

TOLERANCE AND TRUTH

Philip Dormer Stanhope, Earl of Chesterfield (1694–1773)
to Philip Stanhope (1732–1768), his son

London, 21 September 1747

I received by the last post your letter of the 8th, N. S., and I do not wonder that you are surprised at the credulity and superstition of the Papists at Einsiedlen, and at their absurd stories of their chapel. But remember at the same time that errors and mistakes, however gross, in matters of opinion, if they are sincere, are to be pitied, but not punished nor laughed at. The blindness of the eye; and there is neither jest nor guilt in a man's losing his way in either case. Charity bids us set him right if we can, by arguments and persuasions; but charity at the same time forbids either to punish or ridicule his misfortune. Every man's reason is, and must be, his guide; and I may as well expect that every man should be of my size and complexion as that he should reason just as I do. Every man seeks for truth; but God only knows who has found it. It is therefore as unjust to persecute as it is absurd to ridicule people for those several opinions which they cannot help entertaining upon the conviction of their reason. It is the man who tells or who acts a lie that is guilty, and not he who honestly and sincerely believes the lie. I really know nothing more criminal, more mean, and more ridiculous than lying. It is the production either of malice, cowardice, or vanity, and generally misses of its aim in every one of these views; for lies are always detected sooner or later. If I tell a malicious lie in order to affect any man's fortune or character, I may indeed injure him for some time, but I shall be sure to be the greatest sufferer myself at last; for as soon as ever I am detected (and detected I most certainly shall be), I am blasted for the infamous attempt, and whatever is said afterwards to the disadvantage of that person, however true, passes for calumny. If I lie or equivocate, for it is the same thing, in order to excuse myself for something that I have said or done, and to avoid the danger and the shame that I apprehend from it, I discover at once my fear as well as my falsehood, and only increase instead of avoiding the danger and the shame; I show myself to be the lowest and the meanest of mankind, and am sure to be always treated as such. Fear, instead of avoiding, invites danger, for concealed cowards will insult known ones. If one has had the misfortune to be in the wrong, there is something noble in frankly owning it; it is the only way of atoning for it, and the only way of being forgiven. Equivocating, evading, shuffling, in order to remove a present danger or inconveniency, is something so mean and betrays so much fear, that whoever practices them always deserves to be and often will be kicked. There is another sort of lies, inoffensive enough in themselves, but wonderfully ridiculous; I mean those lies which a mistaken vanity suggests, that defeat the very end for which they are calculated, and terminate in the humiliation and confusion of their author, who is sure to be detected. These are chiefly narrative and historical lies, all intended to do infinite honor to their author. He is always the hero of his own romances; he has been in dangers from which nobody but himself ever escaped; he has seen with his own eyes whatever other people have heard or read of; and has ridden more miles post in one day than ever courier went in two. He is soon discovered, and as soon becomes the object of universal contempt and ridicule. Remember then, as long as you live, that nothing but strict truth can carry you through the world with either your conscience or your honor unwounded. It is not only your duty, but your interest—as a proof of which you may always observe that the greatest fools are the greatest liars. For my own part, I judge of every man's truth by his degree of understanding.