

18. Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary*

FRANÇOIS-MARIE AROUET was born in Paris on 21st November 1694. His father was a successful notary, his mother died when he was 7. At an early age his godfather made him recite the fables of La Fontaine and an agnostic poem called *Mosaïde*, wherein all religions are denounced as 'folly most fantastical and vain'.

At the age of 10 he was sent to the Collège de Louis-le-Grand, one of the oldest schools in Paris, and a Jesuit institution. It has been claimed that the Jesuits formed him in their own image, because he wrestled with the idea of God all his life, even after dismissing much of religion as nonsense. Many of the pupils became freethinkers like himself, and even some of the teachers were of dubious religious orthodoxy. It was a large school with 3,000 pupils, most of whom were from the élite of French society, and many of whom remained his friends for the rest of his life.

He spent 7 years there, emerging with a largely classical education and, in compliance with his father's wishes, he then entered law school. But his heart was set on a literary career and he spent much of his time for the next couple of years in his late teens writing poetry and socialising with the young rich and famous. His father made several attempts to set him on the 'right' track, but all to no avail. He even sent him to The Hague, but when he fell in love with a young woman there, he was sent back to Paris where he discovered that his father had taken out a *lettre de cachet* to have him imprisoned. He persuaded him instead to send him to the French colonies in the West Indies. However, his father offered to withdraw this banishment if he agreed to pursue a serious legal career.

It wasn't long before Voltaire broke his promise and set his sights on writing a play for the Comédie Française. He chose the Oedipus theme, the most famous story of patricide in European literature, though there is no real foundation for the idea that a hatred of his father was the stimulus. He started *Oedipe* in early 1715 but while working on it he was distracted by another project, a long epic poem which he called *La Henriade* in imitation of Homer's *Iliad* and Virgil's *Aeneid*.

He chose as his subject the heroic achievement of Henry IV in bringing about a truce in the wars of religion between Catholics and Protestants in 16th century France. It was a dangerous topic because the toleration embodied in the Edict of Nantes had been revoked by Louis XIV and the persecution of Protestants continued in Voltaire's own day under Louis XV. For Voltaire to write an epic poem against religious fanaticism and in praise of toleration was an open and potentially seditious act against the regime. The poem wasn't printed until 1723 when it became so popular that the censors were effectively swept aside. Sixty editions were published during the next half-century.



At the end of 1715 Voltaire had finished the first draft of his play, but the Comédie Française turned it down. Eventually, with revisions, it was accepted but not performed until 1718. The reason for the delay was that Voltaire was twice arrested: first, for having written some verses containing biting criticisms of the debauchery of the regent's daughter; and second, for writing more serious verses suggesting an incestuous relationship between the regent and his own daughter. On the latter occasion, he was sent to the Bastille for 11 months and released in April 1718.

He then decided to give himself a nom de plume. In June 1718 he signed a letter 'Arouet de Voltaire', and by the end of the year he was signing himself simply

'Voltaire'. He didn't explain his choice, but one theory is that it is an anagram of the Latin version of 'Arouet', where 'v' replaces 'u', and the initial letters of 'le jeune' ('the younger'), where 'i' replaces 'j'.

Oedipe was an immediate and sensational success. Over the next 60 years, Voltaire wrote 27 tragedies and his plays were performed more often than those of Corneille and Racine combined. No longer a pushy little versifier, Voltaire was transformed into a new literary star. Nevertheless, being outspoken and rash, he also continued to promote deistic views and criticisms of orthodox religion. A long poem *Épître à Uranie*, written in 1722 but only published surreptitiously ten years later, contains a damning indictment of Christianity and argues that the Christian God is a travesty of the natural God of the universe.

In 1726 he was again imprisoned in the Bastille, this time for challenging a nobleman to a duel, but released a month later after offering voluntary exile in England. He was delighted with England and described it as a land of liberty and religious tolerance in which the House of Commons 'hindered the king from becoming a despot'. The fruit of this stay was *Letters Concerning the English Nation*, first published in 1733, and republished in France in 1734 as *Lettres Philosophiques*. The work was taken as an implicit criticism of French society and an order was sent out for his arrest and for the book to be burned by the public executioner, because it was 'the greatest danger for religion and public order'. The French *parlement* intimated that it might consider burning the author as well! One editor has described the work as 'the first bomb thrown at the *Ancien Régime*'.

Voltaire fled to the Château de Cirey, where he began a fifteen-year relationship with the Marquise du Châtelet. He continued to write plays and also began long researches into science and history. By 1744 he found life at the château confining, and on a visit to Paris he found a new love: his niece Marie Louise Mignot. Eventually, after the Marquise died, he lived with Marie for the rest of his life. In 1755 he bought a country house outside Geneva where

they lived for a few years, but strains soon developed between him and the Genevan Calvinists. The city banned theatrical performances at the theatre which he had built and by 1758 he was on the move again, 3 miles across the French border to Ferney, where he bought a large estate and lived for most of the remaining 20 years of his life.

In 1759 he wrote *Candide, ou l'Optimisme*, a satire on Leibnitz's philosophy of optimistic determinism for which he is perhaps best known. The work was inspired by the 1755 Lisbon earthquake which killed thousands (estimates vary from 10,000 to 100,000). Voltaire had already written a poem about the disaster, *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne*, in which he questioned whether a just and compassionate God would seek to punish sins through such terrible events. An all-powerful God could have prevented the innocent suffering along with the sinners. All living things, he concluded, seem doomed to live in a cruel world and are condemned to suffer grief throughout life. There is no divine system and God does not concern himself or communicate with human beings.

In a letter while preparing the poem he wrote: *"My dear sir, nature is very cruel. one would find it hard to imagine how the laws of movement cause such frightful disasters in the best of all possible worlds... What a wretched gamble is the game of human life! What will the preachers say, especially if the palace of the Inquisition is still standing? I flatter myself that at least the reverend father inquisitors have been crushed like others. That ought to teach men not to persecute each other, for while a few holy scoundrels burn a few fanatics, the earth swallows up one and all"*.

Candide, which sold upwards of 30,000 copies on its publication despite being banned in France, is a witty novel about the problem of suffering. If, as we are told, the Creator is all-powerful and all-good, why did he make a universe where suffering abounds? Surely He could have made a better world? Candide, the illegitimate nephew of a German baron, grows up in the baron's castle under the tutelage of Dr Pangloss, who subscribes to Leibnizian optimism and maintains that we live in the best of all possible worlds. What we think is evil will ultimately be found conducive to the good of some other creature, and we must put up with it, as best we can, for the sake of the general good. The story traces Candide's slow, painful disillusionment with this philosophy as he witnesses and experiences great hardships including a war, a tempest, an earthquake and a shipwreck. The work concludes when a farmer advises Candide that work is a cure for boredom, vice and poverty. He abandons Panglossian optimism in favour of working together to 'cultivate our garden'.

The ending seems to suggest that we should not waste our time justifying the ways of God to man but actively cooperate with one another to make the world a better and a happier place. During the 1760s Voltaire put his own advice into practice, becoming a reformer and campaigner and a champion of human rights. It was at this time that he began to use the motto or battle cry, 'Écrasez L'infâme' ('crush the horror') at the end of many of his letters. Although he never specified what the horror was, he clearly meant Christianity in general and the Catholic Church in particular, and the superstition, fanaticism and intolerance that their power and influence bred in the people.

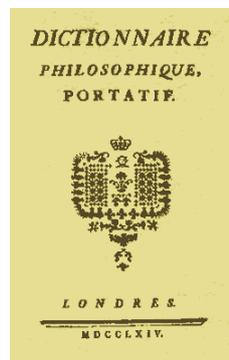
The most celebrated cause was the case of Jean Calas, a Huguenot shopkeeper in Toulouse, whose eldest son was found dead, probably by suicide, in October 1761. Jean was accused by the Toulouse *parlement* (law court) of murdering him because he wanted to become a Catholic and, in order to make him confess, he was first stretched on the rack; then, when he refused, he was ordered to be broken on the wheel; and finally, when he still refused, he was sentenced to death, strangled and his body thrown on a burning pyre. His property was confiscated and his two daughters were seized and locked up in different convents.

Voltaire became obsessed with the case and was convinced of a miscarriage of justice. He exclaimed: "It is evidence of the most horrible fanaticism in this supposedly enlightened century". He paid lawyers to dig out the facts and stirred up public opinion by publishing a pamphlet called *Pièces originales*, which included details of the family's version of events, and distributed it to key figures at court. Mme de Pompadour openly sided with him. In 1763 the King's Council ordered the Toulouse *parlement* to hand over the records of the trial, which had been held behind closed doors and without any legal representation for the accused. In 1764 the Council decided unanimously to annul the verdict and in 1765, three years after the death sentence had been passed, the Appeals Court enacted the public exoneration and rehabilitation of Jean Calas.

The case inspired another pamphlet, *Traité sur la tolérance* (1763), in which Voltaire argued that religious intolerance and the persecution of non-believers was unique to Christianity: "I say it with horror, but with truth: it is we Christians who have been persecutors, executioners, assassins! And of whom? Of our own brothers. It is we who have destroyed a hundred cities, with the crucifix or the Bible in our hands, and who have not ceased spilling blood and lighting pyres, from the reign of Constantine until our own day". He proposed that Protestants should be accorded a similar degree of toleration in France as Catholics enjoyed in England. "We are", he said, "all children of the same father and creatures of the same God".

Hot on the heels of the *Traité* came the first edition of the *Dictionnaire philosophique portatif* ('Pocket Philosophical Dictionary'), published anonymously in Geneva, with a false London imprint (see illustration), in 1764 in his 70th year. It had actually been planned back in 1752 during Voltaire's stay in Potsdam with Frederick II of Prussia. At a court dinner party he and other guests agreed to write an article and share them the next morning. Voltaire was the only one to take the game seriously and the idea expanded over the intervening years. The first edition was 344 pages and consisted of 73 articles. Later editions were expanded into two volumes consisting of 120 articles.

Needless to say, the work was repeatedly condemned by the authorities in several countries. The *procureur général* of Geneva, Jean Robert Tronchin, described it as 'a deplorable monument of the extent to which intelligence and erudition can be abused', and complained that Voltaire quoted from the Bible passages which 'taken literally would be unworthy of Divine Majesty' (which rather proved Voltaire's case). It was instantly placed on the Vatican's Index of forbidden books, where it remained until the list itself was withdrawn in 1966.



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Voltaire himself vigorously denied that he had anything to do with 'this abominable little dictionary', but his denials fooled no one. Soon after it appeared, a youth of nineteen from Picardy, the Chevalier de La Barre, and a companion were accused of various offences including malicious damage to a crucifix and singing anti-religious songs. A copy of the *Dictionary* was found in La Barre's room, and in his trial the prosecution argued that he had been incited to his crimes by its corrupting influence. He was found guilty and in July 1766 in Abbeville he was tortured, beheaded and burned on the pyre, with the copy of the offensive book tossed into the flames for good measure, the last person in France to be executed for blasphemy.

Voltaire was greatly upset and ran away to safety in Switzerland. But he was not inactive. He wrote a pamphlet, *Relation de la mort du chevalier de la Barre*, in which he exposed the flimsy evidence against the young man and made light of his alleged offences. He also underlined the fact that in French law the crime of blasphemy did not carry the death penalty. The Church, he fulminated, "wanted to execute, with a torture reserved for poisoners and parricides, mere children accused of having sung ancient blasphemous songs. You could not believe, sir, how much this event makes our Roman Catholic religion hateful to all foreigners".

Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary* consists of a series of essays, arranged alphabetically, whose unifying thread is an attack on religious and political intolerance. Unlike Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, it does not attempt a factual survey of knowledge but is intended as a briefer alternative, concentrating largely on questions of morality and society from an overtly anti-clerical and polemical perspective. As he himself remarked on Diderot's work: "Twenty folio volumes will never make a revolution. It is the little portable volumes of thirty sous that are to be feared". So he planned his 'dictionary of ideas' as a 'revolutionary' book, in which he would savagely ridicule myths and absurdities. The entry on 'Tolerance' is typical: "If we look at the matter at all closely we see that the catholic, apostolic and Roman religion is the opposite of the religion of Jesus in all its ceremonies and all its dogmas".

What an audacious statement to put in print in the middle of the 18th century! And how accurate a description it remains today! Much of the scathing criticism, though, is less direct. The article on historical research into Christianity is an incendiary satire on the stupidities, absurdities and inconsistencies inherent in the early tradition, but concealed with a smack of irony. Thus he notes biblical anomalies: the fig tree was cursed for not bearing figs, when it was not the season for figs; demons were sent into the bodies of swine, in a country in which swine were not domesticated; water was changed into wine at the end of a meal, when the guests were already excited. But, he adds: "these criticisms by the learned are confounded by faith, which thereby becomes all the purer".

Most of Voltaire's lifelong intellectual preoccupations are contained in the *Dictionary*, such as Leibniz's response to the incompatibility of evil and suffering with a good God. He tackles it in the article 'All is Good' and also in the much briefer 'The Impious', where he writes: "The silly fanatic repeats to me, after others, that it is not for us to judge what is reasonable and just in the great Being, that His reason is not like our reason, that His justice is not like our justice. Eh! how, you mad demoniac, do you want me to judge justice and reason otherwise than by the notions I have of them? do you want me to walk otherwise than with my feet, and to speak otherwise than with my mouth?"

Voltaire, however, was not an atheist. He attacked the prevailing creeds of the time because he thought they were dishonourable to his God, the God of nature. For him, Christianity made God a monster of cruelty and stupidity. He mercilessly attacked the Bible with all the verbal weapons at his command in support of a rational religion. In his article on 'Sects' in the *Dictionary* he asks: "What would be the true religion if Christianity did not exist? That in which there are no sects, that in which all minds would necessarily be in accord".

He also believed that religion was an essential tool for ensuring morality and public order in a civilised society. In the entry on 'Atheism' he writes: "A vengeful God is needed to punish in this world or the next the wicked who have avoided human justice". This helps to explain the famous remark in his poem *Epître à l'auteur du livre des Trois imposteurs* (1768) that "If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him". It has to be said that his Deism has not taken hold anywhere. The only argument he presents for the existence of a god is that the order in the universe implies an orderer, an argument demolished by Hume in his *Dialogues*, published after Voltaire's death.

Voltaire, now a frail old man, returned to Paris after an absence of 20 years in February 1778, partly in order to see the opening of his tragedy *Irene*. He was hailed as a hero by many, but he declared that "there were forty thousand bigots in the city who would call down blessings from heaven and carry faggots to heap around the stake for me". Nevertheless, many people of importance turned out to greet him, including Benjamin Franklin, who was visiting the city. He died on 11th May 1778 at the age of 84. He was refused a Christian burial but friends managed to bury his body secretly at the abbey of Scellières in Champagne before this prohibition had been announced. In 1791, the National Assembly of France, which regarded him as a forerunner of the French Revolution, had his remains brought back to Paris to enshrine him in the Panthéon.

Voltaire is undoubtedly the central figure of the Enlightenment, and it is perhaps no exaggeration to say that we are more indebted to him for the liberties we enjoy than any other man who ever lived. For 60 years he waged a continuous and unrelenting war against tyranny, fanaticism, superstition and injustice and in favour of the power of reason, freedom of speech, the rule of law, tolerance, pluralism and the secularisation of the state. He employed all the weapons of the pen at his disposal: pamphlets, essays, philosophical tales and dictionaries, comedies, tragedies, histories, poems, novels and letters (of which he wrote at least 20,000). With the considerable wealth that he accumulated from his writings and his speculative ventures, he could have rested on his laurels. Instead, he used his prosperity to ensure his independence and to challenge injustices done to people weaker than himself.

Voltaire carried the sacred torch of reason in bringing truth to power and shame to the powerful. As Ingersoll said, he filled the flesh of priests with the barbed and poisoned arrows of his wit and his light still shines and will as long as man loves liberty and truth. Voltaire is the ultimate proof that the pen can be mightier than the sword.

FURTHER READING

Philosophical Dictionary, translated Besterman (Penguin 1972) and Fletcher (Oxford, 2011)
Ian Davidson: *Voltaire: A Life*, Profile Books, 2010
Robert Ingersoll: *Voltaire: A Lecture*, 1895