

## 15. Jean Meslier's *Testament*

**J**EAN Meslier was born in Mazerny in the Ardennes in 1664, the son of a serge weaver. At the age of 25 he became a priest in the tiny parish of Étrépy in Champagne, where he performed his duties for 40 years without complaint. His life seems to have been unremarkable, though apparently he did fall foul of the church authorities.

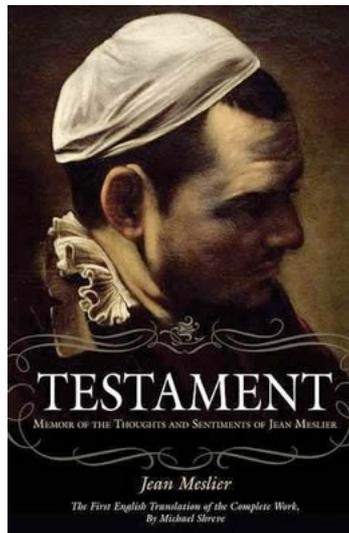
According to Voltaire in his short biography, Meslier refused to pray for Antoine de Touilly, the local lord, who had ill-treated some peasants. The Archbishop of Reims reprimanded him, but the next Sunday Meslier stood in his pulpit and declared: "This is the general fate of the poor country priest; the archbishops, who are great lords, scorn them and do not listen to them. Therefore, let us pray for the lord of this place. We will pray for Antoine de Touilly, that he may be converted and granted the grace that he may not wrong the poor and despoil the orphans". De Touilly, who was present in the church, reported him again and he was sent to Reims for a month's confinement.

Some accounts also suggest that he lived with a young maid and was ordered to separate from her by the religious council, which forbade priests from keeping female servants under 40. He refused, saying that she was his niece (some say, cousin). Many years later he started up again with another... niece. He was 55, she was 18. The church punished him with another month's retreat in a Reims monastery.

Meslier lived an austere life and gave what remained of his salary to the poor. He died in 1729 at the age of 65, leaving all his possessions to his parishioners and asked to be buried in his garden. In his house were found three copies of a 633-page manuscript, which he called a 'Memoir' and signed as 'My Testament', wherein he denounced all religions as 'inventions and purely human institutions' that perpetuated the misery of the people by favouring oppression and injustice. No one knows when it was written, but a reasonable guess is that he worked at it during the last ten years of his life between 1719 and 1729.

One of the manuscripts eventually reached Voltaire, who distributed hundreds of copies to his friends and published an emasculated version in 1762. Meslier's *Testament* was too hot even for him, and his extracts were clearly chosen to make the priest appear to be a Deist like himself. He went so far as to state that it was 'the testimony of a priest who asks forgiveness of God' – a complete travesty since Meslier makes it abundantly clear that "there is no God" (chaps. 59, 74, 93, 94).

The effect of Voltaire's intellectual betrayal was to bury the work for another hundred years until the Dutch Humanist Rudolf Charles published a few hundred copies in Amsterdam in 1864. The first French edition did not appear until 1970, and the work was not translated into English until as recently as 2009 (this translation by Michael Shreve, with a preface by Michel Onfay, is published by Prometheus Books; page numbers below refer to it).



To complicate matters further, Paul Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach, published his own atheist polemic, *Le Bon Sens* (*Good or Common Sense*), anonymously in 1772, which was republished in 1791, two years after his death, as *Le bon sens du curé Meslier* or sometimes as *Superstition in all Ages*. By 1803 it was widely recognised as being written by d'Holbach, but even today it is still confused with Meslier's and still republished under his name, though these reprints frequently include Voltaire's abstract from the *Testament* as well as his biography and correspondence regarding Meslier.

Why did this priest remain in his post after he realised that religion was a big lie? At the beginning of the *Testament* he tries to explain his reasons. He admits to his parishioners that he loathed what he was

doing: "I totally hated all the vain functions of my ministry, and particularly all the idolatrous and superstitious celebrations of masses, and the vain and ridiculous administrations of sacraments that I had to do for you, I cursed them thousands of times to the core when I had to do them" (p41).

Yet he clearly thought that he could best serve the community by helping the ordinary people around him. Besides, he did not want to upset his parents and – not least – he did not wish to face the pyre or the scaffold. On the other hand, after his death it didn't matter: "Let them do what they want with my body; let them tear it apart, cut it to pieces, roast it or fricassée it and then eat it, if they want, in whatever sauce they want, it will not trouble me at all. I will be entirely out of their reach; nothing will be able to frighten me" (pp43-44). But truth, justice and the public good demanded that the errors and impostures of religion and the pride and injustice of the rulers governing so tyrannically over the earth must be exposed.

Long before the writings of Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris or other so-called 'aggressive' atheists, Meslier's *Testament* is an uncompromising, no holds barred onslaught on religion, spanning 97 chapters, 8 'proofs' and – in the English translation – 593 pages. Essentially, he seeks to demonstrate 'the vanity and falsity of all the divinities and of all the religions of the world' as inventions and purely human institutions fostered by ruling elites to oppress the mass of the people. Faith is 'blind belief' founded on absurdities and contradictions. The prophets of the Old and New Testaments are the delusions of madmen, not least Jesus. Christianity itself propounds false doctrines and its morality contradicts all that nature teaches, especially in its claims that pleasure is wrong, poverty is a virtue and that justice lies in turning the other cheek. The soul is not immortal but just a form of matter which perishes with death.

If Dawkins and co. are 'new' atheists, then Meslier was very much an 'old' atheist and every bit as combative. Indeed, his work could be claimed as the first unqualified atheist treatise in history. Confucius and Protagoras were agnostics; Epicurus and Lucretius were arguably polytheists; Spinoza and Toland were pantheists; Voltaire and Rousseau were deists.

Meslier, on the other hand, is clear and unequivocal: all the religions of the world are false and not only is the eternal recompense of paradise imaginary, but also you can set your minds and hearts at ease about all the vain fears religion gives you of the so-called eternal punishments of hell, which does not exist. "For everything they tell you about the beauty and magnificence of the one, or the terror and frightfulness of the other, is only a fable; there is no more good to hope for or evil to fear after death" (p46).

Meslier then proceeds to offer his 'proofs'. First of all, since they are conflicting and opposed to one another and even condemn one another, it is evident that they cannot all be true or come from the same principle of truth, i.e., God. He infers from this that they are purely human inventions and that those who first invented them used the name and authority of God only to make it easier to accept the laws and orders that they wanted to establish and at the same time to make themselves more honoured, feared and respected by the people whom they were leading and on whom they wanted to foist this trick. Moreover, far from convincing the other sects of their truth, religions have fought and debated with one another, even to the point of persecution with fire and blood to uphold their opinions over the others.

Meslier's second proof is that all religions are based on faith, which is 'blind belief' contradicting 'the lights of reason and all the appearances of the senses' (p72). This blind faith is bolstered by belief in miracles, which all the religions share and copy from one another. As for Jesus, far from performing so many wonderful miracles, "we are more likely to believe that he was really only a fanatical madman and, consequently, that Christianity was in the beginning only pure fanaticism" (p84). The miracles themselves do not agree with what we should think of the grandeur, bounty, wisdom and justice of an infinitely perfect being and are therefore unbelievable in themselves (p115).

Thirdly, the visions and divine revelations of prophets are the work of madmen. For example, some of them attribute to God cruel and barbaric sacrifices of innocent beasts and maintain that these sacrifices are pleasing to Him. "I have never been able to think without horror of that abominable carnage and sacrifice of innocent beasts that King Solomon made to dedicate his temple when he slit the throats of 22,000 cattle and 120,000 sheep and goats (1 Kings 8:63) What carnage! What bloodshed! What innocent beasts to skin! What flesh to roast and boil! How to imagine and be convinced that a god, infinite in grandeur, majesty, gentleness and wisdom, would want to have only butchers, cut-throats, and skin-flayers for his sacrificers, and that he would want to make an ugly slaughterhouse of his temple and tabernacle?" (p147).

Meslier's fourth proof is that the prophecies of the Bible are never fulfilled. To take just two of the vain and mad prophecies of Jesus, he says that he will deliver his people from their sins, but "we do not see in any people any sign of this so-called deliverance since they were always and still are today subject to all kinds of vices and also slaves of their evil passions just as all other people" (p167). Jesus also preached that the kingdom of heaven is nigh, but if it were really as near as he said, "it has been a long time coming. For it has been almost two thousand years since he promised and preached its near arrival" (p173).

Fifthly, Christian morality is degraded for three main reasons. First, it holds that the greatest good is the pursuit of pain and suffering, which is like saying that the greatest virtue consists in loving to be miserable and unhappy, which is completely unnatural. Second, it condemns as vices worthy of eternal punishment the thoughts, desires and affections of the flesh, which are the most natural, proper and necessary for the preservation and multiplication of the human race. Third, it promotes precepts that favour the wicked and oppress the good and the weak, such as love our enemies, do good to them that do you harm and not to resist vicious men but quietly to suffer injury and mistreatment. This endorses the status quo, which is basically the law of the jungle.

This leads Meslier to his sixth proof, which is that the Christian religion acts as the accomplice of political tyrannies. Here he reveals his communist credentials, arguing two centuries before Marx that religion is the opium of the people because it teaches that to resist and rebel is to resist and rebel against God. The spiritual power of priests supports the temporal power of kings in enslaving the masses.

In the seventh and longest proof, Meslier argues against the existence of a god. The beauty, order and perfection found in nature is created naturally. The material order does

not require a creator since it is matter and motion which are infinite in time and space. Moreover, the existence of evils, miseries, vices and viciousness show that there is no all-powerful, infinitely good and wise being who could prevent or relieve them. He calls god a 'chimera' whose existence is not a prerequisite for morality.

Meslier's final proof of the falsity of religion is that the soul is not spiritual and immortal but simply a modification of matter in both animals and humans which is perishable. He expresses anger at the notion that animals are inanimate machines, an attitude that stifles all feelings of gentleness and kindness towards them.

Reading Meslier's *Testament*, one becomes aware of how 'modern' and ahead of his time this priest really was. As Michel Onfray says in his Preface to the English translation, he "invented a radical atheism, proposed a hedonist ethics, formulated an immanent ontology, constructed his libertarian politics and gave them a communalist and internationalist concept, thought of a feminism in action, anticipated the battle against speciesism, erected modern materialism, unmasked the Cartesian doubt, sketched the revolutionary concept of 1789...", and so on.

Yet, as we have said, this masterpiece of freethought has been effectively buried for nearly 300 years. Part of the blame lies with Voltaire, whom we might have thought – as a champion of the Enlightenment and the attributed author of the remark that "I disapprove of what you say, but will defend to the death your right to say it" – would uphold free speech. Instead, he censored it and did the work of the religious Establishment, which even today is still eager to pretend that atheism is something new and nasty. Almost the last word goes to Meslier himself and his famous quote from chapter 2. He remembers the wish of a man a while back "that all the rulers of the earth and all the nobles be hanged and strangled with the guts of priests" (p37). Diderot refined it to say that "man will never be free until the last king is strangled with the guts of the last priest". Amen to that.

