that depict religion as a remnant of superstition destined to fade before the advance of reason. Montesquieu did not believe that societies could simply outgrow religion. Nor did he think they should. What concerned him was not the existence of religion, but its configuration, its institutional form, its relationship to law, and its integration into civic life (Bandoch, 2016).

This approach explains why Montesquieu consistently resisted universal solutions. He did not propose a single model of church–state relations. He did not prescribe a uniform doctrine of tolerance. Instead, he insisted that the political effects of religion must be evaluated within specific historical, cultural, and legal contexts. A religion that stabilizes a monarchy might destabilize a republic. A belief system that cultivates obedience in one climate might incite fanaticism in another. Such claims may appear relativistic, but they are not. Montesquieu did not deny the existence of universal values. What he denied was the possibility of imposing them abstractly, without regard for social texture. Liberty, for him, was not an idea to be proclaimed; it was a condition to be maintained. And maintaining it required attentiveness to the subtle forces that shape human behavior, among which religion was one of the most powerful (Castro et al., 2025).

This article argues that Montesquieu's reflections on religion form a coherent and philosophically significant theory of political moderation. Religion, in his view, must neither be enthroned nor abolished. It must be limited, pluralized, and integrated into a system of counterweights. Only under these conditions can it contribute to moral life without undermining political freedom. To develop this argument, the article proceeds in five steps. First, it reconstructs the intellectual context in which Montesquieu wrote, paying particular attention to the dominant Enlightenment attitudes toward religion (Mehmood, 2022). Second, it outlines the methodological approach of this study, which combines close textual analysis with a contextual reading of Montesquieu's major works. Third, it identifies the core dimensions of his conception of religion, focusing on its moral, political, and cultural functions. Fourth, it situates these findings within broader debates on secularism, pluralism, and political authority. Finally, it reflects on the contemporary relevance of Montesquieu's thought in societies where religion continues to be both a source of meaning and a site of conflict. In doing so, this article does not seek to transform Montesquieu into a prophet of modern secularism, nor to recruit him as a defender of religious tradition. It aims instead to show how his refusal of extremes, his insistence on nuance, balance, and institutional restraint, offers a framework for thinking about religion that remains remarkably актуал in a world still struggling to reconcile belief and freedom (Zahra et al., 2022).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

Montesquieu's reflections on religion have rarely been treated as a coherent object of study in their own right (Oake, 1953). Most scholarly attention has been directed toward his constitutional theory, his doctrine of the separation of powers, or his typology of political regimes. Religion, when mentioned, often appears as a secondary motif, an illustrative detail rather than a structural component of his thought. This marginalization is not accidental. It reflects a broader tendency in modern political theory to isolate legal and institutional mechanisms from the moral and symbolic forces that sustain them. In early liberal interpretations, Montesquieu is frequently presented as a precursor of secular constitutionalism, a thinker who paved the way for the emancipation of politics from theological authority. Within this framework, his occasional remarks on religion are read either as strategic concessions to his historical context or as residues of pre-modern thinking. Such readings flatten the conceptual complexity of his position. They assume that religion, for Montesquieu, was merely an obstacle to be circumvented rather than a phenomenon to be understood.

Conversely, in more conservative or communitarian interpretations, Montesquieu is sometimes portrayed as a defender of religious tradition, a thinker who recognized the indispensability of faith for moral cohesion. Yet this view, too, tends to simplify his stance. Montesquieu did not romanticize religion. He was keenly aware of its capacity for intolerance, fanaticism, and political capture. His admiration for its moral effects was always tempered by his fear of its absolutization. More recent scholarship has begun to acknowledge this ambivalence. Studies influenced by intellectual history and political anthropology have emphasized Montesquieu's sensitivity to cultural variation, his contextualism, and his rejection of universal moral blueprints. However, even within this literature, religion often remains under-theorized. It is treated as one variable among others, climate, commerce, customs, rather than as a force that interacts dynamically with political power. This article departs from these approaches by treating religion not as a marginal theme, but as a structural element of Montesquieu's political anthropology. It argues that his reflections on religion form part of a broader theory of social equilibrium, in which no single force, whether legal, moral, or spiritual, is allowed to dominate without restraint. To grasp this logic, a methodological framework is required that can account for contradiction, mediation, and historical specificity. For this reason, this study adopts a combination of qualitative textual analysis, contextual interpretation, and, crucially, dialectical and historical materialist perspectives.

Methodological

The primary method of this study is close textual analysis of Montesquieu's major works, especially *The Spirit of the Laws* and *Persian Letters*. Rather than extracting isolated quotations, the analysis focuses on conceptual patterns, argumentative tensions, and structural

motifs. Montesquieu's remarks on religion are not treated as standalone statements, but as moments within a broader theoretical architecture. However, textual analysis alone is insufficient. Montesquieu did not write in a conceptual vacuum. His thought emerged within a specific historical configuration marked by the decline of feudalism, the consolidation of absolute monarchies, the rise of commercial society, and the ongoing struggles between ecclesiastical and secular authorities. To ignore this context would be to misunderstand both the urgency and the limits of his reflections.

This is where the historical materialist perspective becomes indispensable. Historical materialism does not reduce ideas to mere economic reflections, but it insists that intellectual formations are inseparable from the material conditions of social life. Montesquieu's concern with religion cannot be detached from the transformations of European society in the early modern period: the weakening of traditional bonds, the reconfiguration of sovereignty, and the emergence of new forms of political legitimacy. His fear of fanaticism, for instance, cannot be understood apart from the memory of religious wars. His insistence on moderation reflects not an abstract moral preference, but a response to concrete historical crises.

At the same time, Montesquieu's thought cannot be captured by a purely linear or deterministic model of causality. His work is saturated with tensions: between liberty and order, faith and reason, tradition and reform. These tensions are not inconsistencies; they are the very substance of his theory. To analyze them, this study employs a dialectical approach. Dialectical materialism, in this context, is not used as a dogmatic framework, but as a critical lens. It allows us to see religion in Montesquieu's thought not as a fixed entity, but as a contradictory social force, one that both stabilizes and destabilizes, both humanizes and dominates. Religion appears as a site of struggle between competing tendencies: moralization and mystification, solidarity and exclusion, meaning and obedience. Rather than resolving these contradictions, Montesquieu seeks to institutionalize them through mechanisms of balance and limitation. This dialectical perspective also clarifies why Montesquieu refuses absolutist positions. He does not ask whether religion is "true" or "false." He asks what it does, how it functions, and under what conditions it becomes dangerous. This shift from metaphysical evaluation to social analysis marks a decisive break with theological and anti-theological discourses alike. By combining close reading with dialectical and historical materialist approaches, this study reconstructs Montesquieu's conception of religion as a dynamic, relational phenomenon. Religion is not treated as an isolated belief system, but as a social practice embedded in power relations, legal frameworks, and material conditions. This methodological synthesis allows us to move beyond simplistic classifications, such as "pro-religion" or "anti-religion", and toward a more nuanced understanding of Montesquieu's political anthropology.

3. RESEARCH RESULTS

3.1 Religion and the moral structuring of social life

Montesquieu's analysis of religion begins not with theological propositions, but with an inquiry into how social orders are sustained in everyday life. He repeatedly insists that laws alone cannot govern societies. Legal prescriptions, however rational or well-designed, remain fragile if they are not supported by habits, customs, and internalized dispositions. These dispositions, which he famously calls *mœurs*, operate beneath the level of conscious deliberation. They shape what individuals perceive as natural, acceptable, or reprehensible. Religion, in this framework, is one of the most powerful forces in the production of such dispositions. Rather than viewing religion as a collection of doctrines, Montesquieu understands it as a moral technology. It forms subjects by shaping their sense of obligation, guilt, hope, and meaning. This formative function is not accidental. It is the very reason why religion has historically played such a central role in political life. Individuals who obey only out of fear of punishment remain unstable political subjects. Individuals who internalize norms, by contrast, regulate themselves. Religion contributes to this internalization by connecting moral conduct to transcendent narratives, thereby transforming social rules into personal convictions (Ming, 2025).

This is why Montesquieu refuses the Enlightenment fantasy that morality can be engineered purely through rational legislation. Human beings, he suggests, do not act primarily as abstract moral calculators. They are affective, habitual, and symbolic creatures. They require narratives that anchor their behavior in a meaningful horizon. Religion provides precisely such horizons, even when its metaphysical claims are contested. Yet Montesquieu is careful not to romanticize this function. Moralization, in his account, is never neutral. It always implies a form of discipline. The same mechanisms that encourage self-restraint can easily be mobilized to enforce conformity. Religion does not merely stabilize social life. It also structures what counts as deviance. In doing so, it participates in the distribution of symbolic power (Edwards, 2007).

This insight distinguishes Montesquieu from both religious moralism and secular moral engineering. Against religious moralism, he denies that moral effects justify absolute authority. Against secular moral engineering, he doubts that purely rational norms can achieve the same depth of internalization. Religion, in his thought, is neither sacred essence nor ideological illusion. It is a historically contingent force whose moral effects depend on its institutional form and political embedding. What matters, then, is not whether religion produces morality, but what kind of morality it produces. Montesquieu draws a crucial distinction between moral formation that encourages civic responsibility and moral formation that suppresses judgment. The former supports liberty. The latter erodes it. A society in which individuals act virtuously out of reflective commitment differs fundamentally from one in which they act out of unquestioning obedience.

This distinction explains why Montesquieu consistently associates political freedom with moderation. Moral absolutism, even when motivated by sincere belief, tends to collapse the space of judgment. It transforms

ethical questions into matters of submission. When this happens, moral life ceases to be a sphere of autonomy and becomes an extension of authority. Religion, therefore, cannot be evaluated in isolation from the political structures within which it operates. The same belief system may cultivate responsibility in one context and fanaticism in another. Montesquieu does not search for the true religion. He searches for the conditions under which belief remains compatible with freedom.

In this sense, his analysis anticipates later sociological approaches that treat religion not as a metaphysical object, but as a social practice. What is distinctive, however, is his insistence that this practice must be politically constrained. Religion must shape conscience without monopolizing it. It must inspire conduct without sanctifying command. This delicate balance is not guaranteed by doctrine. It must be institutionalized. Montesquieu's political thought, at its core, is an attempt to imagine such institutionalizations. His reflections on religion are inseparable from this broader project. They are not ancillary remarks. They are structural components of his theory of social equilibrium.

3.2 Religion and political authority

If religion shapes the moral dispositions of individuals, it also participates directly in the constitution of political authority. Montesquieu repeatedly emphasizes that power is never sustained by coercion alone. Even the most brutal regimes require some form of legitimacy, some symbolic framework that transforms obedience into something more than mere submission. Religion has historically provided precisely this function. By linking political order to transcendent meaning, it converts contingent arrangements into apparently natural or sacred ones. This legitimizing function, however, is precisely what makes religion politically dangerous. When authority is no longer perceived as human and revisable, but as divinely sanctioned, the possibility of critique collapses. Montesquieu sees this collapse as one of the defining features of despotic regimes. In such systems, law ceases to be a public and rational structure. It becomes an extension of personal will, often wrapped in religious language. What concerns Montesquieu is not simply the existence of religious belief, but its fusion with sovereignty. When political power claims sacred authority, it escapes all forms of limitation. This is why Montesquieu's fear of despotism is inseparable from his fear of sacralized power. Despotism, for him, is not merely excessive rule. It is rule that has abolished the distinction between command and right.

In this sense, Montesquieu anticipates later critiques of political theology. He understands that when power presents itself as holy, resistance becomes heresy. Dissent becomes sin. Law becomes dogma. Under such conditions, even cruelty can be justified as divine necessity. This is not an accidental perversion of religion. It is a structural possibility whenever belief is absorbed into sovereignty. Montesquieu's solution is not to eradicate religion from public life. He does not advocate for a purely secular political space in the modern sense. Instead, he insists on

a structural separation between moral authority and coercive authority. Religion may guide consciences, but it must not command bodies (Rasch, 2016). The moment it does, it ceases to be a moral force and becomes a political weapon. This distinction explains why Montesquieu places such importance on institutional design. Liberty, in his view, is not guaranteed by good intentions. It is produced by arrangements that prevent any single force from becoming absolute. Just as political power must be divided to prevent tyranny, symbolic power must be dispersed to prevent domination. Religion must be one voice among others, not the final arbiter of meaning.

Importantly, Montesquieu does not deny that religion can support political stability. He acknowledges that belief can motivate obedience, sacrifice, and social trust. But he insists that stability achieved through sacralization is always fragile. Once belief is shaken, authority collapses dramatically. Political orders grounded in divine legitimacy are less adaptable, less capable of reform, and more prone to violent crisis. This insight reveals Montesquieu's deep historical sensitivity. He does not treat religion as an abstract category. He observes how it interacts with concrete forms of rule. In monarchies, religious symbolism may support hierarchy. In republics, it may cultivate civic virtue. In despotic regimes, it may sanctify fear. These are not accidental associations. They reflect the way belief systems become entangled with institutional logics.

What matters, then, is not whether religion exists, but how it is politically embedded. Montesquieu's refusal to absolutize any form of legitimacy leads him to a relational understanding of authority. Power must always be exposed to contestation. Religion, when it claims finality, closes this space. This is why Montesquieu never formulates a doctrine of sacred politics. He formulates a politics of limitation. Religion must be prevented from becoming sovereign. Sovereignty must be prevented from becoming sacred. Only under these conditions can belief coexist with liberty. In this sense, Montesquieu does not propose a secularization of society. He proposes a desacralization of power. The difference is decisive. One abolishes belief. The other protects freedom (Krause, 2023).

3.3 Religion, fanaticism, and despotism

One of Montesquieu's most penetrating insights lies in his analysis of fanaticism. He does not treat fanaticism as a mere psychological anomaly or as the product of irrational minds. Instead, he understands it as a political phenomenon that emerges under specific social and institutional conditions. Fanaticism, in his view, is not simply excessive belief. It is belief that has been detached from judgment and transformed into absolute certainty. This distinction is crucial. Montesquieu does not condemn faith itself. What he fears is the moment when faith abolishes doubt, when conviction becomes immune to reflection. In such cases, religion no longer functions as a moral guide. It becomes a totalizing force that absorbs all other criteria of action. The individual no longer acts, but obeys. The conscience no longer deliberates, but submits (Fanaticism, 2023).

Fanaticism, for Montesquieu, is therefore not an intensification of religion, but a deformation of it. It arises when belief is insulated from contradiction. This insulation can be produced by isolation, by censorship, by the absence of plural voices, and by the fusion of religious authority with political power. Under these conditions, belief ceases to be one orientation among others. It becomes the sole horizon of meaning. This is why Montesquieu repeatedly associates fanaticism with despotic structures. Despotism, as he defines it, is not merely a concentration of power. It is a system in which fear replaces law, and command replaces normativity (Petersen, 2023). In such systems, religion often becomes a perfect complement. It translates fear into virtue and obedience into piety. The danger, Montesquieu suggests, is not that individuals believe too much, but that they are no longer allowed to interpret. Interpretation requires distance. Fanaticism abolishes this distance. It collapses the distinction between meaning and command. Once this collapse occurs, moral reasoning becomes impossible.

In *The Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu contrasts societies governed by fear with those governed by honor or virtue. Fear simplifies. It reduces the complexity of social life to a single imperative. Religion, when absorbed into this logic, becomes a mechanism of simplification. It no longer opens worlds. It closes them. What makes fanaticism politically devastating is its capacity to naturalize cruelty. When violence is perceived as divinely mandated, it no longer appears as violence. It becomes necessity. In this sense, fanaticism is not merely excessive devotion. It is the moral anesthetization of power. Montesquieu's critique here is remarkably modern. He anticipates later analyses of ideological extremism, even though his vocabulary is religious. What concerns him is not the content of belief, but its structure. Any belief system that claims totality, infallibility, and exclusive legitimacy becomes politically lethal (Yoon, 2023).

Yet Montesquieu does not imagine that fanaticism can be eradicated through education alone. He does not believe that rational enlightenment automatically dissolves extremism. What produces fanaticism is not ignorance in the narrow sense. It is the absence of institutional pluralism. This insight explains his insistence on structural remedies. Fanaticism is not defeated by arguments. It is contained by arrangements. When belief systems coexist, when no single authority monopolizes meaning, when power is divided and exposed to contestation, fanaticism loses its political efficacy.

Montesquieu therefore does not approach fanaticism as a moral pathology, but as a political risk. This risk cannot be eliminated, but it can be managed. Management, in his sense, does not mean repression. It means dispersion. Meaning must not be centralized. This approach sharply distinguishes him from both theological and rationalist solutions. Theological solutions seek to correct belief. Rationalist solutions seek to replace belief. Montesquieu seeks to limit belief politically (Meints-Stender, 2024).

What he fears most is not false belief, but unquestionable belief. Once belief becomes unquestionable, it becomes despotic, regardless of its content. In this sense, Montesquieu's reflections on fanaticism are not

peripheral. They belong to the core of his theory of liberty. Liberty, for him, is not the absence of authority. It is the absence of final authority.

3.4 Religious pluralism and the conditions of Liberty

For Montesquieu, liberty is not a metaphysical abstraction, nor is it a mere legal condition. It is a fragile equilibrium sustained by a complex interplay of institutions, customs, beliefs, and power relations. Within this configuration, religious pluralism does not appear as a moral ideal in the modern sense, but as a structural necessity. He does not defend pluralism because it is inherently good, but because it is politically indispensable. A society in which multiple belief systems coexist is a society in which no single worldview can easily monopolize moral authority. This dispersion of symbolic power functions as a safeguard against absolutism. Where meaning is distributed, domination becomes more difficult. Where interpretation is plural, command loses its sacred aura (Krause, 2005). Montesquieu's insight here is profoundly counterintuitive. Instead of seeking unity as the foundation of order, he identifies heterogeneity as the precondition of freedom. Unity, when imposed at the level of belief, tends to generate conformity. Conformity, when politically instrumentalized, tends toward despotism. Pluralism, by contrast, preserves a margin of uncertainty. This uncertainty is not a defect. It is the very space in which judgment, critique, and moral autonomy can emerge. Individuals who are exposed to multiple normative horizons are less likely to mistake obedience for virtue. They are compelled, even if reluctantly, to compare, to reflect, and to choose. This is not a romantic vision of tolerance. Montesquieu does not believe that pluralism produces harmony. He believes it produces limits. These limits are precisely what make freedom possible (Fanaticism, 2023).

What is striking is that Montesquieu does not ground pluralism in a doctrine of natural rights or in an abstract theory of human dignity. His justification is structural rather than normative. Pluralism prevents the fusion of power and meaning. It interrupts the tendency of political authority to present itself as inevitable. In this sense, pluralism is not primarily about protecting minorities. It is about destabilizing majorities. When a single belief system dominates, it does not merely govern behavior. It governs imagination. It defines what can be thought, what can be desired, and what can be feared. Under such conditions, even resistance becomes unintelligible.

Montesquieu's defense of pluralism is therefore inseparable from his defense of political contestability. A free society is not one in which people agree. It is one in which disagreement remains institutionally viable. Religion, when pluralized, becomes part of this ecology of contestation. It no longer commands universally. It persuades locally. It no longer defines reality. It offers interpretations (Cohler, 2021). This transformation does not weaken religion. It prevents it from becoming despotic. Montesquieu does not imagine a society without belief. He imagines a society in which belief is never final. This is the deepest continuity between his reflections

on religion and his theory of separation of powers. Both aim at the same target: the prevention of totality. Political freedom, in his thought, does not mean self-rule in a metaphysical sense. It means that no single force, whether legal, moral, or spiritual, is allowed to become absolute. Pluralism is the social expression of this principle. It ensures that meaning remains open, authority remains limited, and liberty remains thinkable.

4. DISCUSSION

Montesquieu's conception of religion occupies an uneasy position within the intellectual landscape of the Enlightenment. He neither shares the militant anti-clericalism of some of his contemporaries nor endorses the theological conservatism that sought to preserve religious authority as an unquestionable foundation of political order. This ambivalence is not a sign of indecision. It reflects a deeper theoretical orientation. Montesquieu does not ask whether religion is true. He asks what religion does within concrete historical formations. This shift from epistemology to political anthropology marks a decisive departure from both theological and rationalist frameworks. Where Hobbes sought to subordinate religion entirely to sovereign authority, Montesquieu sought to fragment its political influence. Where Locke attempted to protect religion through the language of individual conscience, Montesquieu approached it as a collective force that must be institutionally constrained. His position, therefore, cannot be reduced to early liberal tolerance, nor can it be assimilated into modern secularism. It is a theory of limitation rather than emancipation. This becomes particularly clear when his thought is contrasted with Spinoza's. Spinoza famously argued that religious authority should be stripped of its political power through rational critique and the assertion of freedom of thought. Montesquieu, by contrast, does not believe that critique alone can neutralize religious absolutism. He recognizes that belief does not disappear when it is refuted. It persists as habit, as affect, as social identity. The task of political theory, in his view, is not to abolish belief but to prevent it from becoming sovereign. This is a far more modest and, in many respects, more realistic ambition. It acknowledges the limits of reason without surrendering to irrationalism.

From a dialectical materialist perspective, Montesquieu's analysis can be read as an early attempt to grasp the contradictory social functions of religion. He does not reduce religion to false consciousness, nor does he elevate it to a transcendental source of meaning. Instead, he treats it as a historically situated practice that both stabilizes and mystifies social relations. Religion can legitimize domination, but it can also restrain violence. It can naturalize inequality, but it can also articulate moral protest. These contradictions are not anomalies. They are structural. Montesquieu's refusal to resolve them theoretically mirrors his insistence

that they must be managed institutionally. He does not believe that society can be purified of contradiction. He believes that contradiction must be rendered politically harmless. This position resonates with later sociological analyses, particularly those of Max Weber, who emphasized the role of religious worldviews in shaping ethical conduct and economic behavior. Yet Montesquieu differs in a crucial respect. Weber sought to explain the causal influence of belief systems on social structures. Montesquieu sought to limit their political consequences. His question is not primarily why religions shape societies, but how they should be embedded so that they do not dominate them. This normative orientation distinguishes him from descriptive sociology and aligns him more closely with a critical theory of power. In contemporary debates on secularism, Montesquieu's relevance becomes even more apparent. Modern secularism often oscillates between two extremes. On the one hand, it seeks to privatize religion, treating it as a purely individual matter without political significance. On the other hand, it attempts to neutralize religion through legal abstraction, assuming that formal equality before the law is sufficient to dissolve its influence. Montesquieu would likely reject both assumptions. He would argue that religion cannot be privatized because it shapes collective imaginaries, and it cannot be neutralized by law alone because it operates through moral internalization rather than external coercion.

This insight is particularly important in societies marked by religious resurgence. Where secular theorists often interpret this resurgence as a regression, Montesquieu would interpret it as a reminder of the limits of rational governance. Human beings do not live by institutions alone. They live by narratives, hopes, fears, and symbolic frameworks. Political orders that ignore this dimension become brittle. Yet political orders that sacralize it become despotic. Montesquieu's entire project can be read as an attempt to navigate this narrow corridor. From the standpoint of historical materialism, one might criticize Montesquieu for underestimating the material roots of religious authority. He often treats belief as a cultural variable rather than as an expression of class relations or economic structures. Yet this criticism must be nuanced. Montesquieu does not deny that material conditions matter. He insists that climate, commerce, and social organization shape belief systems. What he resists is reductionism. He does not believe that religion can be deduced mechanically from economic structures. He sees it as a mediating force that transforms material relations into moral meanings. This mediation is precisely what gives religion its political power.

Montesquieu's concept of moderation emerges here as a political virtue rather than a moral sentiment. Moderation is not a matter of temperament. It is a structural achievement. It must be built into institutions, legal arrangements, and symbolic hierarchies. Religion, when integrated into such a framework, can contribute to social cohesion without becoming a tool of domination. When removed from it, it becomes volatile. In this sense, Montesquieu offers neither a theology of politics nor a secular utopia. He offers a theory of fragility. Political orders, he suggests, are always precarious. They depend on forces that exceed their control. Religion is one of those forces. The task of political

theory is not to eliminate such forces, but to prevent them from becoming absolute. This insight places Montesquieu at a critical distance from both revolutionary and conservative traditions. Revolutionaries often seek to destroy religious authority in the name of reason. Conservatives often seek to preserve it in the name of order. Montesquieu distrusts both impulses. Destruction produces chaos. Preservation produces stagnation. What is needed is neither rupture nor sanctification, but permanent limitation. This, ultimately, is what makes Montesquieu's conception of religion so difficult to classify. It is not an answer. It is a framework. It does not resolve tensions. It institutionalizes them. It does not promise harmony. It promises survivability.

5. CONCLUSION

Montesquieu's reflections on religion do not form a doctrine, but a political sensibility. He neither sanctifies belief nor seeks to abolish it. Instead, he treats religion as a historically situated force whose social and political effects depend on its institutional embedding. What makes his position distinctive is not moderation as a moral preference, but limitation as a political principle. Religion, for Montesquieu, must neither dominate nor disappear. It must be contained within a framework of pluralism, counterweights, and legal restraint. This approach allows him to escape both theological absolutism and secular reductionism. He does not ask whether religion is true, but whether it becomes sovereign. In doing so, he anticipates contemporary concerns about extremism, political theology, and symbolic domination. Montesquieu's enduring relevance lies in his refusal of final authorities. Liberty, in his thought, is not the absence of belief, but the absence of unchallengeable belief.

REFERENCES

- Bandoch, J. (2016). Montesquieu's selective religious intolerance in *Of the Spirit of the Laws*. *Political Studies*, 64(2), 351–367. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1467-9248.12174>
- Castro, G. J., Olivieri, A. G., & de Lacerda Castro, L. (2025). A teoria política de Montesquieu: As visões da história e o estado de natureza. *Revista Processus de Estudos de Gestão, Jurídicos e Financeiros*, 16(51), e511493. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17398555>
- Cohler, A. M. (2021). Montesquieu's comparative politics and the spirit of American constitutionalism. University Press of Kansas. <https://byvn.net/UJ11>
- Edwards, J. (2007). Enlightenment, law and nature: Montesquieu and Rousseau. In *The radical attitude and modern political theory* (pp. 63–93). Palgrave Macmillan UK. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230800908_4
- Fanaticism, T. (2023). Montesquieu's restrained approach. In *Fanaticism and the history of philosophy*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781032128207-9>
- Gilmore, N. K. (2022). Montesquieu and the spirit of Rome. Liverpool University Press. <https://www.liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/doi/abs/10.3828/9781802070248>
- Krause, S. R. (2005). Two concepts of liberty in Montesquieu. *Perspectives on Political Science*, 34(2), 88–96. <https://doi.org/10.3200/PPSC.34.2.88-96>
- Krause, S. R. (2023). Political sovereignty in Montesquieu. In *The Cambridge companion to Montesquieu* (pp. 162–181). Cambridge University Press. <https://byvn.net/T6uk>

- Manent, P. (2017). Montesquieu and the separation of powers. In Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu (pp. 443–454). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315095813>
- Mehmood, S. (2022). The impact of presidential appointment of judges: Montesquieu or the Federalists? *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 14(4), 411–445. <https://doi.org/10.1257/app.20210176>
- Meints-Stender, W. (2024). Understanding political change with Montesquieu. In *What kind of government? Rethinking contemporary forms of government after the break in tradition* (pp. 131–140). Springer Nature Switzerland. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-61171-1_8
- Ming, C. (2025). Science and religion in Montesquieu's thought: The scientific foundation of the religious Enlightenment. *Chinese Studies in History*, 58(4), 262–282. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00094633.2025.2570073>
- Oake, R. B. (1953). Montesquieu's religious ideas. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 548–560. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2707701>
- Petersen, F. (2023). Montesquieu and the concept of the non-arbitrary state. *The European Legacy*, 28(1), 25–43. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2022.2106638>
- Rahe, P. A. (2009). Montesquieu and the logic of liberty: War, religion, commerce, climate, terrain, technology, uneasiness of mind, the spirit of political vigilance, and the foundations of the modern republic. Yale University Press. <https://byvn.net/OUV8>
- Rasch, W. (2016). Political theology and political form: Power, contingency, authority, belief. *Journal for Cultural Research*, 20(3), 217–234. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14797585.2016.1141830>
- Resnick, P. (1987). Montesquieu revisited, or the mixed constitution and the separation of powers in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue canadienne de science politique*, 20(1), 97–115. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423900048964>
- Schaub, D. (2017). Of believers and barbarians: Montesquieu's enlightened toleration. In Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu (pp. 471–493). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315095813>
- Spector, C. (2023). Montesquieu. In *Handbook of the history of the philosophy of law and social philosophy: Volume 1: From Plato to Rousseau* (pp. 249–257). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-19542-6_33
- Starobinski, J. (2024). Montesquieu. Seuil.
- Yoon, K. (2023). Oriental despotism and the limits of doux commerce, from Montesquieu to Raynal. *Political Theory*, 51(3), 456–480. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/00905917221134718>
- Zahra, A., Charisma, C. A. T., Azaby, M. A. R., & Fadilah, S. N. (2022). Teori pemisahan kekuasaan Trias Politica dalam pemikiran filsafat hukum Montesquieu. *Praxis: Jurnal Filsafat Terapan*, 1(01). <https://journal.forikami.com/index.php/praxis/article/view/533>