of thought in which one has attempted to derive political principles from theological doctrines. Early on in the study, Frazer joins the Loyalists in accusing the Patriot preachers of doing the exact opposite, of retrofitting their understanding of the Bible to suit a political agenda. By the end of the volume, however, the reader has encountered such a variegated smattering of rationales for loyalism that it is tantalizingly unclear whether this clerical faction went about constructing their political theology any differently.

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Douglas I. Thompson’s excellent *Montaigne and the Tolerance of Politics* is both a book about philosophic history and a book for our times. Thompson writes of a bipartisan loss of confidence in the value of tolerance: the Left worries that “mere tolerance” is much less than “full social equality,” and prefers to insist on the latter standard for its favored social groups; the Right worries that its concerns about the erosion of “important customary norms” are frequently labeled as intolerant so as to exclude them from the realm of reasonable debate (5). Nonetheless, tolerance remains a cornerstone virtue of liberal democracy, which, in spite of its present travails, is clearly superior to “the alternative forms of government currently available” (6).

Liberal democracy needs tolerance. But what exactly is it? While political theorists often describe tolerance as a “species of moral or ethical respect,” Thompson notes an obvious problem with such definitions: “to feel respect for someone is to hold them or something important about them in high regard or esteem; to tolerate someone is to put up with them even though you do not hold them or something about them in high regard or esteem” (8). Tolerance is best understood not as a moral or philosophic principle but as something we “go out and do,” entering into conversation and negotiation precisely with those whose views or behavior we think pernicious or repugnant (4). So understood, tolerance is a political capacity.

Thompson celebrates Michel de Montaigne as an exemplar of this kind of tolerance. The great sixteenth-century author of the Essays (and inventor of that now ubiquitous literary form) was also a serious practitioner of shuttle diplomacy—a political go-between during France’s eight wars of religion.
Montaigne enjoyed the trust of both the Catholic monarchs to whom he was loyal and his country’s Protestant faction, whose leader Henri de Navarre was sufficiently comfortable with Montaigne to sleep in his home. Thompson argues that the autobiographical Essays both depict tolerance as embodied in a life and suggest “exercises” by means of which readers might acquire the capacities that enabled Montaigne to engage with those with whom he disagreed without losing himself (3).

Thompson is hardly the first to treat Montaigne as an important figure in the history of toleration. Judith Shklar’s Ordinary Vices (Belknap, 1984), David Lewis Schaefer’s The Political Philosophy of Montaigne (Cornell University Press, 1990), Alan Levine’s Sensual Philosophy (Lexington Books, 2001), and many other studies consider this aspect of Montaigne. But Thompson takes up his theme with a fresh and distinctive emphasis. He shows that Montaigne presents himself as an ethical model, who balances openness and the ability to argue both sides of a question with loyalty and discretion, and thus possesses the distinctive political virtues of an able negotiator.

Following Phillipe Desan’s Montaigne: A Life (Princeton University Press, 2016), Thompson sees Montaigne’s first, 1580 edition of the Essays as “a kind of curriculum vitae,” intended to advertise its author to the king and his court as an able negotiator and potential royal adviser. He notes that Montaigne’s first action once his book had been printed is to set off for Paris to hand-deliver copies to the king and leading members of his court (21). With his second edition, which built on the immediate publishing success of the first, Montaigne’s ambitions grow: “He is calling into being and instructing a new public into dispositions conducive to negotiating peacefully across differences of value and interest to achieve peaceful conflict resolution” (42).

What are these “dispositions” conducive to the practice of negotiation that is the substantive reality of toleration? Thompson considers four of them: First, Montaigne “offers a rich affirmation of pleasure and enjoyment of direct dialogue with people of different religions and cultures,” a pleasure of which the Essays themselves are designed to give the reader a taste (46). Second, Montaigne shows a penchant for what Thompson calls uncivil conversation—for exchanging frank, sometimes rough speech with people with whom he has deep disagreements (65). Third, Montaigne models immunity to the influence of elites who use “moralism or necessity as pretexts for violence in pursuit of political gain,” and warns his readers to be wary of such chicanery (92). Fourth, Montaigne practices what Thompson calls “radical moderation,” moderation that stays in touch with the extremes of political partisanship while eschewing violence and engaging with interlocutors on the other side as they are, not as we might wish them to be (122).

The advantage Thompson points out to Montaigne’s political approach to toleration is that it allows people to “bargain concrete terms of cooperation and the realization of shared public goods” without confusing such political
deliberations with moral or theological debates (153). Politics, the art of pursuing the public good, need not always raise questions of our most deeply held principles, and is often better off for not doing so.

Thompson’s book is well researched, well argued, original, and insightful. His focus on the understudied political side of Montaigne’s thought and life brings out an important dimension of the essayist and illuminates the phenomenon of tolerance as such. But Thompson’s reading of Montaigne’s thought through the lens of the particular politics of his time has a distorting effect. Montaigne, he tells us, was a “committed Catholic,” a “strong Catholic,” a man “passionately drawn to Catholic practice” (3, 145, 123). Historically, it is true that Montaigne consistently hewed to the Catholic side in the conflicts of his time, avowed his submission to the church in the Essays, and went through the motions of his religion. But these acts of outward submission take on a different coloration when we understand them as parts of the comprehensive way of life he depicts. Montaigne’s readers, from Pascal to Voltaire to Nietzsche, have long recognized that his way of life — hedonistic, skeptical, nonchalant about death and completely unconcerned with the hereafter — is sharply at odds with Christianity. Montaigne mocks the Eucharist, the atonement, the virgin birth, the idea of personal providence, and the sacrament of penance. This is not the attitude of a serious Catholic, however open-minded.

Thompson perhaps overlooks the impieties with which the Essays abound because he believes that “our imaginations are time-bound and limited” (28). Montaigne thought otherwise, and compared the writings of ancient pagans and the morals of New World cannibals favorably to what he saw around him in Christian France. As Thompson recognizes, Montaigne presents himself as moral model to rival Cato and Socrates (134) — that is, as a man engaged in a debate across time over the question of how to live, and able to imagine and embody a way of life that is not only out of step with his contemporaries but historically unprecedented.

The self-portrait with which Montaigne presents us in the Essays is not the portrait of a “man of his time,” but that of a man with pervasive doubts about almost everything his contemporaries customarily do, think, or say. Montaigne’s practice of tolerance is not the activity of a passionate partisan who knows how to reach across the aisle, but that of a stranger in his own country working hard to deal with the mad passions that animate the people around him. Montaigne is politically tolerant because he is morally nonchalant; those to whom such nonchalance seems to bring political perils of its own may have to look elsewhere for models.

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