

# TOLERANCE: VOLTAIRE AND THE SPIRIT OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

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Voltaire (1694-1778) around age 24. A sharp-witted critic of authority, Voltaire saw many of his own writings banned in his lifetime.

**One of the leaders of the French Enlightenment, Voltaire advocated for greater freedom of speech and the press and railed against superstition, fanaticism, and religious intolerance.**

Voltaire was born in Paris in 1694. He grew up at the end of the long reign of King Louis XIV, the absolute monarch who ruled France from 1643 until his death in 1715.

Voltaire's name at birth was François-Marie Arouet. His father was a well-to-do lawyer and wanted his son also to pursue a career in law. When Voltaire finished school, however, he announced he wanted to be a writer. His father repeatedly tried to push him into law, shuffling him off to legal jobs within and even outside France. Each job led to the same result: Voltaire charmed his hosts with his great wit, concentrated on his writing, and failed at his job.

Finally, his father had to pull Voltaire back to Paris before he eloped with a girl he had met. When Voltaire returned, Louis XIV had died, his 5-year-old son, Louis XV, could not rule until he reached the age of 13, and the Duke of Orleans ruled in his place as regent. The Paris social scene was particularly lively during the regency, and Voltaire eagerly jumped in. He quickly gained a reputation in social circles for his ironic poetry and lively, barbed wit, but he overstepped the line when he wrote verses that mocked the regent's family. The regent sent him to the Bastille, the Paris prison, for 11 months.

Behind bars, he wrote *Oedipe*, based on the ancient Greek tragedy *Oedipus Rex*. He placed the

name "Monsieur de Voltaire" on the play's title page, his first use of this name.

He wrote constantly throughout his long career. His sheer output was amazing. With boundless energy, fueled by cup after cup of coffee, he wrote from the time he arose to when he went out at night. He wrote more than 20,000 letters, signed "Voltaire," to philosophers, scientists, writers, clergymen, and even kings and queens. He also wrote innumerable essays, plays, novels, books and booklets, poems, histories, scientific works, and pieces of journalism and criticism. Many of his works carried other pen names (he used almost 200 pen names in his career) or had no name attached at all, because, as he knew too well, writing the wrong words in France could land an author in prison.

When *Oedipe* was staged in Paris, the public hailed it as a masterpiece. The play made Voltaire famous, and he returned to the social scene as the most sought-after guest in Paris.

But on two separate social occasions, a young nobleman mocked Voltaire for changing his name. Each time Voltaire responded with a retort of his own. Enraged at Voltaire's nerve, the nobleman sent his servants to beat up Voltaire while he watched at a distance. Voltaire tried to get the authorities to arrest him, but he was a nobleman, and Voltaire, a mere playwright. They refused to help. Voltaire decided to challenge him to a duel. Learning of Voltaire's plan, the nobleman arranged for an order,



signed by the regent, to send Voltaire to the Bastille. Voltaire was not entitled to a trial, appeal, or any other way to defend himself.

### The English Years (1726-1728)

After a short time in the Bastille, however, Voltaire persuaded the authorities to let him go into exile in England. He spent the next two years in London. Voltaire quickly mastered the English language, and using his contacts from Parisian society, he mingled with the leading scientists and writers of London.

Voltaire found a lot to admire in England. The country allowed much greater freedom than France. Its writers did not fear being sent to prison for what they wrote. In fact, no one went to prison without a trial. Even the king had to obey the law.

He saw greater religious diversity. Hundreds of Protestant sects existed side by side. He particularly respected one sect, the Quakers, who practiced pacifism, lived simply, and had no clergy.

He observed that England held different values than France. He attended the funeral of Isaac Newton and marveled that England honored the life of the great scientist and mathematician. He also noted that England respected its businessmen. In short, he found England to be a much more vigorous and prosperous society than France, where the royalty, nobles, and clergy held all the power.

Voltaire immersed himself in studying the works of Newton and the philosopher John Locke (1632–1704). Locke was a proponent of human rights and natural philosophy. Thomas Jefferson borrowed many of Locke's ideas (and even words) when writing the Declaration of Independence: "all men . . . are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

### Chateau de Cirey (1734-1749)

Voltaire was allowed to return to France in 1729. At a dinner party in Paris, a mathematician told him of a plan to win a government lottery. He joined in the plan and won a fortune. In addition, his father had died and left him an inheritance. Voltaire invested his money wisely and remained rich for the rest of his life. Unlike most writers and artists of his day, Voltaire never had to look for a patron to support him financially. But his wealth did not protect him from the authorities.

Voltaire had written his thoughts about England in a series of collected essays that praised England

and by implication criticized France. The work was published in England, but Voltaire had not gotten permission from the French censors to publish it in France. When the work was printed in France (probably without Voltaire's permission), it caused a scandal. The censors banned the book and burned it in public, and Voltaire had to flee Paris because he was about to be arrested once again.

He fled to the Chateau de Cirey, an estate in eastern France, but close to the border just in case he had to flee France completely. He felt safe because it was owned by a nobleman, and therefore the French authorities probably would not go after him there. The resident of the estate was a woman he knew, Emilie de Breteuil. Brilliant, highly educated, and 12 years younger than Voltaire, she knew much more about Newtonian science than Voltaire. He lived with her for the next 15 years.

Voltaire renovated the estate. He and Emilie spent their days studying science, conducting experiments, debating subjects, and writing. One debate centered on Gottfried Leibniz, the German scientist, mathematician, and philosopher. Leibniz had developed calculus at the same time as Newton and is considered its co-founder. Although Emilie believed Newton was the greater scientist, she enjoyed Leibniz's metaphysics. Metaphysics, to oversimplify, is the study of what exists behind or beyond physical reality. Voltaire considered metaphysics too abstract and impractical. He preferred the practical, the scientific, and the experimental. Hence they argued. At night, they entertained the many guests who visited them.

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### In and Out of France (1750-1778)

In 1749, Emilie died in childbirth, and Voltaire had to find a new home. He returned to Paris and then in 1751, he accepted an offer from Frederick the Great, the king of Prussia, to be an adviser at his court. All went well at first, but then Voltaire got into a dispute with Frederick's main science adviser and accused him of plagiarizing Leibniz. Frederick flew into a rage, and Voltaire fled.

Learning that King Louis XV did not want him to return to Paris, Voltaire went to Geneva, then an independent city-state (today it is a city in Switzerland). He bought an estate, continued his writing, entertained guests, and performed his plays. But Geneva was a strict Protestant state and outlawed performing plays.

After several years, Voltaire moved on. His solution was to relocate to nearby Ferney and buy a large ►





Illustration from Voltaire's popularization of the science of Isaac Newton (1738). Voltaire is shown at a writing desk receiving light from Newton himself.

piece of land that overlapped the borders of three countries: France, Switzerland, and Geneva. He figured he could cross the border if one country's police came for him. He lived there with his niece for the last 20 years of his life.

He built a large country house, tore down a church that blocked his view, and built a new one. On the church's entrance, he engraved in Latin, "Voltaire erected this to God." Like other Enlightenment thinkers, Voltaire was a deist, someone who believes in God as a supreme intelligence but does not think God performs supernatural acts in the world.

### Candide

At Ferney in 1759, Voltaire wrote his most famous work, the novella *Candide*. The work dealt with an aspect of Leibniz's philosophy. Leibniz was religious and had to reconcile his belief in an all-good and all-powerful God with the evil that exists in the world. His answer was that God created the "best of all possible worlds." God did not create a perfect world; that would be Heaven. Instead, God created the best possible world that had evil in it.

Voltaire satirized this belief, because Voltaire thought it could be used to support superstition, create religious intolerance, and justify evil in the world.

*Candide* tells the tale of a young, naive German driven from his home who ends up traveling the world, accompanied by his former tutor, Dr. Pangloss. Pangloss is a follower of Leibniz who keeps pointing out, after each evil act and natural disaster, that "all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds."

Candide and his companions suffer terrible mishaps and meet selfish or foolish people. Many encounters are based on real events. For example, in 1755, a terrible earthquake and tsunami destroyed the large city of Lisbon, Portugal, killing thousands. Many Portuguese thought God was punishing them. In hopes of averting future disasters, officials gathered up locals not considered sufficiently Catholic and publicly burned them alive. In the book, Candide visits Lisbon after the earthquake. Voltaire writes:

After the earthquake had destroyed three-fourths of Lisbon, the sages of that country could think of no means more effectual to prevent utter ruin than to give the people a beautiful auto-da-fé; for it had been decided by the University of Coimbra, that the burning of a few people alive by a slow fire, and with great ceremony, is an infallible secret to hinder the earth from quaking.

Voltaire highlights that Europeans, who increasingly saw themselves as more "enlightened" than the rest of the world, still often succumbed to dangerous, superstitious beliefs. *Candide* also was meant to criticize those who thought the advances of the Enlightenment alone would naturally lead to a better world. Pangloss and Candide witness many terrible things and are themselves enslaved, beaten, and mutilated over the course of their travels. They end up on a farm in Turkey.

Through it all, Pangloss somehow keeps his same point of view. By the end, however, Candide has changed his mind. After yet another speech by Pangloss, the book concludes with Candide responding: "All that is very well . . . but let us cultivate our garden."

### 'Crush the Infamy'

Voltaire spent much time in his later years campaigning against injustices, torture, fanaticism, and religious intolerance. His often-repeated motto was "écrasez l'infâme," which translates as "crush the infamy." Voltaire believed that ignorance and superstition led to many injustices.



Voltaire focused his criticism on Catholicism, but he also criticized Protestantism, Judaism, and Islam. He even wrote a play titled *Fanaticism, or Muhammad the Prophet*. But church officials saw it as a thinly veiled assault on Catholic practices and had the play shut down.

Voltaire had limited knowledge of religion in India and China. But he respected Hinduism and Confucianism for what he believed was their willingness to accept other religious faiths.

Voltaire took up many cases of injustice. One was that of Jean Calas, a Protestant. His son hanged himself, but rumors circulated that Calas had killed his son because he wanted to convert to Catholicism. Without any evidence, French authorities prosecuted Calas for murder. They tortured and killed Calas while trying to get him to confess. The authorities took all the family's property and removed the remaining children from their mother and put them in a monastery.

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Outraged, Voltaire provided financial support for the Calas family. He also mounted a massive campaign, lobbying every contact he had in the French government. Voltaire's effort in publicizing the injustices done to Calas and his family eventually led to Calas' conviction being overturned, and his family was reunited and paid compensation. As part of the campaign, Voltaire wrote *A Treatise on Tolerance*. The work defended not only Calas, but promoted the idea of universal toleration of religious differences to prevent a similar injustice from ever happening again.

The work employs various arguments in support of toleration. In one, Voltaire appeals directly to European monarchs arguing that intolerance can threaten their rule:

And here let us consider a while the dreadful consequences of the right of non-toleration; if it were permitted us to strip of his possessions, to throw into prison, or to take away the life of a fellow-creature, who . . . did not profess the generally received religion . . . what is there which would exempt the principal persons of the state from falling under like punishments? Religion equally binds the monarch and the beggar.

Voltaire also appeals to a wider audience in condemning intolerance as a threat to reason and civilization:

The law of persecution then is equally absurd and barbarous; it is the law of tigers; nay, it is even still more savage, for tigers destroy only for the sake of food, whereas we have butchered one another on account of a sentence or a paragraph.

The book was distributed briefly in France, but then the censors banned it.

### Voltaire's Final Days

In 1778, Voltaire returned to Paris to see the opening of his final play. Greeted as a hero, he was overwhelmed. He died in Paris a couple of months later. Because of his conflicts with the church, he was denied a burial in Paris. But in 1791, two years after the French Revolution broke out, the revolutionary government established the Pantheon, a temple in Paris to honor and bury national heroes. Voltaire's body was the first entombed there.

The great 19th century French writer Victor Hugo said, "To name Voltaire is to characterize the entire 18th century." American popular historian Will Durant stated:

Italy had a Renaissance, and Germany had a Reformation, but France had Voltaire. . . . His spirit moved like a flame over the continent and the century, and stirs a million souls in every generation.

### DISCUSSION AND WRITING

1. Why did Voltaire believe England was superior to France?
2. What do you think were Voltaire's strongest beliefs? Why do you think he held them? Are Voltaire's beliefs relevant to today's world? Explain your answers.
3. The following two quotations are often attributed to Voltaire, yet no evidence exists that he ever said them:
  - "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it."
  - On his death bed when a priest asked him to renounce Satan, Voltaire replied, "Now is not the time for making new enemies."Why do you think people believe he said each of them? Explain.
4. During the French Revolution, many violent attacks on French clergy occurred. Do you think Voltaire would have approved of them? Was his criticism of the church in some way responsible for them? Use the article to explain your answers.
5. What did Leibniz mean by the "best of all possible worlds"? Why did Voltaire disagree with Leibniz, and how did Voltaire express his disagreement?