

## **Faith, reason and belief in the “Apology for Raymond Sebon”: are we Christians as we are Perigordines or Germans?**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper analyzes Montaigne's concept of "faith", in comparison with the concepts of "reason" and "belief", in relation to the role assigned to authority by the author of the *Essays*. The paper discusses mainly the rather established claim that Montaigne's skepticism would reduce faith to the scope of customs and beliefs.

**Keywords:** Montaigne, Skepticism, Faith, Belief, Reason

### **Introduction**

Montaigne's thought is presented to us by both classic and enlightening interpretations, such as Hugo Friedrich's and Jean Starobinski's, as a philosophy of pure immanence, simply human, that is, in which the questions connected to religion and faith, exactly because they are unattainable to human reason, lose their place. We are Christians as we are Perigordines or Germans – this crystal clear sentence from *Apology for Raymond Sebon*<sup>1</sup> would sum up, after all, the question religion and faith in Montaigne. Starobinski writes about that: “ (...) in the best situation, Christian faith can be respected because it has become a habit – for lack of a better certainty.”<sup>2</sup> Faith would then be assimilated to the scope of beliefs and religion to customs: as a rule of life, Montaigne would recommend the skeptical precept: “follow the customs of your country”.

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1 MONTAIGNE. *Essays*, II, 12, 445/179. In the references to Montaigne's *Essays*, the number in Roman indicates the book, and the first number in Arabic, the chapter. Indicated, next, are the pages of the French edition by Pierre Villey followed by the pages of the Brazilian translation by Rosemary C. Abílio and the pages of the English translation, by Charles Cotton.

2 STAROBINSKI. *Montaigne em Movimento. [Montaigne in Movement]*, p. 260.

This view seems to us to be as true as it is limited. True in the sense that, doubtlessly, the *Essays* develop in the scope of that which is simply human, as their author writes in “*On Prayers*”: “I for my part propose fancies merely human and merely my own, and that simply as human fancies, (...) things which I discourse of according to my own notions, not as I believe, according to God” (I, 56, 323/482/155). Here we have the expression of an unquestionable secular thought: in fact, in the *Essays*, what the Church declares about regret or prayers is, so to speak, put between brackets as the authority's unquestionable truth – because above human reason; whereas the presence, in everyday human life, of the attempts at repentance and the effective practice of prayers is subjected to a strict and absolutely autonomous analysis in relation to what orthodoxy establishes.<sup>3</sup> The important thing is that, in Montaigne's perspective, regret and prayers become object of reflection as dimensions of human life, and, in this sense, the scope of faith is sent to the ground of custom and belief, from which it never departs in the dynamics of the text of the *Essays*. One should ask if this procedure allows us, with so many interpreters, to conclude that Montaigne naturalizes the supernatural dimension and definitely reduces the question of faith to the scope of customs and faiths.

However, it seems to us that the remark made above is not enough to account for the problem of faith and religion in the *Essays*. Recent interpretations have given more importance to the role of Christianity in Montaigne's thought. Leaving aside extreme positions, such as Andrée Comparot's, which makes him to a loyal Agostinian, or a Miernowiskian's, who finds in the *Essays* the spirit of negative theology, going through Screech, who turns Montaigne into a “tridentine advertiser”,<sup>4</sup> we shall keep Frédéric Brahami's claim that Christianity plays a fundamental role in the structuring of Montaigne's thought, and notably in the configuration of the author's skepticism.<sup>5</sup> Then one sees the need to re-situate the problem of faith within the dynamics of the *Essays*. In order to do that we will, firstly, analyze the dyad faith-reason, and secondly, the dyad faith-belief and, then, develop a reflection on the authority question.

## **Faith and Reason**

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3 So for all Montaigne's interpreters the problem is to conciliate his protest of faith and submission with his heterodox positions. This question is best treated by André Tournon, “Que c'est que croire”, 1993.

4 See TOURNON, 1993, p. 180, note 6.

5 This thesis can be found in two of Brahami's works: *Le scepticisme de Montaigne* and *Le travail du scepticisme*.

We shall start from the consequences Montaigne draws from the very explicit claim that in the *Essays* God is absolutely transcendent and is above all human understanding. Thus, since truth belongs to the scope of the divine and being possessed by God, it cannot belong to the scope of human reason. Montaigne writes in the “Apology”:

What does truth mean, when she preaches to us to fly worldly philosophy, when she so often inculcates to us, that our wisdom is but folly in the sight of God; that the vainest of all vanities is man; that the man who presumes upon his wisdom, does not yet know what wisdom is; and that man, who is nothing, if he thinks himself to be anything, but seduces and deceives himself? (II, 12, 449/176/213)

This radical connection between truth and the supernatural dimension has as a first consequence to dissociate the traditional couple human reason-truth that, even in a restricted way, had always gone together in Christian theology. This means that not only human reason is prevented from knowing what is “above” it (which would distinguish divine truths from human truths), but that *all* truth is in God. Thus, the term “reason”, in Montaigne, loses its essential definition of faculty of knowledge and of relation with truth, and opens itself to a rich polysemy.<sup>6</sup> Analyzing this question, Frédéric Brahami points out what he calls “naturalization” of reason: reason becomes one among the several instinctive functions in man and is, thus, aimed at serving life.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, we should note that the base of Montaigne's “skepticism” does not derive, as in his predecessors, from the verification of the equipolency of opinions; on the contrary, the critique of reason in the “Apology” is developed within the frameworks of a religious problem and is conceived as a religious posture. Christianity – or at least what Montaigne thinks to be its most pious expression – outlines the framework in which he registers his critique of reason. Placing himself in a perspective for which God is absolute transcendence, the author of the “Apology for Raymond Sebon” closes human

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6 See also my article “Montaigne's Reasons”, to be shortly published in the review *Síntese*.

7 See BRAHAMI, *Le Travail du scepticisme*, p. 36.

reason within finitude and claims his incapacity of understanding truth. The supernatural and the natural dimensions not only differ, as do the superior and the inferior, but, essentially, do not establish any kind of contact, except for pure divine decision, by “miracle”, as Montaigne likes to say – who never denies this possibility, though he had never seen it happen. As the theologian Sebon, he starts from a fundamental Christian dogma – the idea of nature as creation and man as “creature” -, but he draws from it the anti-Sebonian consequence that all discourse about God is impossible, for the creature does not reach the Creator. As Paul Mathias observes, “the impossibility of natural theology [in the sense of a rational understanding of God] is due to what one knows about Creation, not to what one ignores about it”.<sup>8</sup>

We can establish, then, that: (1) Montaigne's religious position aims essentially at understanding the work of destitution of reason in the “Apology”; (2) the pair faith-reason opposes to what has and what does not have relation with truth. Brahami concludes about it:

reason having disappeared from Montaigne's anthropology, the spirit divides itself between a faith so pure that nothing can be said about it, except that it changes man, and an ordinary belief that is man's very form. Putting faith above discourse, reducing man to his condition of creature who does not take part in anyway (...) in deity (...), the elementary fact of human life is now belief.<sup>9</sup>

That is, we are Christians just as we are Perigourdines or Germans.

## **Faith and Belief**

Will this be, though, Montaigne's last word on faith? The course we will take is to analyze the dyad faith-reason, as it appears in the “Apology” and in other chapters of the *Essays*. Now, what is faith? What is belief?

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<sup>8</sup> MATHIAS. Introduction ... , p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> BRAHAMI. *Le travail du scepticisme*, p. 61.

Textually, the difference is established from the first pages of the “Apology”:

If we held upon God by the mediation of a lively faith; if we held upon God by Him and not by us (...). (II, 12, 441/165/209)

If we did believe in Him, I do not say by faith, but with a simple belief (...) if we did believe Him, or knew Him as any other history, or as one of our companions (...) at least He would go equal in our affections with riches, pleasures, glory, and our friends. (II, 12, 444/169/210-211)

We shall try a definition: belief results from the scope of experience and has rationally unfounded certainties that model everyday behavior; now, faith is described as something inspired by God, an infusion originating from above. Faith has divine origin, but the links constituted by human means (discourses and custom) would be belief. Moreover, Montaigne says that faith would be inflexible and inexorable and would have virtue actions as effects; it has supernatural origin, therefore it would lead to practice beyond nature and knowledge beyond belief, towards truth, as the first passage from the previous citation continues:

(...) if we had a divine basis and foundation, human accidents would not have the power to shake us as they do (...). If we were but touched with this ray of divinity, it would appear throughout; not only our words, but our works also, would carry its brightness and lustre (...). If we had but one single grain of faith we should move mountains from their places, says the sacred Word; (...) our actions would not be merely human (...). (II, 12, 441-442/165-166/209-210)

The conditional clause is explained by the fact that, making use of experience, Montaigne does not find any sign, any clue that the existing religion is marked by divine presence, by this extraordinary infusion. In fact, on the contrary, what is seen are people who change beliefs according to novelties and political games, and whose actions do not fit the words; what is shown is a religion marked by divisions in relation to truth, by the brutality of wars and cruelty, and put, finally, to serve the worst

human instincts. As Brahami writes: “Taking literally the words of the Gospel that claim that if we had only one drop of faith we would remove mountains, Montaigne deduces that, since the mountains remain in their place, we do not have faith”.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, “belief” also seems to be out of Christian's reach, and it is still Brahami who develops an interesting thesis concerning that: given the supernaturality of Christian faith and the radicality of its demands,<sup>11</sup> it is *impracticable as belief*: “The Christianity's sublimity itself forbids that it may be an object of a belief”.<sup>12</sup> While human religions find followers who adapt their practice to them, “a so divine and celestial institution mark Christian only by the tongue” (II, 12, 442/165). Here it is not just a matter of a moralizing speech that would show the inferiority of Christians: more than that Montaigne would be recognizing that Christians' demands exceed so much the conditions of simple human nature that it cannot be a religion in which one only believes and to which life could adapt itself to.<sup>13</sup>

The accomplishment of Christianity could only happen in a scope above belief and in a supernatural way. Such understanding is enough to recognize that Montaigne does not assimilate faith to belief, but keeps the distinction between both scopes. In this perspective, to say that “we are Christians as we are Perigourdines and Germans” or that “we only recommend our religion in our own way and with our hands” (II, 12, 445/170) would mean that we are not, absolutely, Christians and that the supernatural truth of Christianity is revealed in its absence in the realm of nature. The logic underneath Montaigne's thought would be similar to that man's who,

(...) going to Rome to the same end, and there seeing the dissoluteness of the prelates and people of that time, settled himself all the more firmly in our religion, considering how great the force and divinity of it must necessarily be that could maintain its dignity and splendour amongst so much corruption and in so vicious hands. (II, 12, 442/166/210)

In other words, man's practice is not the measure of God's truth, it is its own measure. Faith remains, therefore, as a kind of unfulfilled place capable of denouncing theologians' rational pretensions, the pious self-illusion and the superstitious' *naïveté*, as we will see in the next item.

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10 BRAHAMI. *Le travail du scepticism*, p. 61.

11 It is beyond “mortal and human religions”, that are accepted through 'human procedures'. (II, 12, 445/171)

12 BRAHAMI. *Le travail du scepticisme*, p. 64.

13 Tournon presents a similar interpretation: this passage shows, in fact, “the difficulty of a personal and intimate adhesion to Revelation” (“Que c'est que croire”, footnote 176).

The elements mentioned above show, therefore, that the question of religion in Montaigne surpasses in much its understanding as simple custom or belief. In fact, the postulation of a religion situated in the silent place of truth defines, by contrast, the scope of belief as the essence of human nature:

If it enter not into us by an extraordinary infusion; if it only enter, not only by arguments of reason, but, moreover, by human ways, it is not in us in its true dignity and splendour, and yet I am afraid we only have it by this way. (II, 12, 441/164-165/209)

### **Faith and Authority**

Another essential point in the understanding of the problem of faith in Montaigne is its connection with authority, that is, with the Catholic Church doctrine, which takes the place of truth.<sup>14</sup>

Right at the beginning of the “Apology”, Montaigne registers the context in which he got to know the works of the theologian Raymond Sebon: a friend recommended them to his father “as a very useful piece and proper for the time wherein he gave it to him, which was when the novel doctrines of Martin Luther began to be in vogue, and in many places to stagger our ancient belief: wherein he was very well advised (...)” - and he goes on denouncing common people's insolence of submitting “the impressions they had received from the authority of the laws or the reverence of ancient custom” to “their own decrees, and given their special consent” (II, 12, 439/162/208).

At this point, it seems to us that we can find another idea of faith in the “Apology”, beyond the “extraordinary infusion” mentioned earlier. Contrary to his time, which changed religion into a personal certainty question, into an interior certainty, Montaigne claims something absolutely opposite, and very annoying for his post-Reform readers: faith is not something that the individual may be led to believe in, it is not a convincing exercise, that is, it does not happen in the scope of judgment or

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<sup>14</sup> About this point, Brahami claims that: “the only objective truth that Montaigne recognizes in the *Essays* is that given by the Catholic Church” (*Le travail du scepticisme*, p. 59).

personal beliefs. Everyone's convictions, as he shows in so many cases, change with time at the discretion of interests: they have a human and passionate origin. Faith is something else: it is defined as submission to a word of authority and must be received as such.

The *Essays* are full of formulae, like the one in the chapter on repentance:

(...) always adding this adage, not an adage of mere formality, but of sincere and loyal submission: that I speak enquiring and ignoring, referring. as for the decision, pure and simply, to the common and legitimate beliefs. I do not teach, I report (III, 2, 29-30).

The submission to the authority of the Church is not only an aspect of faith *according* to Montaigne, but Montaigne's textual and explicit character of faith (once he does not move mountains and, therefore, can consider himself to be free from that “divine infusion” defined in the previous item). I have mentioned the annoyance of this formulation: there is always the problem of connecting the *duplicity* between the doctrine's truth, which he confesses to accept, and the scope of his own beliefs and opinions, anyway, of the exercise of his judgment that so many times acts in clear opposition to what the Church establishes. From the duplicity to indifference or even to hypocrisy, the distance seems to be short, which made several interpreters raise questions on the sincerity of the author of the *Essays*.

I do not intend to play here the role of the defense attorney of the philosopher's sincerity, for this is out of any interpreter's reach. I simply intend to accept this duplicity in which the author explicitly and textually sets himself (that is, to refuse to interpret it just as a sort of cunning or as a mask of incredulity) and, from that, to understand the place he gives faith and belief.

The acceptance of the authority of the Church is generally based on a reflection on the powers of reason and its limits, which is clearly seen in the title of one his chapters: “That it is folly to measure truth and error by our own capacity” (I, 26). Anticipating an idea that will be developed by Hume, Montaigne claims that, when trying to sort true from false, we only take whatever is habitual as worth of credit and what is rare or strange as not worth it, but this means “to attribute to oneself the privilege



of knowing the borders and limits of God's goodness and the power of our mother nature" (I, 27, 179/268). Now, as we do not know the foundations and the rules of what is natural and possible, we cannot, definitely, establish something as "impossible" - which makes room to the word of authority that demands our acceptance of propositions contrary to common sense.<sup>15</sup> Here the critical and educated man seems to get closer to common people, for he would even be allowed to believe in superstitions. However, the closeness is only apparent, and that for two reasons; the first one is that what Montaigne proposes is a reflected credulity, aware that submitting the dogmas of religion to the judgement of reason would mean a greater ignorance: the ignorance of oneself, or of the limits of reason. This first reason – the awareness of the limits of reason that leaves room to another word that goes against what is "habitual" and "plausible" - would be a kind of condition of possibility of the acceptance of authority recommended by Montaigne. The second reason is that this word imposes itself by the very dignity of its source. The word is here worth not for its rationality, but for the credibility of its speaker. It is evidence, not argument, and, therefore, according to what Tournon observes,

the series of Saint Hillary's posthumous miracles compiled by the innocent Bouchet in the *Annales d'Acquitaine* makes [Montaigne] laugh, but "similar stories" confirmed by Saint Augustine would not be refused "without impudence": the authority of the saint doctor is enough to back up the most singular taumaturgies.

There is a restriction on the place of authority (God, the apostles, the Church) and, therefore, of accepted evidence.<sup>16</sup>

Another aspect of divine truth, kept by authority, is that it can not be an object of interpretation, that is, of knowledge, by man: it is from this content, forever untranslatable, that Montaigne can, in the first place, accuse those who propose a new theology instead of the ancient. Now, it is not a question of claiming that the truth of tradition is more evident than the novelties, but that "it is only up to God to know himself and to interpret his works" (II, 12, 449/250). All translation of divine truth into the

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15 See, for example, the discussion on the immortality of soul in the "Apology".

16 TOURNON. "Que c'est que croire", p. 166. The text in question can be found in the *Essays* (I, 27, 270-271 / 181). Brahami questions the notion of testimony in Montaigne, especially in what concerns his criticisms of the value of the martyrdom (*Le travail du scepticisme*, p. 62). I believe, though, that the two problems belong to different scopes. On one hand, Montaigne turns to the "psychology of martyrdom, as he does with the psychology of regret, and on that he "exercises his judgement"; on the other, it is a matter of accepting those testimonies that the Church invested in with its authority. For, as Tournon himself remarks, for Montaigne "men are not good witnesses of the supernatural" ("Que c'est que croire", p. 168). It is not a testimony that establishes the truth of a fact, but the authority that underlies it.

language of reason is, if not a fraude, at least a big mistake. The untranslatable character of divine truth is also used as a basis for the merciless criticism of credulity and for the accusation of those who claim to know God's intentions. In “There must be sobriety so that one can adventure oneself to judge the divine decisions”, Montaigne claims that it is a mistake to try to decipher, in concrete events, signs of God's wish: “To a Christian it is enough to believe that all the things come from God and to receive them recognizing their divine and inscrutable wisdom (...)” (I, 32, 261/322). Every time someone interprets this or that occurrence as a divine approving or disapproving sign, his version will be biased and simply human – and he will be as Christian as those whose religion is not marked by a divine and transcendent origin; finally, he will be Christian as he is Perigourdine or German.

## Conclusions

- 1) The sentence “we are Christians as we are Perigourdines or Germans” if, on one hand, it describes a fact situation, on the other, in spite of assimilating Christianity to other religions, it is an alert against the humanization of the supernatural, which should not mark true religion.
- 2) The possibility of a criticism of beliefs and superstitions is laid not on a pretentious capacity for reason to distinguish between what is possible and what is impossible (as it will later be the case with the illuminists), but on the postulation of a truth of faith, of which any attempt of interpretation degenerates into credulity.
- 3) Montaigne, on one hand, restricts the scope of human reason, which should not aim at truth. Reason becomes the place of the essay, of investigation, of “fantasy”. However, on the other hand, he also restricts the scope of theology, for it is nothing but the content accepted by divine authority who must not dialogue with this set of human ideas and fantasies, that is, with reason – for this would decrease its dignity.<sup>17</sup> That is perhaps why the author of the *Essays* did not make any of the changes that the Inquisition determined he did in his book. This attitude is not opposed to his protests against submission, it only proves that he thinks his works are too human to intend to have divine authority as its interlocutor. The submission to authority cannot materialize itself in any discourse beyond its own

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<sup>17</sup> Faye interprets this last consequence as a weakening of theological discourse (*Philosophie et perfection de l'homme*, p. 196).

reiteration.

4) Our starting point was the triad: reason, defined (negatively) as what (does not) connects itself with truth; belief, understood as all discourse that refers to life, and faith, that refers either to what is supernatural or to authority. Between the lines of Montaigne's discourse on this triad, however, we can identify a new place, different from reason, because it does not “set a foothold”, but only “rehearses”; different from belief, because reflected and critical; different from faith, because only human. What we have is Montaigne's “judgement”, his “opinions” or what he “thinks according to himself” - certainly the most striking aspect of all his philosophy.

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