

Voltaire: A *Treatise on Toleration* (1763)

Voltaire was the most eloquent and tireless advocate of the anti-dogmatic movement known as "The Enlightenment." He argued in favor of "deism," a vague substitute for traditional religion which acknowledged a creator and some sort of divine justice, but rejected most of the other fundamental beliefs of Christianity. Instead he preached that all are obliged to tolerate each other. When he defends even false religion as superior to none, it is obvious that his objections to atheism are superficial and that he looks on religious beliefs as useful, but not necessarily true. It should be remembered that atheism was strictly illegal in Voltaire's time, and he had been imprisoned repeatedly and finally exiled for his challenges to traditional religion. Deism provided a convenient (and legal) screen for his attacks on Christianity; but many scholars believe that despite his statements to the contrary, he was in fact an atheist.

Whether it is Useful to Maintain People in their Superstition

Such is the feebleness of humanity, such is its perversity, that doubtless it is better for it to be subject to all possible superstitions, as long as they are not murderous, than to live without religion. Man always needs a rein, and even if it might be ridiculous to sacrifice to [fauns, or sylvans, or naiads, \(1\)](#) it is much more reasonable and more useful to venerate these fantastic images of the Divine than to sink into atheism. An atheist who is rational, violent, and powerful, would be as great a pestilence as a blood-mad, superstitious man.

When men do not have healthy notions of the Divinity, false ideas supplant them, just as in bad times one uses counterfeit money when there is no good money. The pagan feared to commit any crime, out of fear of punishment by his false gods; the Malabarian fears to be punished by his pagoda. Wherever there is a settled society, religion is necessary; the laws cover manifest crimes, and religion covers secret crimes.

But whenever human faith comes to embrace a pure and holy religion, superstition not only becomes useless, but very dangerous. We should not seek to nourish ourselves on acorns when God gives us bread.

Superstition is to religion what astrology is to astronomy: the foolish daughter of a very wise mother. These two daughters, superstition and astrology, have subjugated the world for a long time.

When, in our ages of barbarity, scarcely two feudal lords owned between them a single New Testament, it might be pardonable to offer fables to the vulgar, that is, to these feudal lords, to their imbecile wives, and to their brutish vassals; they were led to believe that Saint Christopher carried the infant Jesus from one side of a river to the other; they were fed stories about sorcerers and their spiritual possessions; they easily imagined that [Saint Genou \(2\)](#) would cure the gout, and that [Saint Claire \(3\)](#) would cure eye problems. The children believed in the werewolf, and the fathers in the rope girdle of Saint Francis. The number of [relics \(4\)](#) was innumerable.

The sediment of these superstitions still survived among the people, even at that time that religion was purified. We know that when Monsieur de Noailles, the Bishop of Châlons,

removed and threw into the fire the false relic of the holy navel of Jesus Christ, then the entire village of Châlons began proceedings against him; however, he had as much courage as he had piety, and he succeeded in making the Champenois believe that they could adore Jesus Christ in spirit and truth, without having his navel in the church.

Those we call [Jansenists \(5\)](#) contributed greatly to rooting out gradually from the spirit of the nation the greater part of the false ideas which dishonored the Christian religion. People ceased to believe that it was sufficient to recite a prayer to the Virgin Mary for thirty days so that they could do what they wish and sin with impunity the rest of the year.

Finally the bourgeoisie began to realize that it was not Saint Geneviève who gave or withheld rain, but that it was God Himself who disposed of the elements. The monks were astonished that their saints did not bring about miracles any longer; and if the writers of The Life of Saint Francis Xavier returned to the world, they would not dare to write that the saint revived nine corpses, that he was in two places, on the sea and on land, at the same time, and that his crucifix fell into the sea and was restored to him by a crab.

It is the same with excommunications. Our historians tells us that when King Robert was excommunicated by Pope Gregory V, for marrying his godmother, the princess Bertha, his domestic servants threw the meats to be served to the king right out the window, and Queen Bertha gave birth to a goose in punishment for the incestuous marriage. One could seriously doubt that in this day and age the servants of the king of France, if he were excommunicated, would throw his dinner out the window, or that the queen would give birth to a goose.

There are still a few [convulsive fanatics \(6\)](#) in remote corners of the suburbs; but this disease only attacks the most vile population. Each day reason penetrates further into France, into the shops of merchants as well as the mansions of lords. We must cultivate the fruits of this reason, especially since it is impossible to check its advance. One cannot govern France, after it has been enlightened by Pascal, Nicole, Arnauld, Bossuet, Descartes, Gassendi, Bayle, Fontenelle, and the others, as it as been governed in the times of Garasse and Menot.

If the masters of errors, and I'm speaking here of the grand masters, so long paid and honored for abusing the human species, ordered us today to believe that the seed must die in order to germinate; that the world is immovable on its foundations, that it does not orbit around the sun; that the tides are not a natural effect of gravitation; that the rainbow is not formed by the refraction and the reflection of rays of light, and so on, and they based their ordinances on passages poorly understood from the Holy Bible, how would educated men regard these men? Would the term "beasts" seem too strong? And if these wise masters used force and persecution to enforce their insolent stupidity, would the term "wild beasts" seem too extreme?

The more the superstitions of monks are despised, the more the bishops are respected and the priests listened to; while they do no good, these monkish superstitions [from over the](#)

[mountains \(7\)](#) do a great deal of harm. But of all these superstitions, is not the most dangerous that of hating your neighbor for his opinions? And is it not evident that it would be much more reasonable to worship [the Holy Navel, the Holy Foreskin, or the milk or the robe of the Virgin Mary, \(8\)](#) than to detest and persecute your brother?

Chapter 21: Virtue is Better than Science

The fewer dogmas, the fewer disputes; the fewer disputes, the fewer miseries: if this is not true, then I'm wrong.

Religion was instituted to make us happy in this life and in the other. What must we do to be happy in the life to come? Be just.

What must we do in order to be happy in this life, as far as the misery of our nature permits? Be indulgent.

It would be the height of folly to pretend to improve all men to the point that they think in a uniform manner about metaphysics. It would be easier to subjugate the entire universe through force of arms than to subjugate the minds of a single village. . . .

Chapter 22: On Universal Tolerance

It does not require great art, or magnificently trained eloquence, to prove that Christians should tolerate each other. I, however, am going further: I say that we should regard all men as our brothers. What? The Turk my brother? The Chinaman my brother? The Jew? The Siam? Yes, without doubt; are we not all children of the same father and creatures of the same God?

But these people despise us; they treat us as idolaters! Very well! I will tell them that they are grievously wrong. It seems to me that I would at least astonish the proud, dogmatic Islam imam or Buddhist priest, if I spoke to them as follows:

"This little globe, which is but a point, rolls through space, as do many other globes; we are lost in the immensity of the universe. Man, only five feet high, is assuredly only a small thing in creation. One of these imperceptible beings says to another one of his neighbors, in Arabia or South Africa: 'Listen to me, because God of all these worlds has enlightened me: there are nine hundred million little ants like us on the earth, but my ant-hole is the only one dear to God; all the other are cast off by Him for eternity; mine alone will be happy, and all the others will be eternally damned.'"

They would then interrupt me, and ask which fool blabbed all this nonsense. I would be obliged to answer, "You, yourselves." I would then endeavor to calm them, which would be very difficult.

I would then speak with the Christians, and I would dare to say, for example, to a [Dominican Inquisitor of the Faith: \(9\)](#) "My brother, you know that each province of Italy

has their own dialect, and that people do not speak at Venice or Bergamo the same way they speak at Florence. The Academy of Crusca near Florence has fixed the language; its dictionary is a rule which one dare not depart from, and the Grammar of Buonmattei is an infallible guide that one must follow. But do you believe that the consul of the Academy, or Buonmattei in his absence, could in conscience cut the tongues out of all the Venetians and all the Bergamese who persist in speaking their dialect?"

The inquisitor responds, "There is a difference between your example and our practice. For us, it is a matter of the health of your soul. It is for your good that the director of the Inquisition ordains that you be seized on the testimony of a single person, however infamous or criminal that person might be; that you will have no advocate to defend you; that the name of your accuser will not even be known by you; that the inquisitor can promise you mercy, and immediately condemn you; that five different tortures will be applied to you, and then you will be flogged, or sent to the galleys, or ceremoniously burned. Father Ivonet, Doctor Cuchalon, Zanchinus, Campegius, Roias, Felynus, Gomarus, Diabarus, Gemelinus, are explicit on this point, and this pious practice cannot suffer any contradiction."

I would take the liberty to respond, "My brother, perhaps you are reasonable; I am convinced that you wish to do me good; but could I not be saved without all that?"

It is true that these absurd horrors do not stain the face of the earth every day; but they are frequent, [and they could easily fill a volume much greater than the gospels which condemn them. \(10\)](#) Not only is it extremely cruel to persecute in this brief life those who do not think the way we do, but I do not know if it might be too presumptuous to declare their eternal damnation. It seems to me that it does not pertain to the atoms of the moment, such as we are, to anticipate the decrees of the Creator.

[Translated by Richard Hooker](#)

(1) Ancient Greek demigods.

(2) His name means "knee" in French.

(3) Her name suggests light.

(4) Physical remains of saints, either their body parts, clothing, or any other physical object associated with them; these relics were supposed to display remarkable curative and other magical properties.

(5) Reformers who agreed in many ways with Protestant ideas.

(6) Ecstatics who fell into religious fits.

(7) Rome.

(8) These are all relics actually venerated in his time.

(9) The Dominicans ran the notorious Inquisition which tortured and condemned to death people who departed from orthodox Catholicism.

(10) Note how he slips in this comment, arguing that the Inquisition itself is contrary to the teachings of Christ.