

Julian the Apostate, Montaigne, Livinas, and the Otherness of Democracy

Research Proposal for the Democracy, Culture and Catholicism

International Research Project

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In his brief essay "De la liberté de conscience", the Renaissance author and philosopher Michel de Montaigne holds up as his hero the fourth-century Roman emperor Julian, labeled by

l'Évêque de Sens as "the Apostate". Montaigne's justification of that such epithet

Edward Gibbon got him in immediate trouble with Church authorities, and was one of the

his *Épître* was placed on the *Index Librorum prohibitorum*. Montaigne had to travel to

Rome in person in order to persuade the Vatican censors to allow him to publish his work. One

wonders what Montaigne could have said to get himself off the hook, as the essay lauds the

Julian's *renouveau* in *l'esprit* and *l'opinion*, praising the religious pluralism he

found in *l'Égypte* and *l'Inde*, and his *liberté* in *l'Égypte*.

Montaigne wrote during the Wars of Religion, when French Catholics and Protestants

spent more than twenty years slaughtering each other. The questions of freedom of conscience

of religious toleration, and of the kind of state most likely to foster internal and external peace

were therefore not abstractions to Montaigne, himself a moderate Catholic who played an

important role in bringing about the compromises that brought an end to the civil war

Montaigne's responses to these questions are conditioned, then, by his experience of the Wars of

Religion, and his *renouveau* in *l'esprit* and *l'opinion* from Spanish Jews who fled religious

persecution in their homeland, and by Renaissance encounters with the New World, which

provide for Montaigne examples of what *not* to do when face-to-face with those different from

ourselves. At the heart of his thought on these issues are two fundamental questions: First,

what are we to do when confronted with the Other, a person who is unlike us and whose very

presence constitutes a direct challenge to our values and existence? Second, what civic

structure, what political framework is most likely to provide the conditions necessary for

fruitful assistance with that Other?

These problems have not gone away: if anything, they have presented themselves over the last century on a larger scale, and with even more urgency, than in Montaigne's time. One

of the most important modern responses to this set of issues is found in the work of Emmanuel

Lévinas, who examines, like Montaigne, the relationship between subject and Other, between

ourselves and those who, simply by virtue of not being ourselves, constitute a fundamental

challenge to our existence. This challenge is, in Lévinas's view, *the* philosophical question that

conditioned by direct experience, in his case that of the Holocaust. Given that the Other is, *a*

priori, a potential—and often an actual—threat, how are we to respond? And what are the

philosophical conditions of possibility, and the real-world civic frameworks, that will allow us to

do so, particularly when entire political entities—whole states—may have been organized on the

principle that the Other must be not engaged but annihilated?

I propose to examine the writings of these two authors—one a Jew whose work has

greatly influenced contemporary Catholic thinkers, the other a professing Catholic of Jewish

familial (and, I shall argue, intellectual) antecedents—in order to understand how the direct

philosophical and practical experience of the Other, and of being the Other, may constitute for

subsequent generations of readers have had no trouble discerning in him one of the first theorists

of the good and democratic state. I believe that the thought of Lévinas is fundamentally democratic

in nature, insofar as it offers a radical critique of any state that denies the humanity of any person

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Both Montaigne and Lévinas understand that the Kantian ideal of purely disinterested action must remain an abstract ideal: for both thinkers, we are always already as it were embodied, engaged with our own interest, and any possibility for right action in the world, whether between individuals or within a society, i. e. political action, must therefore take this prior engagement into account. Hence, they ask, how, and under what conditions, can we constitute ourselves in such a way as to have as a condition of our existence--or to demand by

...of fundamental importance in scrutinizing the possibility, and in

...the nature of any conceivable democratic society in the modern world - This is -

...and demanded by ever greater numbers of people living in an ever greater range of cultures

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...and encourages an "other" can arise as a society truly live

...of Montaigne and of Lévinas has much to teach us in this regard

As will be seen from the foregoing, the project I am proposing is situated at the

intersections of several disciplines: literature, intellectual history, and philosophy. It takes as its

starting point close readings of specific texts and will at all times remain grounded both in those

texts and in their intellectual and historical contexts. In this I am merely following the lead of

the authors I propose to study, since both Montaigne and Lévinas anchor their work firmly in the

real world of human experience. For Montaigne, works to be studied will include, in addition to

"De la Liberté de passion", "De la coutume", "Des cannibales", "De l'inégalité qui est entre

l'homme et la bête", "De la conscience", "De la cruauté", "Des courages", "De la mort", "De la

réputation", "De l'incertitude de nos actions", "De l'avarice", "De l'orgueil", and of course the

Apologie de Raymond Sebond, and for Lévinas, Totalité et infini, Autrement qu'être ou au-delà

de l'essence, and Difficile liberté, among others. The essay I am here proposing, specific to the

Democracy, Culture and Globalism: International Research Project will likely be a part of a

translation of some of the Other in Montaigne, Lévinas, and other authors

portions of which will be suitable for publication in literary journals such as *PMLA*, *L'Esprit*
créateur, or *Modern Philology*, as well as interdisciplinary journals such as *Critical Inquiry* or

Representations. I plan ultimately to bring the various parts of the project together in a

book. It is my hope in essence that this project will contribute to an informed discussion

of contemporary modes of democratization, and help illuminate how democracy can take on

forms adapted to real people and real experience in the 21st century.