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"Want of Zeal for It": Pierre Bayle on Religious Radicalization

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Abstract: This article argues that Pierre Bayle (1647–1706) is not merely a theorist of religious toleration but also a theorist of religious radicalization. By exploring how religious dissenters experienced religious conformity as a kind of mental and spiritual torture akin to conventional forms of corporeal punishment, I demonstrate that Bayle's influential defense of toleration and liberty of conscience hinges on his account of the psychological mechanism of religious radicalization. Demands for religious conformity do not convince dissenters of their error but of their lack of zeal for their faith. Bayle's plea for toleration, more broadly, urges us to reflect on the ways that we invite those who are different from us into dialogue or risk alienating them even further, an urgent concern today as extremist religious and nationalist views are on the rise across the globe.

Keywords: Pierre Bayle; toleration; liberty of conscience; radicalization; zealotry; religion; nationalism

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1. Introduction

A Muslim man in France joins an Islamic extremist group. A far-right Christian nationalist in America storms the capital. An anti-Semitic conspiracy theorist shoots up a synagogue. Across the globe, religious and political extremism are on the rise, as demonstrated by constant news headlines about bombings, assassinations, shootings, beheadings, insurrections, and attacks on holy sites, places of worship, and government buildings. Commentators increasingly attend to this puzzle of fanaticism, ranging from the atrocities of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the conflict between Muslims and Christians in Central Africa, attacks by Buddhists against Muslims in Burma and Hindus in Sri Lanka, and lone-wolf "home-grown" terrorist attacks in Europe and the United States (Saiya 2018, p. 2).[1]

Scholars with varied methodological and theoretical commitments aim to explain why some individuals assimilate to modern society, while others are emboldened in their religious and nationalist ideologies. Fabien Truong studies why young Muslim men born and raised in France join religious extremist groups with ties to ISIS (Truong 2018). Yuna Blajer de la Garza explores the experience of political belonging, examining how citizens respond to attempts to make them feel "other" or "lesser than" in their communities (Blajer de la Garza 2023).[2] Carly Wayne and Keith Schnakenberg focus on the complex role of anger in politics and attend to the interplay between psychological and material aims in fomenting conflict (Schnakenberg and Wayne 2024). Nilay Saiya traces the phenomenon of religious terrorism to the increased regulation and suppression of religious belief and worship around the world (Saiya 2018). These commentators consider why some individuals with marginalized worldviews adapt to the world around them while others are reinvigorated in their commitments. Influential commentators have focused on the puzzle of radicalization in modern politics through an empirical and ethnographic lens, but the reconsideration of historical debates on religious fanaticism showcases the underlying psychological motivations behind radicalization.

Nearly three hundred and fifty years ago, Pierre Bayle (1647–1706) confronted a world characterized by religious fracturing and zealotry. A philosopher, encyclopedist, and religious heretic in Catholic France, Bayle fervently defended the toleration of religious

sects against the prevailing edifice of religious persecution and fanaticism (Gais 2024). Bayle was known, both in his time and today, as a theorist of toleration, arguing that the state should tolerate religious dissenters, including Jews, Muslims, and atheists (although not Catholics).[3] In *Philosophical Commentary*, Bayle argues that "Christian Princes cannot in justice expel the Mahometans out of Towns taken from the Turk, nor hinder their having Mosks, or assembling in their own House", articulating a radical view of toleration that protects many forms of religious expression and worship (Bayle 2005, p. 213). Bayle's striking defense of religious sectarianism is a marked difference between him and many of his early modern contemporaries, or as Bayle condescendingly calls them, "half-toleration men". Many early modern figures, Bayle insists, fail to appreciate that *all* religious sects should be tolerated.

Bayle defends religious toleration, yet early modernity was hardly characterized by "progressive" institutional arrangements and shared attitudes toward religious dissenters (Walsham 2004, pp. 32–48; 2006, pp. 1–13, 39–92, 160–62, 188–206; Collins 2009, p. 609; Kaplan 2007, pp. 1–47, 127–33, 140–43, 156–71, 177–83, 195–97). While Queen Elizabeth I famously refused to "make windows into men's souls",[4] confessional conflicts, religious persecution, and outward conformity were ubiquitous in the early modern world (Zagorin 1990, p. 68; Kaplan 2007, pp. 115, 157–58, 161; Hadfield 2017, pp. 1–20; Walsham 2004, pp. 36–37; 2006, pp. 188–206; Gais 2024, pp. 11–12). In a newly multi-confessional society, religious dissenters were forced to choose among "martyrdom, insurrection and emigration to dissimulation, equivocation and forms of partial and occasional conformity" to survive persecutory conditions (Walsham 2006, p. 161). Many religious dissenters conformed to the state religion to avoid financial penalties, imprisonment, or violent death.[5] The inevitable consequence of this widespread religious persecution was not an erasure of religious pluralism, but the ubiquity of hypocritical conformity and religious dissimulation, ranging from disingenuous participation in mandatory religious services to the equivocation of certain religious proclamations, such as refusing to bow one's head or using a muddled voice during a prayer. Many acquiesced to the state religion publicly while continuing to practice their religion privately in hidden worship spaces (i.e., conventicles) or family homes (i.e., house chapels) (Kaplan 2007, pp. 172–97). The severity and ubiquity of religious persecution in early modern Europe was so drastic that it actively "encouraged [dissenters] to hide behind a façade of outward conformity" (Walsham 2006, p. 206). Intellectual debates on hypocritical conformity and religious dissimulation were central to Bayle's political thought, urging him to consider the extent to which the state should attempt to coerce religious and political uniformity through the false performance of religious worship or feigned public professions of political allegiance, even if this conformity violates the conscience of dissenters?

This article argues, however, that Bayle is not merely a theorist of religious toleration, but also a theorist of religious radicalization. By exploring how religious dissenters experienced religious conformity as a kind of mental and spiritual torture akin to conventional forms of corporeal punishment, I demonstrate that Bayle's influential defense of toleration and liberty of conscience hinges on his account of the psychological mechanism of religious radicalization. Demands for religious conformity do not merely convince dissenters of their error, as they are intended by their advocates, but of their lack of zeal for their faith. Hypocritical conformity inflicts mental torture on a dissenter who, in turn, is only radicalized further in their faith. By tracing Bayle's diagnosis of the unanticipated backlash that disingenuous outward confession incites against the state, the looming threat of religious zealotry emerges as the underlying impetus for his defense of toleration.

This revisionist account of Bayle as a theorist of radicalization has implications for our understanding of Bayle as a political figure, as well as the broader conceptual debate on religious radicalization. Commentators account well for Bayle's striking defense of toleration by emphasizing two arguments in his political thought (Gais 2020). First, they often frame Bayle's influential defense of toleration as grounded in a recognition of the futility of coercion to inspire genuine conversion. As Andrew Murphy has stressed, "a

key component of the tolerationist program had always been the idea that 'belief cannot be forced': that, at most, force could produce hypocrites, but never authentic conversion" (Murphy 2015, p. 249). Religious persecution merely pressures dissenters into false confessions, Benjamin Kaplan suggests, "extending the age-old dictum that faith could not be forced and that coercion only produced hypocrisy" (Kaplan 2007, p. 334). For these commentators, Bayle highlights the argument that religious persecution and hypocritical conformity simply does not work, a now-familiar argument associated with John Milton, John Locke, and Baruch Spinoza. Second, commentators trace Bayle's striking defense of the toleration to his skepticism (Popkin 2003, pp. 283–302; Israel 2006; Forst 2008; 2017, pp. 249–61; Kukathas 2017, p. 264). Richard Popkin, the influential historian of skepticism, argues that the impossibility of certain divine knowledge assessed through reason, for the Pyrrhonian Bayle, undermines early modern justifications of persecution (Popkin 2003, p. 297). Given that there is "no way to tel[l] an erring conscience from a non-erring one", defenders of coercion cannot insist that they are justified in compelling dissenters to the one "true" religion (Bayle 2005, p. 89). While "each Sect looks on itself as the only true Religion, or at least much the truest", allowing them to claim they do "great service to Truth" by attempting to compel others to their religion, Bayle argues that it is impossible to assess which religious tradition is the "true" one (Bayle 2005, p. 89). By situating Bayle in a broader intellectual tradition of skepticism that foregrounds the uncertainty of divine inspiration and revealed truth, these commentators showcase the novel and striking way that Bayle challenges the assertion of one "true" religion. These influential commentators account well for Bayle's defense of toleration by foregrounding his defense of the futility of coercion and the implications of skepticism, but they overlook the deeper psychological intuitions underlying Baylean toleration. Not only does hypocritical conformity fail to inspire genuine conversion, but it may even inspire dissenters to cling more tightly to their fervor.

By showcasing the profound psychological torture afflicted on dissenters by hypocritical conformity, Bayle draws out the effects of cognitive dissonance on the dissenter. Bayle shifts the discourse on toleration in early modernity by suggesting that violations of liberty of conscience are not merely ineffective, but that they antagonize dissenters into religious fervor. While early modern theories of toleration often emphasize the futility of coercion to shape inward persuasion, Bayle warns that attempts to convert dissenters may backfire, an appeal that continues to resonate even today, despite the differences in historical context and state actors. One obvious approach to the threat of radicalization is the compulsion of conformity—to attempt to coerce the zealous to conform to majoritarian political or religious views. Yet Bayle argues that the answer to alienation should not be more alienation. Bayle's urging toward moderation and toleration might seem ill-equipped to confront radical religious and political ideologies today; yet it might be the only path forward. Anything else risks emboldening zealots even further. Before turning to Bayle's analysis of the mechanism of religious radicalization, it is helpful to begin where Bayle begins in the *Philosophical Commentary*—with his intellectual opponents, or as Bayle calls them, "convertists".

2. Bayle's "Convertists"

Bayle's analysis of religious zealotry is hardly just an intellectual exercise. Rather, Bayle's world was characterized by deep religious strife and extremism. Bayle himself was forced to flee his homeland for the Dutch Republic as the Edict of Nantes—a law granting unprecedented rights to Calvinist Huguenots in Catholic France—was growing more tenuous. Bayle's brother, an ordained Calvinist minister, was imprisoned and would soon thereafter die in prison for his heterodox ministry. Despite Bayle's experience with being forced to choose between fleeing his country and his conscience, Bayle concedes that many dissenters practiced dissimulation to survive persecutory conditions. Of course, dissenters could flee their repressive homelands, as Bayle had done, or they could martyr themselves in death, but Bayle recognizes that most dissenters engaged in hypocritical

conformity. While critics of enforced conformity condemned dissimulation as a "despicable and damnable act of apostasy", Bayle acknowledges the ubiquity of the practice to "defus[e] suspicion and deflec[t]" persecution (Walsham 2006, pp. 196, 207). The practice of hypocritical conformity shaped "everyday life in early modern Europe", from attendance at mandatory religious services to the omission of certain phrasing or bodily comportment. For example, dissenters would equivocate their compliance by reciting compulsory prayers in a muddled voice or refusing to remove their hats during a mandatory religious service (Hadfield 2017, p. 20).

Bayle's influential work on religious toleration is structured as an intellectual dialogue with his opponents (Gais 2024). In *Philosophical Commentary*, he engages with theories of persecution in early modern discourse to "cut off the Convertists from all of their Starting-holes", attacking the view that persecution is a charitable effort to save religious dissenters from their damning heterodoxy (Bayle 2005, p. 140). Persecution is, its advocates insist, an act of Christian love and charity that brings dissenters closer to God and saves them from eternal damnation. Religious persecution is accordingly a laudable tool to inspire conversion, a "bitter but efficacious medicine" intended to "cure and educate" heretics (Walsham 2006, p. 2). Religious heterodoxy would "eventually wither out of existence", conformists argue, if dissenters were forced into consistent exposure to religious "truth" (Walsham 2006, p. 60). First, advocates should enlist legitimate means of persuasion, but if these fail, they should remain open to violence as the "necessary" means to "force" dissenters "to deliver themselves from their Prejudices" (Bayle 2005, p. 79). Rather than call these measures "Persecution", they are called "Acts of Kindness, Equity, Justice, and right Reason" (Bayle 2005, p. 88). Bayle sets out to debunk the prevailing view that "Violence open[s] a Man's eyes to see his Heresy", suggesting rather that violence fails to accomplish this goal of conversion (Bayle 2005, p. 154). The consequences of persecution, Bayle argues, are "very far" from the desired conversion that persecutors hope to attain through measures of coercion (Bayle 2005, p. 140).

While Bayle argues that persecution does not achieve its intended goal of conversion, he concedes that it is very effective at encouraging outward behavior. Even if it is futile, Bayle acknowledges that many dissenters conform to the state religion to avoid the very real threat of persecution. A "reasonable. . .Man", Bayle acknowledges, is afraid of persecution, either of the "prospect of [his] Family ruin'd, exil'd, or encloister'd" or "of his own Person degraded and render'd incapable of all Honors and Preferments, and thrust into a loathsome Dungeon" (Bayle 2005, p. 139). Measures of persecution, or what he describes as "all the Crimes imaginable", among which he names "Murder, Robbery, Banishment, and Rapes", are effective at compelling outward conformity (Bayle 2005, p. 64). While violence or the threat of violence is "incapable. . .of convincing the Judgment, or of imprinting in the Heart the Fear or the Love of God", it encourages dissenters to comply outwardly. Quite understandably, dissenters willingly engage in false professions and participate in disingenuous sacraments to escape the violent horrors that await them if they refuse. Given the very real risk of social ostracism, exile, or imprisonment, it is entirely sensible, Bayle argues, that dissenters conform to the state religion.

The severity of this violation derives from its intrusion on liberty of conscience; not only do individuals engage in insincere outward behavior, but hypocritical conformity demands that they perform in ways that violate their conscience. Dissenters engage in "some outward Signs void of all inward Sincerity", or even more egregiously, perform "Signs perhaps of an interior Disposition most opposite to that which [they] really are" when confronted with the threat of religious persecution (Bayle 2005, p. 78). Not only are dissenters willing to feign disingenuous acquiescence that they do not believe in, but they are willing to act contrary to their conscience, an even more severe act of hypocrisy. The false performance of sacramental rights, or what Bayle describes as "Hypocrisy" and the "sacrilegious Profanation of Sacraments", harms the dissenter who violates his conscience to secure some degree of safety or standing in civil society (Bayle 2005, p. 64). Elsewhere in *Philosophical Commentary*, Bayle describes this hypocritical conformity as "external Acts

which are Hypocrisy and Imposture, or a downright Revolt against Conscience" (Bayle 2005, p. 64). Quickly thereafter, Bayle reiterates the language of violence aimed at conscience, suggesting that outward conformity is akin to "Acts of Hypocrisy, and Falshood, or Impiety and Revolt against Conscience" (Bayle 2005, p. 77). Hypocritical conformity, Bayle argues, urges religious dissenters to commit a grave violation of their conscience.

This forced acquiescence, moreover, is not inconsequential. Bayle warns that hypocritical conformity inflicts psychological trauma on the compelled dissenter. His rich descriptions of revolution and violence stress the significant violation inflicted on dissenters, a kind of mental rather than corporeal injury. In his account of the religious dissenter forced to "adjure" outwardly "with [his] mouth", Bayle suggests that the conscientious dissenter "sink[s] under the Violence of Pain and Torment" (Bayle 2005, p. 58). In particular, Bayle recognizes that it is "very difficult. . .for a body not to lye, when expos'd to the trial of the sharpest Sufferings", highlighting the severe mental burden of hypocritical conformity (Bayle 2005, p. 58). Elsewhere, Bayle criticizes proponents of conformity for taking advantage of this significant mental burden, reaffirming the psychological repercussions of hypocritical conformity:

> Our convertists will have Men threaten'd in the first place, and this condition annex'd, that they who abjure shall be quit of all Persecution, and stand fair for Rewards; and that their Threats may work the more efficaciously, the craftiest have a way of threatening such Deaths as are attended with slow and exquisite Torments, or depriving People of all means of flying, or subsisting at home. This constrains a world to betray the Lights of their Conscience, and *live afterwards under an Oppression of Spirit, which disorders, and at last drives 'em to despair*. What can be more cruel? (Bayle 2005, p. 182, emphasis added).

Defenders of conformity force dissenters to choose between "abjur[ing]" outwardly or facing violent death, or as Bayle describes it, "slow and exquisite Torments" (Bayle 2005, p. 182). Again, Bayle insists that it is judicious for dissenters to engage in acts of "imposture" to avoid financial penalties, imprisonment, or torture (Bayle 2005, p. 182). Yet Bayle warns of the unanticipated aftermath of this feigned conformity, "an oppression of Spirit, which disorders and at last drives 'em to despair" (Bayle 2005, p. 182). The severe and deep anguish provoked by hypocritical conformity is not benign but is its own form of torture similar to more conventionally violent forms of religious persecution. Bayle reaffirms the severity of this psychological torture, describing it as living continuously "in Anxiety and Remorse" (Bayle 2005, p. 182). In the provocative and blunt final line of the passage, Bayle invites his reader to speculate on the brutality of this defilement: "What could be more cruel?" (Bayle 2005, p. 182). This invocation of cruelty highlights Bayle's conflation of physical and mental torture, both experienced viscerally by the dissenter as devastating injustice. The recurring language of torment and suffering throughout Bayle's treatment of hypocritical conformity highlights the psychological distress experienced by the compelled believer, a continuous source of anguish long after the difficult decision has been made. Bayle does not merely defend toleration by suggesting that persecution presumes an untenable insight into religious truth but champions toleration to end the psychological torture inherent in hypocritical conformity.

The consequences of this psychological trauma can be severe, Bayle warns. Elsewhere, Bayle describes religious persecution as the "forcing" of "conscience" with "the most violent Temptations into Acts of Hypocrisy and deadly remorse", associating the act of hypocritical conformity with deep regret (Bayle 2005, p. 194). The qualifier of "deadly", moreover, implies the gravity of the burden of this remorse, so severe that it is experienced as a kind of death by the dissenter. This allusion to mortality is not intended to be hyperbolic but evokes practices of self-harm associated with hypocritical conformity in early modernity. Dissenters experienced "very real distress" when forced to navigate the precarious position between the oppressive demands of the sovereign and their tender consciences (Walsham 2006, p. 197). Indeed, some conformists suffered so greatly after their "agonizing" and "torment[ing]" acquiescence that they turned to suicide in the aftermath

(Walsham 2006, pp. 197–98).[6] They embraced death, "readily giv[ing] into the noose", as they were "overcome by the Extremity of Pain" following their compliance (Bayle 2005, p. 58). The widespread demand for hypocritical conformity resulted in self-harm among compliant dissenters.

Recent revisionist historiography supports Bayle's intuition that hypocritical conformity was deeply felt by dissenters and viewed by its perpetrators as a significant violation. Alexandra Walsham highlights that "oaths of allegiance and supremacy" were "devised as. . .mechanisms for dividing true-hearted subjects from traitors", based on what conformists took to be their severe psychological consequences (Walsham 2004, p. 36). Demands for mandatory sacramental rights and oaths of allegiance were not merely attempts to secure "holy" uniformity but were intended to expose religious heterodoxy. Hypocritical conformity was viewed as imposing an immense psychological tax on dissenters so that they would reveal themselves to be dissenters, effectively operating as "mechanical lie-detectors to discover who hid their false opinions behind the cloak of conformity" (Walsham 2004, p. 36). Proponents of persecution, Bayle argues, recognize the severe impact of measures of coercion, noting that the very "Design of these Torments was only to make 'em confess themselves" (Bayle 2005, p. 58). While many advocates for religious persecution maintain that they are ambivalent about inward persuasion, Bayle argues that conformists were relying on the psychological trauma of hypocritical conformity to pressure dissenters into exposing themselves as such.

3. The "Imposture" of Hypocritical Conformity

Bayle's concern with the psychological pain inflicted on dissenters forced to conform might be read sincerely; he may have been genuinely worried for the tortured dissenter forced into the "imposture" of hypocritical conformity. But we might also read Bayle's sustained attention to liberty of conscience in light of his argument that persecution, rather than toleration, incites political conflict. This somber assessment of the potential consequences of persecution resonates with Thomas Hobbes's treatment of compulsion in *Behemoth*, in which he argues that attempts to coerce inward conviction exacerbate political conflict by provoking zealous dissenters. Severe forms of coercion which aim to compel interiority, Hobbes argues, tend to backfire against the sovereign. Hobbes appeals to the puzzling distinction between *forum internum* and *forum externum* in *Behemoth*, explaining that attempts to compel conviction are not merely futile but incendiary:

> A state can constrain obedience, but convince no error, nor alter the minds of them that believe they have the better reason. Suppression of doctrine does but unite and exasperate, that is, increase both the malice and power of them that have already believed them (Hobbes 1990, p. 62).

While the sovereign can enforce hypocritical conformity with the threat or use of force, attempts to compel conviction with violence risk intensifying sedition. Not only are these attempts futile—they fail to successfully "convince" individuals of revealed truth—but they further attach subjects to their religious zeal. The "suppression" of sedition convinces dissenters of their conscience even more. Like Bayle, Hobbes recognizes the psychological obstacles to hypocritical conformity; yet, instead of exploring the way that it hardens the dissenter, he argues that it emboldens religious fervor and dissenters' attachment to their consciences. Religious dissenters might not merely suffer psychologically but might also react aggressively toward the state out of resentment against the enforcers of their mental torture.

While Bayle recognizes the inevitability of the pluralism of "opinions" and the "variability" of "judgments" among members of a political community, he views religious difference as inevitable. One might expect those who view difference as divisive to defend any attempt to ensure religious uniformity. While Bayle acknowledges that "Unity and Agreement", especially "Agreement among Christians in the Profession of one and the same Faith", would be an "invaluable Blessing", uniformity is not possible in the first place (Bayle 2005, p. 208). Bayle acknowledges that unity would be desirable, but he suggests

that the human condition is doomed to be characterized by pluralism, recognizing that a "difference in Opinions seems to be Man's inseparable Infelicity" (Bayle 2005, p. 208). Difference is inevitable, reframing the debate from the most effective strategy to eliminate difference to a conversation on peaceful coexistence. Given the inevitability of diversity, toleration is a "smaller Evil, and less shameful to Christianity", than severe measures of persecution, such as "Massacres, Gibbets, Dragooning, and all the bloody Executions" (Bayle 2005, p. 140; emphasis in original). Pluralism is unavoidable, even if unity would be preferred, and the violence used to overcome it will be considerably detrimental to our political communities.

Moreover, persecution has hardly been successful. Difference divides communities, Bayle acknowledges, but it is attempts to compel uniformity that pose the most critical threat to social stability. For Bayle, attempts to compel conscience with a sword incite ceaseless conflict. Unlike Hobbes who is notoriously worried about the divisive consequences of religious sectarianism, Bayle argues that it is the very persecution of these differences that breeds the kind of civil disorder that so concerns Hobbes. It is not difference itself that incites conflict; rather, attempts to thwart difference lead to the kind of violence that characterizes the Hobbesian state of nature. For Hobbes and many of his absolutist contemporaries, the "Multiplicity of Religions" places "Neighbor at variance with his Neighbor, Father against Son, Husbands against their Wives, and the Prince against his Subjects" (Bayle 2005, p. 199). Yet Bayle offers an alternative account of the source of division in society, suggesting that attempts to compel conformity breed civil disorder. We only need to consult history, Bayle suggests, to see that "all the Disturbances attending Innovations in Religion, proceed from People's pursuing the first Innovators with Fire and Sword, and refusing 'em a Liberty of Conscience" rather than "the new Sect's attempting, from an inconsiderable Zeal, to destroy the Religion establish'd" (Bayle 2005, p. 201).

Attempts to compel conscience are far more divisive than conscience itself. Liberty of conscience is not necessarily divisive but attempts to coerce conscience are volatile. Conflict does not arise from pluralism itself but from attempts to "exercise a cruel Tyranny" over dissenters and "force Conscience" (Bayle 2005, p. 200). In short, "all the Mischief arises not from Toleration, but from the want of it" (Bayle 2005, p. 200). Bayle continues to stress this point: "Nothing therefore but Toleration can put a stop to all those Evils; nothing but a Spirit of Persecution can foment' em" (Bayle 2005, p. 201). Religious persecution and hypocritical conformity actually embolden religiosity by attempting to restrict it. Simply put, it is less contentious to allow dissenters to "serv[e] God according to the Light of their Consciences" rather than "murder and torment [them] by a thousand exquisite ways" (Bayle 2005, p. 63). Bayle reaffirms that religious conformity is a kind of torture akin to murder. Religious persecution inflicts a meaningful violation on dissenters, inciting more political upheaval than that inherent in religious sectarianism. For Bayle, the appropriate response to the realities of religious difference is to allow individuals to pursue their own religious truth, as these religious differences only become salient politically when individuals try to compel others into submission.

4. Conformity and Radicalization

Thus far, Bayle defends toleration by stressing the psychic and political trauma of coercion and conformity. Force fails to convert dissenters, and even worse, it incites political turmoil and social strife. Despite the significant threat to the mental and physical security of the religious dissenter, punishments "very rarely change Mens Opinions about the Worship of God" (Bayle 2005, p. 304). Here, Bayle moves beyond an acknowledgement of the inefficacy of religious persecution to foreground a darker assessment of the risks inherent in conformity. Forced conversion is not merely unsuccessful but it may risk exacerbating religious fervor. Hypocritical conformity and religious dissimulation actually have the opposite effect of their intended goals by "mak[ing] [dissenters] more zealous in their own Religion" (Bayle 2005, p. 304). The false performance of a religious sacrament, for example, does not encourage dissenters to consider the "Falseness of [their] Religion",

but inspires them to ponder their "want of Zeal for it" (Bayle 2005, p. 304). The "Persecuted", Bayle insists, are "drawn into. . .a wickeder. . .Imposture by outwardly renouncing a Religion, which in their Souls they were more firmly persuaded of than ever" (Bayle 2005, p. 106). The hypocrisy of insincere outward professions exacerbates their "wicked" heresy even further, moving them to be more "firmly persuaded" of their religion (Bayle 2005, p. 106). Hypocritical conformity is not inconsequential, as early modern advocates of toleration suggest, but convinces dissenters of their religion more fervently than they had been previously.

Elsewhere, Bayle reiterates the counterintuitive implications of measures of coercion intended to convert the souls and hearts of the unorthodox, suggesting that a dissenter is "more confirm'd in his own [Religion]. . .from the tyrannical methods [the state] employs against him" (Bayle 2005, p. 139). This invocation of "firmness" stresses the emboldening—rather than withering—of religious zeal. This potential for fervor is not unique to any specific religion but hinges on a psychological intuition about the aggravating consequences of persecution. Catholics will "become more Popish than they were before", and Muslims will "grow more zealous and obstinate in Mahometism", if persecuted (Bayle 2005, p. 155). Hypocritical conformity, Bayle warns, has precisely the opposite effect of its intended goal.

Bayle offers up two examples of the counterintuitive effects of religious persecution. The former focuses on the state, and the latter foregrounds a religious leader. First, Bayle describes a hypothetical political state that closely resembles his homeland, France. He invites his reader to suppose that the state views Catholicism as the "true Church" and to consider the "Consequences of Compulsion" (Bayle 2005, p. 155). What are the consequences of "threaten[ing] those who persis[t] in their Heresy with the roughest Treatment?" Bayle asks (Bayle 2005, p. 155). In response to this query, Bayle argues that dissenters, surprisingly enough, "gr[ow] more zealous in their Religion than ever" (Bayle 2005, p. 154). Persecution does not ensure the religious uniformity of this imagined political society but radicalizes dissenters and heightens fracturing in civil society. This religious zeal manifests in austere measures of religious practice, such as "continual Fastings and extraordinary Humiliations", demonstrating their heightened religiosity (Bayle 2005, p. 154). Dissenters view persecution as a providential sign that they should commit themselves even more fiercely to their religion.

Second, Bayle offers up a corresponding example of a religious leader who compels dissenters into false worship. He elaborates on an example of a pastor who is "sincerely zealous for the Salvation of his Flock", even enlisting coercive measures to try to convince dissenters of his religion (Bayle 2005, p. 300). Yet Bayle reaffirms his warning that these kinds of measures of coercion do not invite dissenters in but ostracize them: "Men being much more apt to be embitter'd and confirm'd in their Opinions by harsh Treatment, than determin'd to change and forsake 'em" (Bayle 2005, p. 300). For Bayle, persecution does not deliver on its presumed goal of inspiring dissenters to abandon their heterodoxy and embrace the one true, saving religion; rather, it estranges them from the state and intensifies their attachment to their religion even further.

Early modern historians have recovered this emboldening effect of persecution, suggesting that dissenters experienced the repression of the state as a divine sign of the need for religious zeal. Alexandra Walsham stresses that the early modern "social experience of diaspora and displacement often helped to strengthen the religious commitment of those who undertook it", recognizing the significant impact of exile and ostracism on dissenters and refugees like Bayle (Walsham 2006, p. 186). Many measures of persecution "galvanized the faith" of religious dissenters in practice (Walsham 2006, p. 186). Persecution does not convince dissenters of their heresy but "intensif[ied] and catalyz[ed] the conviction that one was a member of the predestinate elect" (Walsham 2006, p. 186). For advocates of conformity, persecution is intended to convince dissenters that they are "afflicted [by] a false Religion" (Bayle 2005, p. 154). Yet persecution and the many "Evils" dissenters are forced to confront are attributed to their "want of Zeal for [their] Religion, to their Lukewarmness

in its services" (Bayle 2005, p. 154). Persecution does not undermine religious heterodoxy but inspires dissenters to be even more fanatical in their religious practice and commit themselves more fully to religious rituals. Persecution implies this strange tension, which is both disturbing and energizing. Suffering is "at the same time immensely empowering", not necessarily demoralizing dissenters but inspiring them to commit even more fiercely to their religion (Walsham 2006, p. 212). Bayle suggests that meaningful violations of conscience may not only distress dissenters but may vex them so deeply that they respond with fanaticism.

5. Conclusions

By attending to the internal dynamics of the individual made to feel "othered" by the state, Bayle shifts the debate between proponents and critics of toleration from the inefficacy of coercion to the psychological dynamics of toleration and persecution as they are experienced by real people. Early modern theories of toleration hinge on the argument that force does not convert dissenters, but Bayle offers deeper, darker psychological arguments about the power of force. For Bayle, the dissonance between inward persuasion and outward behavior does not urge the dissenter to consider religious conversion but solidifies their faith and invites them to devote themselves more fully to their religious practice. Many early modern advocates for conformity hoped that forced exposure to religious ideas and practices would slowly convince dissenters of their heresy, but Bayle urges his reader to consider how these attempts to engage non-conformists might backfire in unanticipated ways.

By illuminating the unintended consequences of pressures to conform, Bayle provides us with an occasion to consider the challenges of co-existence in a diverse community, religious or otherwise, and the looming threat of radicalization, especially as religious extremism and far-right nationalism are on the rise. Jon Elster, the political philosopher, hoped that the process of conformity would slowly and subconsciously change the minds of individuals, what he called the "civilizing" effect of hypocrisy (Elster 1998, pp. 97–122). Yet those who are made to feel like they do not "belong" through forced conformity, to echo Yuna Blajer de la Garza, might not assimilate to the world around, but reject it even more ferociously.

Bayle's plea for toleration urges us to reflect on the ways that we invite those who are different from us into dialogue or how we might alienate them further, an urgent concern today as extremist religious and nationalist views are on the rise across Western societies and deep political polarization continues to threaten democratic politics. We find ourselves asking, once again, how best to approach those with whom we share competing worldviews. Bayle does not, perhaps surprisingly so given his received reputation as a champion of toleration, offer an inspiring defense of toleration that celebrates difference, but urges the persecutor to reconsider their attempts to persuade dissenters of their heresy.[7] This more moderate approach to politics might seem antiquated today, especially in service of confronting radical ideologies across the world. Our modern world is so deeply polarized and extremist, and we cannot risk tolerating such radical or inegalitarian worldviews without risking the threat of their flourishing. Yet Bayle's measured defense of toleration suggests that the alternative might backfire in dangerous and unexpected ways.

The historical context of early modernity hardly maps onto our modern politics, barring one striking likeness: early moderns also viewed their opponents as dangerous and blasphemous heretics, a kind of earlier analogue to zealots and dissidents today. Any kind of forced conformity, even to liberal and democratic principles of toleration, equality, and multiculturalism, risks further entrenching authoritarian and inegalitarian worldviews. Radical opposition groups, moreover, take advantage of this ostracism, preying on lone-wolf or outsider individuals who are made to feel like they do not belong—and indeed, do not belong—and foster their extremism by affording them inclusion and community.[8] This is hardly a principled attempt to convince the persecutor to lay down his sword, but perhaps Bayle is right to expect this more realistic defense of toleration to resonate with his

opponents. The social and political ostracism of competing worldviews—even those that might deserve it—may only inspire their followers of their "want of zeal for it". Toleration is, Bayle argues, the only way forward.

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Notes

[1] Saiya focuses on religiously inflicted terrorism, but I tie in nationalist extremism here. They are, of course, conceptually different, but I intend to invoke recent claims of trends toward radicalization in both religion and nationalist ideologies.

[2] Blajer de la Garza distinguishes between citizenship and belonging; members of a political community might enjoy full rights and privileges of citizenship yet still feel like "second-class" citizens that do not "belong" in their community.

[3] Bayle's willingness to tolerate such a wide range of religious differences, especially of atheists, is a marked and crucial difference between Bayle and many of his early modern contemporaries, such as John Milton and John Locke.

[4] For Queen Elizabeth, this window metaphor encompassed a refusal to "require her subjects to take Communion in their parish churches" (Kaplan 2007, p. 136).

[5] I use gender-neutral language to refer to religious dissenters, yet this decision is not historically accurate (both in terms of Bayle's political thought and the phenomenon of hypocritical conformity). Most religious dissenters that engaged in hypocritical conformity were men, since women (and their children) were often excluded from the public sphere and public displays of religious obedience. Alexandra Walsham documents the gendered practice of hypocritical conformity: "a shrewd domestic arrangement prevailed, whereby the husband periodically conformed to protect the family's social respectability and financial security, while his wife and children safeguarded its spiritual integrity by strictly separation themselves from heretical worship" (Walsham 2006, p. 191). Benjamin Kaplan also recognizes the gender dynamics of hypocritical conformity, suggesting that more men were forced to conform than women and children. Yet he acknowledges that the state was less concerned with the conformity of women and children, as the conformity of men was a sufficient "gesture of submission authorities required to leave their families alone" (Kaplan 2007, p. 275).

[6] For example, Walsham offers the powerful example of a "Church Papist", a conforming Catholic who tried to drown himself after reciting the common prayer of the Church of England.

[7] This view of Baylean toleration aligns with revisionist efforts by political theorists to highlight the "pragmatic" quality of early modern toleration, not grounded in a "positive virtue" but rather in a "grudging acceptance of unpleasant realities" (Kaplan 2007, p. 8).

[8] I am grateful to Yuna Blajer de la Garza for this insight into the relationship between opposition groups and belonging.

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