Who was Baron de Montesquieu?

Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu was born into a Catholic noble family in 1689. He received a law degree from the University of Bordeaux and married a practicing Protestant. In 1721 Montesquieu published The Persian Letters in Amsterdam, and the book was smuggled into France. The writer of The Persian Letters was not identified, but Montesquieu was widely known to be the author. The Persian Letters became a best seller and made Montesquieu a literary celebrity.

Montesquieu described how European culture might look to travellers from non-European countries. In The Persian Letters, he uses a fictional correspondence between several Persians to reflect on contemporary French government and social customs.

In 1748, Montesquieu published The Spirit of Laws in which he examined the three main types of governments - republic, monarchy, and despotism, a form of government in which the ruler is an absolute dictator. To guard against absolute rule and to protect individual rights, Montesquieu argued that the governmental powers of the executive, the legislature, and the judiciary should be separate from, and dependent upon, each other.

Montesquieu died in 1755.

**Excerpts from Montesquieu’s The Persian Letters**

**From Letter XXIV (dated 1712): The king of France is the most powerful prince in Europe. Moreover, this king is a great magician. He exercises his mind over his subjects and makes them thinks as he likes. There is another magician even more powerful than the king. This magician is called the Pope. Sometimes he has the king believing that three are only one, sometimes that the bread he eats is not bread, and the wine he drinks not wine, and a thousand other things of that sort.**

**From Letter XXXVII (dated 1713): The king of France is old. I have studied his character and I find in it contradictions impossible to resolve. For example, he has a minister who is only eighteen years old, and a mistress who is eighty. He loves his religion, and yet he cannot stand those who say that religion should be observed to the last letter.Often he shows preferment to a man who undresses him or who hands him his napkin when he sits down to table over some other who takes cities for him and wins battles. He is magnificent, especially in his buildings. There are more statues in the gardens of his palace than there are citizens in a great city.**

**From Letter XXIX (dated 1712): The Pope is the head of the Christians. He is an old idol worshipped out of habit. He has immense treasures and a great country under his domination. I can assure you that there has never been a kingdom where there are so many civil wars as in the Kingdom of Christ. In Spain and Portugal there are certain devishes [priests] who stand for no nonsense and will have a man burned as if he were straw. When people fall into the hands of those fellows, happy is he who has always prayed to God with little wooden beads in his hands.**

**From Letter CXVII: The prohibition of divorce is not the sole cause of depopulation in Christian countries. The great number of eunuchs they keep is no less considerable cause. I am talking of the priests of both sexes who vow themselves to eternal chastity.**

**From Letter IV: Here husbands consider the unfaithfulness of their wives as a stroke of some inevitable fate. Here a husband who loves his wife is a man lacking the attraction to make himself loved by another woman. Not that there are no virtuous ladies. My guide always pointed them out to me. But they were all so ugly that a man would have to be a saint not to have virtue.**

**From Letter XLVIII: [one of the Persian visitors, Usbek, comments on a ladies’ man] What have you to say about a country that tolerates such people? Where they let a man who leads such an existence live? Where unfaithfulness, betrayal, rape, and injustice lead to a good reputation? Where a man is held in esteem because he steals a daughter from her father, or a wife from a husband and throws confusion into the sweetest and most holy of social relations.**

**From Letter XXVIII: [another of the Persian visitors, Rica, has received a letter from an actress] “I have always been the most virtuous actress at the theatre. Seven or eight months ago, I was in my dressing room where you saw me yesterday. As I was preparing for the role of a priestess of Diana, a young priest came into my room, and with no respect for my white costume, veil, and headband, ravished me of my innocence.”**

**From Letter LXXX: I must confess that I have not noticed in Christians that lively conviction of religion which is found among the Muslims. There is much distance with them between profession of faith and belief, between belief and conviction, and between conviction and practice. Religion is less a matter of holiness than an excuse for disputes, open to everyone.**

**From Letter LXXXV: I am not sure that it would not be a good thing for a country to have several religions. I admit that the history books are filled with wars and religion. But it is certainly not the multiplicity of religions that produced such wars, it is rather the spirit of intolerance which inspired the religion that believed itself to be in the majority. This spirit of intolerance is a spirit of intoxication, the progress of which leads to a total eclipse of human reason.**

**From Letter LXX: I have often sought to find out which system of government was most in conformity with human reason. Be assured, my dear Rhedi that in a country the degree of cruelty of punishment does not cause people to obey the laws more. In countries where punishment is moderate, the laws are respected just as well as in those where punishment is tyrannous and frightful.**

**From Letter CXLIII: Men are certainly to be pitied! They continually float between false hopes and ridiculous fears, and instead of leaning upon reason, they invent for themselves monsters to terrify them, or phantoms to seduce them. You will say that certain magic spells have caused a battle to be won. And I shall reply that you must be very blind indeed not to find sufficient reasons for that effect in the location of the terrain, the numbers and courage of the soldiers, and the experience of the officers.**

**From Letter CXLI: Some days ago, I was presented to a lady of the court who had taken a fancy to see my foreign figure. I found her beautiful…. She asked me a thousand questions about the customs and lifestyles of the Persians, and the style of life led by the Persian women. The life of the seraglio did not appear to her taste, and she displayed repugnance at the idea of one man being shared among ten or a dozen women.**

**From Letter CXLVII by the The Chief Eunuch to Usbek, at Paris: Things have come to such a pass here that it is not to be endured; your wives imagine that your departure exempts them from all restraint; there has been most atrocious behaviour: I myself tremble at the harrowing story I am about to tell. Some days ago Zelis, on her way to the mosque, let her veil fall, and appeared before the people with her face almost wholly uncovered. Yesterday evening a young fellow was observed in the garden of the seraglio; he made his escape over the wall.**

Analysis Questions:

1. Based on the excerpts from The Persian Letters, what is Montesquieu’s attitude toward absolutism in France? Explain with specific examples.
2. Based on the excerpts from The Persian Letters, what is Montesquieu’s attitude toward religion in France and Europe? Explain with specific examples.
3. Based on the excerpts from The Persian Letters, what is Montesquieu’s attitude toward social customs and law in France and Europe? Explain with specific examples. Comment on the described roles of women.
4. By what criterion or standard does Montesquieu judge French society? Give two examples.
5. Why does Montesquieu use the literary technique of several Persians visiting France and commenting on its institutions and values? What other literary techniques does Montesquieu employ?