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VOLTAIRE: “SUBLIME, HONORABLE, AND DEAR ANTI-CHRIST”

1694	Born
1718	Wrote first play, <i>Oedipe</i>
1726–1728	English exile
1734–1739	Residence at Cirey
1750–1753	Residence in Berlin
1751	Wrote <i>The Age of Louis XIV</i>
1753	Wrote <i>An Essay on Customs</i>
1755–1778	Residence in Switzerland
1758	Wrote <i>Candide</i>
1764	Wrote <i>Philosophical Dictionary</i>
1778	Died

Voltaire was one of the world's most popular and prolific writers: his collected works in the standard French edition run to 135 heavy volumes. They include dozens of plays and novels, among them his most famous single work, *Candide*; a number of substantial histories including his *History of Charles XII*, *The Age of Louis XIV*, *History of the Russian Empire under Peter the Great*, and *An Essay on Customs* (a universal history of civilization); hundreds of essays and tracts including his scandalously antireligious *Philosophical Dictionary*, and more than twenty thousand surviving letters.

Voltaire was born François-Marie Arouet in Paris in 1694, the son of a lawyer and minor government functionary. He was educated at the Jesuit college of Louis Le Grand in Paris, where he treasured the learning and mocked the religion of his teachers. He successfully resisted the wish of his father that he study law and instead began to frequent the literary salons of Paris. He quickly became known for his wit and outrageous opinions—which earned him imprisonment in the Bastille for nearly a year in 1717. In the following year the first of his plays, *Oedipe*, was a resounding success. It was at this time that he adopted the pen name Voltaire; what it meant is unknown.

He had already adopted an aggressive, outspoken deism, the rational, natural religion that was one of the leading tenets of the freethinking intellectuals of what was beginning to be called the Age of Reason or the Enlightenment. In the course of his long life, Voltaire was to become the leading advocate for the Enlightenment, as he was for deism.

In 1726, as a result of a quarrel with an overbearing nobleman, Voltaire was forced to leave France. For the place of his exile he chose England, which he had long admired for its liberal and enlightened government, so unlike the narrow and repressive government of France. He also admired the scientific works of Sir Isaac Newton and the philosophical empiricism of John Locke—he even learned English in order to read Locke's works. In his two years in England, Voltaire was lionized by the English literary and philosophical establishment. He was befriended by such writers as Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, William Congreve, and the philosophical successor to Locke, George Berkeley. He was presented at court by Lord Bolingbroke and Sir Robert Walpole.

Early in 1729 Voltaire returned to France, more committed than ever to a program of radical rationalism in government, manners, and religion. He continued to write—plays, histories, and philosophical works. And the religious and political establishment continued to harass him.

In 1734, threatened with arrest once more, Voltaire embarked on a series of travels that would keep him away from Paris for most of the rest of his life. For more than fifteen years he engaged in a liaison with a brilliant French noblewoman, Madame du Châtelet. Her chateau at Cirey in Champagne was beyond the reach of the Parisian authorities. During this time Voltaire's plays made him the leading dramatist of his age; his works of history were almost equally popular, as were his novels or *contes*; and his philosophic writings were more impassioned than ever, and more scandalous.

In 1750 he was attracted to the court of Prussia by his friendship with the young king, Frederick the Great, but after three turbulent years they had a falling out and Voltaire departed, finally settling in Geneva. It seemed a haven of tolerance, but Voltaire's religious views proved as unacceptable to the Protestant authorities of Geneva as they had to the Catholic authorities of Paris. In 1758 he bought adjoining properties at Ferney in Switzerland and Tournay in France, just across the border. By moving from one residence to the other he could avoid the authorities of either country. Here he remained for the rest of his life.

The Philosophical Dictionary

VOLTAIRE

By the time he settled at Ferney, Voltaire was a wealthy man, having profited from his writings and invested his money shrewdly. This enabled him to build grand houses on both his properties, which he turned into model agricultural estates. Sincerely interested in the welfare of the people who worked for him, Voltaire paid them a decent wage, defended them before municipal authorities, and opened a stocking mill and a watch factory to provide additional employment for them. In his residences he kept sumptuous court, entertaining the fashionable philosophers, scientists, and literary figures attracted to Ferney by his fame and generous hospitality. Voltaire was called the "Innkeeper of Europe."

Voltaire continued to write and speak out on a broad range of topics—literary, scientific, political, philosophical. But his preoccupation was his campaign for rational religion and against the bigotry and intolerance of established religion. While most of his writings touched these concerns in one way or another, his Philosophical Dictionary (1764) dealt specifically with them. Under the entry "Religion," we find the passage excerpted below. It is a reverie on the universality of God and on the parallel universality of humanity's intolerance and hypocrisy. It is a condemnation of Old Testament Jewish militarism and of Christian slaughter of both fellow Christians and the native Americans in the name of religion. It is, at the same time, an ironic account of humankind's rejection of its greatest benefactors, including the ancient Roman king Numa Pompilius, Socrates, and Christ.

Last night I was meditating; I was absorbed in the contemplation of nature, admiring the immensity, the courses, the relations of those infinite globes, which are above the admiration of the vulgar.

I admired still more the intelligence that presides over this vast machinery. I said to myself: A man must be blind not to be impressed by this spectacle; he must be stupid not to recognize its author; he must be mad not to adore him. What tribute of adoration ought I to render him? Should not this tribute be the same throughout the extent of space, since the same Supreme Power reigns equally in all that extent?

Does not a thinking being, inhabiting a star of the Milky Way, owe him the same homage as the thinking being on this little globe where we are? Light is the same to the dog-star as to us; morality, too, must be the same. . . .

The heart has everywhere the same duties; on the steps of the throne of God, if He has a throne, and at the bottom of the great abyss, if there be an abyss.

I was wrapt in these reflections, when one of those genii who fill the spaces between worlds, came down to me. . . .

He transported me into a desert covered all over with bones piled one upon another; and between these heaps of dead there were avenues of evergreen trees, and at the end of each avenue a tall man of august aspect gazing with compassion on these sad remains.

"Alas! my archangel," said I, "whither have you brought me?" "To desolation," answered he. "And who are those fine old patriarchs whom I see motionless and melancholy at the end of those green avenues, and who seem to weep over this immense multitude of dead?" "Poor human creature! thou shalt know," replied the genius; "but, first, thou must weep."

He began with the first heap. "These," said he, "are the twenty-three thousand Jews who danced before a calf, together with the twenty-four thousand who were slain while ravishing Midianitish women; the number of the slaughtered for similar offences or mistakes amounts to nearly three hundred thousand.

"At the following avenues are the bones of Christians, butchered by one another on account of metaphysical disputes. They are divided into several piles of four centuries each; it was necessary to separate them; for had they been all together, they would have reached the sky."

"What!" exclaimed I, "have brethren thus treated their brethren; and have I the misfortune to be one of this brotherhood?"

"Here," said the spirit, "are the twelve millions of Americans slain in their own country for not having been baptized." "Ah! my God! why were not these frightful skeletons left to whiten in the hemisphere where the bodies were born, and where they were murdered in so many various ways? Why are all these abominable monuments of barbarity and fanaticism assembled here?" "For thy instruction."

"Since thou art willing to instruct me," said I to the genius, "tell me if there be any other people than the Christians and the Jews, whom zeal and religion, unhappily turned into fanaticism, have prompted to so many horrible cruelties?" "Yes," said he; "the Mahometans have been stained by the same inhuman acts, but rarely; and when their victims have cried out '*amman!*' (mercy!) and have offered them tribute, they have pardoned them. As for other nations, not one of them, since the beginning of the world, has ever made a purely religious war. Now, follow me!" I followed.

A little beyond these heaps of dead we found other heaps; these were bags of gold and silver; and each pile had its label: "Substance of the heretics massacred in the eighteenth century, in the seventeenth, in the sixteenth," and so on. "Gold and silver of the slaughtered Americans," etc.; and all these piles were surmounted by crosses, mitres, crosiers, and tiaras, enriched with jewels.

"What! my genius, was it then to possess these riches that these carcasses were accumulated?" "Yes, my son."

I shed tears; and when by my grief I had merited to be taken to the end of the green avenues, he conducted me thither.

"Contemplate," said he, "the heroes of humanity who have been the benefactors of the earth, and who united to banish from the world, as far as they were able, violence and rapine. Question them."

I went up to the first of this band; on his head was a crown, and in his hand a small censer. I humbly asked him his name. "I," said he, "am Numa Pompilius; I succeeded a robber, and had robbers to govern; I taught them virtue and the worship of God; after me they repeatedly forgot both. I forbade any image to be placed in the temples, because the divinity who animates nature cannot be represented. During my reign the Romans had neither wars nor seditions; and my religion did nothing but good. Every neighboring people came to honor my funeral, which has happened to me alone. . . ."

Then we saw Zaleucus, Thales, Anaximander, and all the other sages who had sought truth and practised virtue.

When we came to Socrates I quickly recognized him by his broken nose. "Well," said I, "you then are among the confidants of the Most High! All the inhabitants of Europe, excepting the Turks and the Crim Tartars, who know nothing, pronounce your name with reverence. So much is that great name venerated, so much is it loved, that it has been sought to discover those of your persecutors. Melitus and Anitus are known because of you, as Ravailac is known because of Henry IV¹; but of Anitus I know only the name. I know not precisely who that villain was by whom you were calumniated, and who succeeded in procuring your condemnation to the hemlock."

"I have never thought of that man since my adventure," answered Socrates; "but now that you put me in mind of him, I pity him much. He was a wicked priest, who secretly carried on a trade in leather, a traffic reputed shameful amongst us. He sent his two children to my school; the other disciples reproached them with their father's being a currier, and they were obliged to quit. The incensed father was unceasing in his endeavors until he had stirred up against me all the priests and all the sophists. They persuaded the council of the five hundred that I was an impious man, who did not believe that the moon, Mercury, and Mars were deities. I thought indeed, as I do now, that there is but one God, the master of all nature. The judges gave me up to the republic's poisoner, and he shortened my life a few days. I died with tranquillity at the age of seventy years, and since then I have led a happy life with all these great men whom you see, and of whom I am the least. . . ."

After enjoying the conversation of Socrates for some time, I ad-

¹The accusers of Socrates at his trial and the assassin of the French king Henry IV.

vanced with my guide into a bower, situated above the groves, where all these sages of antiquity seemed to be tasting the sweets of repose.

Here I beheld a man of mild and simple mien, who appeared to me to be about thirty-five years old. He was looking with compassion upon the distant heaps of whitened skeletons through which I had been led to the abode of the sages. I was astonished to find his feet swelled and bloody, his hands in the same state, his side pierced, and his ribs laid bare by flogging. "Good God!" said I, "is it possible that one of the just and wise should be in this state? I have just seen one who was treated in a very odious manner; but there is no comparison between his punishment and yours. Bad priests and bad judges poisoned him. Was it also by priests and judges that you were so cruelly assassinated?"

With great affability he answered—"Yes."

"And who were those monsters?"

"They were hypocrites."

"Ah! you have said all! by that one word I understand that they would condemn you to the worst of punishments. You then had proved to them, like Socrates, that the moon was not a goddess, and that Mercury was not a god?"

"No; those planets were quite out of the question. My countrymen did not even know what a planet was; they were all arrant ignoramuses. Their superstitions were quite different from those of the Greeks."

"Then you wished to teach them a new religion?"

"Not at all; I simply said to them—'Love God with all your hearts, and your neighbor as yourselves; for that is all.' Judge whether this precept is not as old as the universe; judge whether I brought them a new worship. I constantly told them that I was come, not to abolish their law, but to fulfil it; I had observed all their rites; I was circumcised as they all were; I was baptized like the most zealous of them; like them I paid the corban; like them I kept the Passover; and ate, standing, lamb cooked with lettuce. I and my friends went to pray in their temple; my friends, too, frequented the temple after my death. In short, I fulfilled all their laws without one exception."

"What! could not these wretches even reproach you with having departed from their laws?"

"Certainly not."

"Why, then, did they put you in the state in which I now see you?"

"Must I tell you?—They were proud and selfish; they saw that I knew them; they saw that I was making them known to the citizens; they were the strongest; they took away my life; and such as they will always do the same, if they can, to whoever shall have done them too much justice."

"But did you say nothing; did you do nothing, that could serve them as a pretext?"

"The wicked find a pretext in everything."

"Did you not once tell them that you were come to bring, not peace, but the sword?"

"This was an error of some scribe. I told them that I brought, not the sword, but peace. I never wrote anything; what I said might be miscopied without any ill intent."

"You did not then contribute in anything, by your discourses, either badly rendered or badly interpreted, to those frightful masses of bones which I passed on my way to consult you?"

"I looked with horror on those who were guilty of all these murders."

"And those monuments of power and wealth—of pride and avarice—those treasures, those ornaments, those ensigns of greatness, which, when seeking wisdom, I saw accumulated on the way—do they proceed from you?"

"It is impossible; I and mine lived in poverty and lowliness; my greatness was only in virtue."

I was on the point of begging of him to have the goodness just to tell me who he was; but my guide warned me to refrain. He told me that I was not formed for comprehending these sublime mysteries. I conjured him to tell me only in what true religion consisted.

"Have I not told you already?—Love God and your neighbor as yourself."

"What! Can we love God and yet eat meat on a Friday?"

"I always ate what was given me; for I was too poor to give a dinner to any one."

"Might we love God and be just, and still be prudent enough not to intrust all the adventures of one's life to a person one does not know?"

"Such was always my custom."

"Might not I, while doing good, be excused from making a pilgrimage to St. James of Compostello?"

"I never was in that country."

"Should I confine myself in a place of retirement with blockheads?"

"For my part, I always made little journeys from town to town."

"Must I take part with the Greek or with the Latin Church?"

"When I was in the world, I never made any difference between the Jew and the Samaritan."

"Well, if it be so, I take you for my only master."

Then he gave me a nod, which filled me with consolation. The vision disappeared, and I was left with a good conscience.

The Philosophy of the Enlightenment

ERNST CASSIRER

Voltaire's preoccupation with rational religion was grounded in the basic presuppositions of the philosophy of the Enlightenment. It is to those presuppositions that the following excerpt, taken from The Philosophy of the Enlightenment by Ernst Cassirer, now turns. Cassirer was one of the most eminent German philosophers of the early twentieth century. In midcareer he moved away from his earlier interest in pure philosophy to do pioneering work in what is now called the "history of ideas." The Philosophy of the Enlightenment was the keystone book in that transition. In the preface (p. vii) Cassirer writes, "Philosophy is no longer to be separated from science, history, jurisprudence, and politics; it is rather to be the atmosphere in which they can exist and be effective." There was no better test for his concept than the eighteenth century, when the ideas of the Enlightenment so clearly penetrated all aspects of society, and no better figure to deal with it than Voltaire. In the following passage, Cassirer lays out the basic ideas that governed Voltaire's views on religion.

He leads into his discussion of Voltaire from a treatment of the concept of the centrality of law in eighteenth-century thought. "Law," Cassirer writes, "like mathematics, has its objective structure which no arbitrary whim can alter" (p. 243).

The philosophy of the Enlightenment at first holds fast to this apriority of law, to this demand for absolutely universally valid and unalterable legal norms. Even the pure empiricists and the philosophical empiricists are no exception in this respect. Voltaire and Diderot scarcely differ from Grotius and Montesquieu, but they fall indeed into a difficult dilemma.² For how can this view be reconciled with the fundamental tendency of their doctrine of knowledge? How does the necessity and immutability of the concept of law agree with the proposition that every idea is derived from the senses and that, accordingly, it can possess no other and no higher significance than the various sense experiences on which it is based? Voltaire clearly grasped this contradiction, and at times he seems to waver as to his decision. But in the end the ethical rationalist, the enthusiast for the original competence and the fundamental force of moral reason, triumphs over the empiricist

²Hugo Grotius (1583–1645) was a Dutch legal theorist, and Baron de Montesquieu (1689–1755) was a French jurist and philosopher. Denis Diderot (1713–1784) was a *philosophe*, like Voltaire, and a contemporary who almost exactly shared his views.

and skeptic. On this point he even ventures to oppose his leader and master, Locke. Locke's proof that there are no innate ideas, Voltaire objects, by no means signifies that there can be no universal principle of morality. For the acceptance of such a principle does not imply that it is present and active from the first in every thinking being but that it can be found by everyone for himself. The act of finding this principle is confined to a certain time and a certain stage of development. However, the content, which is discovered and disclosed to consciousness in this act, does not spring from the act itself, but has always existed. "I agree with Locke that there is really no innate idea; it clearly follows that there is no proposition of morality innate in our soul; but from the fact that we were not born with beards, does it follow that we were not born, we inhabitants of this continent, to be bearded at a certain age? We are not born with the strength to walk, but whoever is born with two feet will some day walk. Similarly, no one is born with the idea that it is necessary to be just; but God has so formed the organs of man that all at a certain age agree to this truth."³ Even though he is a historian of civilization who delights in unfolding before us the variety and conflict of human habits and customs, and in pointing out their complete relativity, their dependence on changeable and accidental circumstances, yet Voltaire never deviates from this viewpoint. For time and again he believes he has found beneath this mutability of opinions, prejudices, and customs, the immutable character of morality itself. "Even though that which in one region is called virtue, is precisely that which in another is called vice, even though most rules regarding good and bad are as variable as the languages one speaks and the clothing one wears; yet it seems to me, nevertheless, certain that there are natural laws with respect to which human beings in all parts of the world must agree. . . . To be sure, God did not say to man: 'Here you have laws from my lips according to which I desire you to govern yourselves'; but He did the same thing with man that He did with many other animals. He gave to bees a powerful instinct by virtue of which they work together and gain their sustenance, and He endowed man with certain inalienable feelings; and these are the eternal bonds and the first laws of human society."⁴ And again, in proof of his fundamental conviction, Voltaire refers especially to the great analogy of the laws of nature. Should nature everywhere have aimed at unity, order, and complete regularity, and have missed only in the case of its highest creation, man? Should nature rule the physical world according to general and inviolable laws, only to abandon the moral world completely to chance and whim? Here then we must leave Locke and seek

³Voltaire, Letter to Crown Prince Frederick of Prussia, October 1737, *Works*, I, 138. [Bibliographic notes are Cassirer's.]

⁴Voltaire, *Traité de Métaphysique*, chap. IX, *Works*, xxxi, 65 f.

support in Newton and his great maxim: "Nature is always in harmony with itself" (*natura est semper sibi consona*). Just as the law of gravity, which we find on earth, is not confined to this planet, just as this law reveals a fundamental force of matter which extends throughout the cosmos and connects every particle of matter with every other, so the fundamental law of morality prevails in all the nations we know. In the interpretation of this law there are, according to the circumstances, thousands of variations, but the basis always remains the same and this basis is the idea of the just and the unjust. "In the fury of passion one commits innumerable injustices, as one loses his reason when intoxicated; but when the intoxication wears off, reason returns, and that is in my opinion the sole cause of the preservation of human society, a cause subservient to our need for one another."⁵ To prove God's existence and His goodness, one should not appeal to apparent physical miracles, to the interruption of the laws of nature, but to this one moral miracle: "Miracles are good; but to aid one's fellow, to free one's friend from the bosom of misery, to pardon the virtues of one's enemies, this is a greater miracle and one which is no longer performed."⁶

The Modern Pagan

PETER GAY

The following excerpt is from The Rise of Modern Paganism, the first volume of The Enlightenment, the masterwork of the eminent intellectual historian Peter Gay. Gay was already an established authority on the Enlightenment when he turned to this work of synthesis. The thesis of The Rise of Modern Paganism is that the dominant theme of the Enlightenment was its opposition to traditional religion. And Gay finds Voltaire at its center. Following is Gay's summary of Voltaire's rationalist and increasingly radical deism and his analysis of Voltaire's campaign against established religion—écraser l'infâme ("to crush the infamous thing").

Voltaire's career as a publicist had its real beginning in 1718 with *Cédipe*, his first tragedy; it ended sixty years later, in 1778, the year of his death, when he returned to Paris in triumph, the symbol of an irresistible cause. It was not only long, this career, but also glorious, and it vividly reflects both the evolution of religious controversy in

⁵Voltaire, *Le Philosophe ignorant*, ch. xxxvi, *Works*, xxxi, 130.

⁶Voltaire, *Discours en vers sur l'homme*, Septième discours, *Works*, xii, 92.

eighteenth-century France and the tenacious hold of deism on one of the century's liveliest minds. Voltaire began with the advance guard and ended up as an anachronism—at least among the radicals. As a precocious young man, all wit and intelligence, he was coopted into a precious society of wealthy gourmands, brilliant talkers, and homosexuals, who took impiety for granted—it was the mark of membership, not of independent thought. In this elegant and decadent environment Voltaire practiced the higher criticism on a low level: he learned obscene jokes about the Virgin and unprintable deist poems like the *Moisade*, in which (in familiar style) a personified Good Sense scores rhetorical victories over doctrinaire believers and mystery-mongering priests.

But the wit turned philosopher. Before long Voltaire translated the irresponsible rationalism of his circle into a serious world view. His earliest successes, ostensibly remote from theological concerns, are the work of a deist whose rationalist religion is more than a game. Voltaire's version of Sophocles' *Oedipus*, which made him the rival of Corneille and Racine in the eyes of a public parched for good plays, pointedly depicts God as a kind of metaphysical villain, a cruel, despotic, and implacable being: Oedipus and Jocasta have committed incest and parricide, yet they remain virtuous, for their crimes are the crimes of the gods:

Inceste et parricide, et pourtant vertueux,
Impitoyable dieux, mes crimes sont les vôtres,
Et vous m'en punissez!⁷

Voltaire's coterie was gratified by the philosophy of his tragedy, and so, it seems, were his old teachers, the Jesuits, who were at the time embroiled in a fierce struggle against the Augustinian theology of Jansenism.⁸ They were not gratified for long: in the *Henriade*, the epic poem he completed in the early 1720's, Voltaire turned on them to give vent to his principled anticlericalism. The *Henriade* is not primarily a work of propaganda; it is Voltaire's ambitious literary effort to become the Vergil of France. But deism keeps breaking in: the poem is both a hymn to Henri IV, who is shown to be France's greatest king, for being its most tolerant, and a tirade against religious fanaticism, against the assassins of St. Bartholomew's Day⁹ and the blood-thirsty

⁷"Incest and parricide, and still they are virtuous. / Pitiless gods, our crimes are yours, / And you punish us!" (*Works*, II, 107–08).

⁸A Catholic reform movement deriving from the Dutch theologian Cornelis Jansen (1585–1638). Its leading tenet was a radical predestinarian doctrine, much like that of Calvinism. The Jansenists were bitterly opposed by the Jesuits.

⁹The occasion of the massacre of Huguenots (French Protestants) by their Catholic opponents in 1572.

papacy. It is a frigid poem, labored and rather mechanical, and it has not survived the passing of time and changes in taste, but it achieves a certain dramatic force in the polemical passages, in which Voltaire states in preliminary but articulate form the deist criticisms that will be his passionate theme in the 1760's.

Je ne décide point entre Genève et Rome,¹⁰

Voltaire has Henri exclaim, which is to say that all positive religions are at bottom alike. Forty years later he would specify what he here only implies: in tendency, at least, all religions are equally bad.

This was heresy, but Voltaire escaped censure by clothing his formulations in mythological or historical dress, attributing his opinions to pagans or Protestants, and ceaselessly parading his own piety. But as is evident from his *Épître à Uranie*, written in 1722 and not published until the 1730's, Voltaire was no longer a Christian in the 1720's, not even a Christian deist. As I have said earlier, in the *Épître* he poses as a modern Lucretius who defies a cruel God and all His horrible mysteries and explicitly abandons Christianity so that he may be free to love the deist deity. . . .

It was not until much later, until around 1760, that Voltaire discarded all compromise and threw away much of his caution. A great deal had happened, both to the movement and to him. Radical writers were being persecuted, and hard-working Encyclopedists harassed; the tempo of the anti-Christian crusade had quickened. Voltaire was ready: after long wandering he was safely settled at Ferney, just a short ride away from Genevan territory. He was old, rich, world-famous, and almost, if not quite, immune from prosecution. He had mastered the grim Pyrrhonism induced by the Lisbon Earthquake and the outbreak of the Seven Years' War. And he did not like to see the leadership of the movement—*his* movement!—pass into younger hands. He reread the notes he had taken at Cirey twenty years before and resumed work on blasphemous pamphlets he had begun at the court of Frederick the Great. Man was born for action—he had said that in the *Lettres philosophiques*—and now the time for action had come. Long before, in 1738, he had written to a friend, "I know how to hate because I know how to love."¹¹ In the 1760's he translated this to mean that destruction must precede construction: many ask, he wrote, what shall we put in the place of Christianity? "What! A ferocious animal has sucked the blood of my family; I tell you to get rid of that beast, and you ask me, What shall we put in its place!"¹² To get rid of the beast Voltaire made himself into the unofficial adviser to the underground army arrayed

¹⁰"I will not decide between Geneva and Rome." (*Works*, VIII, 66).

¹¹Voltaire to Thieriot (December 10, 1738). *Correspondence*, VIII, 43. [Bibliographic notes are Gay's.]

¹²*Examen important de Milord Bolingbroke*, in *Works*, XXVI, 299.

against it: he began to use the phrase *Écrasez l'infâme*, which gave the army a battle cry and rallied its morale; and he took charge of its tactics: he warned the brethren to conceal their hand, to write simply, to repeat the truth often, to lie if necessary, and to convict the enemy out of his own mouth. He had his reward: the little flock recognized his pre-eminence. In 1762 Diderot affectionately saluted him as his "sublime, honorable, and dear Anti-Christ."¹³

No epithet could have been more welcome: a mere glance at the torrent of pamphlets that poured out of Ferney in the last sixteen years of Voltaire's life reveals a distaste for Christianity amounting almost to an obsession. Interpreters who restrict *l'infâme* to intolerance or fanaticism or Roman Catholicism shrink from a conclusion that Voltaire himself drew, and drew innumerable times, in these frenetic years: "Every sensible man, every honorable man, must hold the Christian sect in horror."¹⁴ This is the central message of Voltaire's last and most intensive campaign: he repeats it with endless variations, with blasphemies, playful absurdities, and sometimes obscenities. Nothing was safe: the Trinity, the chastity of the Virgin Mary, the body and blood of Christ in the Mass, all are cruelly lampooned to enforce a single point: "May this great God who is listening to me, this God who surely cannot have been born of a virgin, or have died on the gallows, or be eaten in a piece of dough, or have inspired these books filled with contradictions, madness, and horror—may this God, creator of all the worlds, have pity on this sect of Christians who blaspheme him!"¹⁵

This is pure rage—there is no rage equal to the rage of the angry idealist—but it is not out of control. Voltaire varied his arguments enough to prevent monotony and repeated them enough to carry his point. . . .

But all this was marking time; Voltaire did not resume concentrated work on his one-man *Encyclopédie* until 1762, when he was involved in the Calas case¹⁶ and wholly committed to action against *l'infâme*. He importuned correspondents to supply him with material; he told Damilaville, in Paris, to send him "*presto, presto*" a recently published *Dictionnaire des conciles*: "Theology," he wrote acidly, "amuses me; there we find man's insanity in all its plenitude."¹⁷ Then in June 1764 the first edition of the *Dictionnaire philosophique* was published in Geneva, with a false London imprint. It was compact and explosive, its success predictable and, given Voltaire's talents and years of preparation, inevitable. And while he gloried in that success and worked on a second

¹³September 25, 1762, *Correspondence*, IV, 178.

¹⁴*Examen important de Milord Bolingbroke*, in *Works*, XXVI, 298.

¹⁵*Works*, XXIV, 354–55.

¹⁶A case in which a man, accused of religious deviation, had been unjustly put to death.

¹⁷December 26, 1762, *Correspondence*, L, 199.

edition, he frantically denied any part in the devilish work: he proclaimed to anyone who would listen that he had not written it, that he had not even read all of it. The lie was too blatant to be believed—and Voltaire was too vain an author to have it believed: the book showed the master's touch on page after page. While those lucky enough to own a copy circulated it among their friends, and Voltaire supplied the demand with edition after edition, the need for his mendacity was painfully confirmed by the actions of governments everywhere: Geneva, the United Provinces, France, and the Holy See all burned the book and longed (as Voltaire ruefully said) to burn the author. For five years, from 1764 to 1769, amid fits of panic and moments of elation Voltaire reprinted, revised, and enlarged the book, and its successive editions record the flexibility of his politics and the stability of his deism. . . .

The arguments of the *Dictionnaire philosophique* require less analysis than its tactics: they follow well-established models. Anyone who knew anything about the deists, English or French, recognized Voltaire's criticism and relished the new way in which familiar things were being said: The Old and New Testaments are alike a collection of childish absurdities and irreconcilable contradictions—hence the prophecies of the Jews and the claims of the Apostles are either primitive allegories or manifest deceptions. The morality of the "Chosen People," exemplified by the conduct of King David, is abhorrent, and the history of the Church is a sanguinary compilation of stupid wrangles ending in civil war and mass murder—hence the fathers of Christianity, and Christians through history, are with their conduct conclusive arguments against the Christian religion. Revealed religion is an infectious disease: "Fanaticism is to superstition what delirium is to fever and rage to anger."¹⁸ The infection inevitably leads to virulent manifestations: "The superstitious man is ruled by the fanatic, and turns into one."¹⁹ And Voltaire defines superstition broadly: "Almost everything that goes beyond the worship of a supreme Being, and the submission of one's heart to his eternal commands, is superstition."²⁰ And that "almost" was a last concession to prudence.

This, as everyone recognized, was critical deism, accompanied, as such doctrine usually was, by its corollary, a naturalistic religion: Voltaire earnestly urged his readers to remember that men are ignorant visitors on this globe who must tolerate each other and develop their capacity for generosity and justice—this is all the philosophical system, all the theology men need. What, someone asks in one of the dialogues in the *Dictionnaire*, what must we do to be able to look at

¹⁸"Fanaticism," *Works*, I, 267.

¹⁹"Superstition," *ibid.*, II, 475.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 473.

ourselves without shame and revulsion? "Be just" is the answer. And what else? "Be just."²¹ Voltaire had said as much, if less openly and less intensely, half a century before.

Questions for Review and Study

1. How would you characterize Voltaire's views on religion?
2. What are the leading elements in the philosophy of the Enlightenment? Discuss.
3. Do you agree with Peter Gay's assertion that the dominant theme of the Enlightenment was its opposition to traditional religion? How does this apply to the case of Voltaire?

Questions for Comparison

1. Discuss Einstein (see p. 243) and Voltaire as embodiments of the Enlightenment spirit. In what sense did Einstein take the path opened two centuries earlier by men like Voltaire? Whose confidence in humankind seems to have been more robust: was the Enlightenment's original faith in human reason still evident in Einstein? Do the different moods of the two thinkers seem to have resulted from different ideas, different temperaments, or different historical circumstances? What did these men regard as the most urgent problems of their respective times? Did the two regard the transnational institutions of their day as helpful or destructive?

Suggestions for Further Reading

A number of critical bibliographies of the vast works of Voltaire are available. The most comprehensive are in the various volumes of the definitive French edition of his works (the notes and other critical apparatus are in English), edited by Theodore Besterman and W. H. Barber, published by the Voltaire Foundation—for example, vols. 132–35, for the correspondence. The most useful and available are the two long bibliographic essays in the two volumes of *The Enlightenment*, by Peter Gay.

The great modern French edition of Voltaire's collected works, edited by Besterman and Barber, is still in the process of publication, with 135 volumes published to date. There is, however, no comparable English translation. The only one that exists is a nineteenth-century edition,

²¹"Chinese Catechism," *ibid.*, I, 130.

reprinted as *The Works of Voltaire* (forty-two volumes, translated by various people and issued by DuMont Press, 1901). The selection from the *Philosophical Dictionary*, excerpted in this chapter, is from volume 13 of that collection. Many editions of Voltaire's individual works have been published, however, including dozens of editions of *Candide*: three of the best are translated by Peter Gay, Robert M. Adams, and Joan Spencer. Two of Voltaire's historical works are available, *The Age of Louis XIV*, translated by Martyn P. Pollack, and *Russia under Peter the Great*, translated by M. F. O. Jenkins. There are two volumes of his letters: *Select Letters*, translated and edited by Theodore Besterman and W. H. Barber, and *The Selected Letters of Voltaire*, edited and translated by Richard A. Brooks. Peter Gay has edited and translated a modern edition of Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary*, and Kenneth W. Applegate has translated and edited *Voltaire on Religion*. Finally, Ben Ray Redman has edited *The Portable Voltaire*, a useful collection.

Of the dozens of biographies of Voltaire, the two most authoritative are by the two leading Voltaire scholars of this century: *Voltaire* is by Theodore Besterman and *The Intellectual Development of Voltaire* is by Ira O. Wade. The famous French literary historian Gustav Lanson's *Voltaire* is the standard French biography, now somewhat dated. Two brief and well-written biographies can also be recommended, by Haydn Mason and Wayne Andrews. An interesting special study, the eminent British philosopher Sir Alfred Ayer's *Voltaire*, is devoted particularly to the analysis of Voltaire's philosophical views. Another special study is J. H. Brumfitt's *Voltaire*. Yet another is *Voltaire's Politics* by Peter Gay, a reissue of the 1959 edition.

There are many historical and critical studies of the age of Voltaire. One must begin with Carl L. Becker's *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers*, probably the most famous modern study of the eighteenth century. The thesis that Becker put forward—that the eighteenth-century philosophers created a new orthodoxy as sterile as that of their thirteenth-century forerunners—has been refuted by Peter Gay in his two-volume *The Enlightenment*, the first volume of which, *The Rise of Modern Paganism*, is excerpted for this chapter. Like Becker's book, Ernst Cassirer's *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* is a classic eighteenth-century study, also excerpted for this chapter. For the pre-Enlightenment influences that formed the Enlightenment, the best work is Ira O. Wade's *The Intellectual Origins of the French Enlightenment*. Charles Frankel's *The Faith of Reason* is a reprint of an earlier (1948) standard work on this familiar theme. A useful and readable popular survey is Peter Gay's *Age of Enlightenment*. See also, the collection of Peter Gay's essays—including three on Voltaire—titled *The Party of Humanity*. Finally, in *Voltaire and the Century of Light*, A. Owen Aldridge deals specifically with the relationship of Voltaire to the influences of his century. (Titles with an asterisk are out of print.)

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