

VOLTAIRE AND THE ENLIGHTENMENT

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The Enlightenment is the name given to the major intellectual and cultural movement of the 18th Century, which was characterized by a pronounced faith in the power of human reason to solve the basic problems of human existence. Scholars disagree on both the starting and ending dates of the movement but most accept 1680 as a rough beginning date and the Congress of Vienna in 1815 as the end. The Enlightenment was born in France and England but Paris was its hub. And the Enlightenment was an international movement that spread through almost all of Western Europe and to the North American colonies where Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Paine were its principal actors.

The leaders of the Enlightenment, whose roster included most of the intellectual giants of the Western World, were collectively known as the Philosophes. In general they shared a conception of history that divided the past into four great epochs: (1) the river civilizations of the Near East; (2) ancient Greece and Rome; (3) the Christian millennium and (4) modern times. The four epochs were alternatively related to one another. The first and third were eras of belief and superstition. The second and fourth were eras of science and rationality.

Intellectuals during the Enlightenment turned a critical eye on nearly all received traditions in Europe. Political traditions; social and economic structures; attitudes toward the past; ideas about human nature; theories of knowledge, science, philosophy, aesthetics, and morals; and, above all, the doctrines and institutions of Christianity were subjected to analysis and criticism. Enlightenment writers aimed at tearing down old structures, rebuilding human society, institutions, and knowledge, and providing them with firm foundations in the presumed natural order of things.

The spirit of critical inquiry was not indulged in by isolated scholars locked up in dusty studies with their books. Rather, the investigations occurred within a remarkable framework of sociability.

The various forms of sociability helped to further the great enlightened cause of disseminating knowledge beyond the boundaries of highly educated society. Professional journals, newspapers and periodicals, and active books also helped to spread ideas.

It was into this world that Voltaire was born in Paris in 1694. He was to die there 84 years later. He was one of the towering figures of the 18th Century and acknowledged as the patriarch of the French Enlightenment. Above all else he was a great writer, in fact Goethe called him the greatest writer of all time. His published works fill more than 100 bound volumes and he left more than 20,000 letters to some 1700 correspondents, most of which were copied and widely circulated. Often he used three stenographers at the same time. His output has been

estimated at 15 million words, and his subject matters included politics, religion, science, history and philosophy. He was a poet, an essayist, a novelist and a playwright.

Voltaire was born a bastard child. His official father was Francois Aroulet, a Parisian lawyer. His biological father was one of Mr. Aroulet's clients. At age 23 the young man changed his name to Voltaire but he never said why he did so or what the new name meant.

Voltaire was educated at College Louis-Le-Grand, the most prestigious of the 700 seminaries that the Jesuits ran in France. Rene Descartes had graduated from the same institution almost a century earlier. Leaving college at age 17, his father tried to steer Voltaire into a legal or diplomatic career. The boy resisted. He had swept all the literary prizes in school and had earned the reputation as a witty critic and satirist. He started making the rounds of the Paris salons. He kept writing his satires and once chose the Duke of Orleans as a subject. Orleans was the regent for the boy king Louis XV and a fit subject for satire as he was carrying on an incestuous affair with his daughter. But Orleans had no sense of humor and sent Voltaire to the Bastille where he was imprisoned for almost a year. During his imprisonment Voltaire wrote his tragedy Odepus which was triumphantly performed on his release.

Next Voltaire got into a quarrel with a prominent aristocrat and circulated a pamphlet lampooning him. The aristocrat had Voltaire beaten up and thrown back into the Bastille. This time Voltaire made a deal with his jailors. If released he would go into voluntary exile. He was set free and went to England where he stayed for the next three years.

Voltaire arrived in England a celebrity. England and France were bitter enemies at the time and any Frenchman who criticized his government was well received. Voltaire was presented to Court and hobnobbed with the leading political and literary figures. He was also a close observer of the English political and social structure.

He began to write letters back to France in which he compared the English political system with that of France. When he returned from exile the letters were published in book form.

If you go into a book store today you will likely find three works of Voltaire readily available: Philosophical Letters (1734); Candide (1759) and the Philosophical Dictionary (1764).

The Philosophical Letters was a critical analysis of French social and political thinking as contrasted with that of the English. It may well have been patterned after Montesquieu's Persian Letters which came out a few years earlier. Voltaire first considered French education which was largely based on Cartesian epistemology. Rene Descartes was a brilliant mathematician and philosopher and a hero to all Frenchmen. He had taught that deductive reasoning was the only sure path to knowledge. God had implanted innate ideas in our minds, he said, and by careful reasoning we could tease out the truth. Meditation rather than observation was the key to knowledge.

But English educational thinking was different. It traced its roots back to the teachings of Francis Bacon (1626). Although not a scientist he was the theoretician of the new English inductive and experimental mode of science which found its full expression in Issac Newton's Principia Mathematica published in 1689. This great work gave a breathtaking vista of a

mechanistic universe governed by gravity. John Locke's Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1690) argued that we learn only through our senses. We are born with a tabula rasa; the mind when we are born is a blank slate upon which experience will write. Inductive reasoning - the scientific method - is the better way to truth.

Voltaire was impressed with the English political order. Following the Bloodless Revolution of 1688 and the Whig Ascendancy, England was structured as a limited monarchy with a participatory democracy. This political system had been created by negotiation and compromise and Parliament's control of state revenues circumscribed monarchical authority.

France on the other hand under Louis XIV and his grandson was governed as an absolute monarchy. And this system was held in place by force, by bribery and by corruption. The aristocracy of France had little power and contented itself with a tax-free status, an exemption from military service and never-ending entertainment at Versailles.

For much of his reign Louis XV was a popular monarch albeit an inept ruler. When he ascended the throne France was enjoying an era of prosperity. But that was soon to change. During the 1740's he led France into the War of Austrian Succession and in the 1750's into the Seven Years War. Both wars were disastrous for France. She gained little or nothing politically or economically and her national debt ballooned. Since the rich paid no taxes the lower classes were saddled with crushing debt.

The religious toleration which characterized English society was markedly different from that of France. All the various religious sects were allowed to practice and Voltaire singled out the Quakers and their founder, George Fox, for special analysis. This sect opposed the government and refused to follow English customs. But Quakers were not persecuted and practiced their religion openly.

In France the established Catholic Church was really an arm of the state. The King appointed the Catholic bishops and regulated their relationship with the Holy See. In turn, the Church supported the monarchy by preaching that any disobedience of the King was a grievous sin.

Lastly, Voltaire praised the capitalist economic system of England which was based on the teachings of Scottish economists ultimately led by Adam Smith. Trade was encouraged. Merchants and businessmen were held in high esteem and members of the aristocracy engaged in commerce. The burden of taxes was more equally distributed and commercial disputes were governed by law, not by arbitrary fiat.

France on the other hand was still mired in mercantilism. Free trade was discouraged. So were any transactions that did not increase the store of precious metals within the country. A nobleman lost his status if he engaged in business. Idleness, rather than industry, was the admired life style.

Needless to say, the authorities were furious with the Philosophical Letters. An unfavorable comparison of France to England was not permitted. The public hangman was

directed to gather all copies of the book and burn them in the city center. A warrant was issued for Voltaire's arrest.

Voltaire fled Paris and found a safe house on the estate of Marquise Chatelet in Cirey. Here he was to remain for the next 14 years. He formed a romantic relationship with Madam Chatelet whose husband, an army officer, was rarely at home. She was 28 years old and the mother of three children. She was a remarkable woman, one of the great polymaths of 18th Century France and an exceptional mathematician. She translated the Principia Mathematica into French, spoke several languages, wrote poetry and was highly regarded as a philosopher. Through her Voltaire secured the patronage of Madame de Pompadour, the mistress of Louis XV, another exceptional woman, who for 18 years acted as the de facto prime minister of France. He also carried on extensive correspondence with Catherine II of Russia, an enlightened ruler, at least until she presided over the partition of Poland in 1772.

Voltaire never married nor had any descendants. He was a wealthy man but not from his writings because he refused all royalties. He had inherited money from his father and was an exceptionally shrewd investor. Supposedly he made a lot of money supplying goods and services to the army during the Seven Years War - a sort of 18th Century Halliburton, if you will.

Voltaire was regarded as the leader of the Philosophes, that group of liberal intellectuals who graced the salons of Paris. They were not philosophers in the modern sense. They were social and political commentators, the analog of today's newspaper columnists and Op-Ed writers. In the 18th Century what we call philosophy, they called metaphysics and metaphysics, at least Cartesian metaphysics (which was all the Jesuits taught), was a subject the Philosophes ignored. Denis Diderot was another famous Philosophe. He edited the Encyclopedia which purported to be a compendium of all human knowledge and is still read today. Voltaire contributed more articles to this 26 volume work than any other writer.

Voltaire was not an atheist; he was a deist. His belief in God was based on reason, not on revelation. His God was the watchmaker who had created the world but then left it alone and remained indifferent to it, exerting no influence over life or natural phenomena. So Voltaire was a spiritual skeptic who had no use for organized religion with its Bibles, ceremonies and prayers. Accordingly, he was branded a heretic and excommunicated from the Catholic Church. His writings were put on the Index of Forbidden Books as soon as they appeared.

On Sunday morning, November 1, 1755, which was All Saints Day, a violent earthquake struck Lisbon. Associated tremors hit Southern Portugal and continued down through the Atlas Mountains in Morocco. Fifty thousand people were killed, many while attending Sunday Mass. Voltaire was shocked and saddened by the tragedy and wrote a major poem about it. This event brought into focus the "Problem of Evil" which troubles many religious people today. Why does God permit such suffering? The believers never had a satisfactory answer. Voltaire answered by writing Candide.

Candide today is Voltaire's most famous work. Partly this is because of the musical version which was written in 1952 by Lillian Hellman with the score by Leonard Bernstein. Most of you probably have seen it for it has been a staple of the repertoire for the last half century.

The hero is a gentle, honest, and pleasant young man, reputed to be the illegitimate son of the sister of a local Baron. Expelled from the Baron's castle after exploring the mysteries and pleasures of love with Cunegonde, the Baron's daughter, Candide travels all over the world. A dutiful young man who has been taught that this is the best of all possible worlds, Candide searches the globe for proof, meeting old friends and acquaintances in unexpected places and unusual circumstances. During his travels he has many misadventures and endures many hardships and pains. Impressed into the Bulgarian army, he discovers the horrors of war. He lives through the Lisbon Earthquake and is ordered flogged by officers of the Inquisition. He finds and loses his sweetheart Cunegonde. He discovers wealth and loses it. He kills men when he does not mean to do so. All of these experiences slowly convince Candide that this is really not the best of all possible worlds. After years of wandering he retires to a little farm where he lives with a small group of friends and his wife now old and far from pretty. Candide's mentor was Dr. Pangloss who provides the book's comic relief. He also provided our language with the word "panglossian" which denotes witless optimism.

Voltaire's tour de force went beyond most other famous satires. Like Alexander Pope's Rape of the Lock, it attacks the pretentiousness of the upper classes; like George Orwell's Animal Farm, it undercuts political systems; like Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels, it sheds sharp light on man's grossness, his cupidity, and his stupidity, as well as on his crude and frequently cruel institutions. Candide goes beyond man and his society, however, to examine the entire world in which man finds himself. Its thesis is contrived in explicit response to Leibnizian optimism that this is "the best of all possible worlds."

The problem of the existence of evil in the world has bothered man ever since he dared speculate about the nature of things. It is treated in the literature of the West at least as early as the book of Genesis, which attributes evil to man's disobedient nature. St. Augustine and, later, John Milton enlarged on this theory, claiming that God limited his own interference in the world when he created man "sufficient to stand though free to fall." The Book of Job in the Bible centers more specifically on the problem of suffering. Its answer is essentially no answer except for God's overwhelming (some have said obscene) demonstration of power, which humbles Job into acceptance. A third century Persian philosopher, Mani, devised the theory that earth is a field of dispute between two nearly matched powers -- one of light, one of darkness -- with man caught in the middle.

Most later explanations appear to be variations on these three. The seventeenth century Frenchman Blaise Pascal believed, like the author of Job, that man's vision cannot perceive the justice of God's overall plan. Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibnitz developed this explanation further. In his Theodicee, published in 1710, he described a harmonious universe in which all events are linked into a chain of cause and effect, and in which apparent evil is compensated by some greater good which may not be evident in the short run because of the limited human mind. The English poet Alexander Pope expressed similar views in rhymed couplets.

Candide is one of a group of about 25 novels that Voltaire called his Philosophical Tales. They are short, witty and focus on the absurdities of the human condition. Mark Twain used these books as models for some of his novels.

In 1750 Voltaire accepted an invitation from Frederick the Great to become the King's Chamberlain. He went to Potsdam where he received a handsome pension, lived in the royal palace, and completed his monumental historical study of the reign of Louis XIV.

Three years later a quarrel with Frederick led him to depart Prussia and take up residence in Switzerland. The Swiss Calvinists soon objected to his presence so he moved across the border to the French town of Fernay. Here he settled for the rest of his life. For the next 25 years an endless stream of the great and near great thinkers and writers of Europe came to Fernay to meet and talk with him.

For this was to be the most influential period of Voltaire's life's work. He campaigned tirelessly on behalf of the vital causes of the Enlightenment - freedom of thought, abolition of slavery and serfdom, an end to colonial and dynastic wars, free trade and peaceful commerce and fiscal and judicial reform. The output was so immense it is difficult to summarize.

More than anything else Voltaire preached tolerance. In fact he changed toleration from a vice to a virtue. In the 18th Century upstanding citizens were expected to denounce any aberrant behavior. Vestiges of that thinking remain with us today in statements like "How do you tolerate that noisy child?" In the age of Voltaire intolerance focused on political and religious thinking and on social conduct and invariably led to persecution. But he led the campaign against it and respect for the beliefs and practices of others is the Enlightenment's great gift to mankind. (Although it should be noted, as many have, that Voltaire was not tolerant enough to tolerate intolerance.)

Among other accomplishments in Fernay Voltaire wrote his Philosophical Dictionary, a work that is still in our bookstores. It's really not a dictionary and it's not necessarily about philosophy. Instead it's a compilation of short pieces largely about religion to which he gave short titles and then arranged alphabetically. Perhaps the form of the book was a parody on the Dictionary that Dr. Johnson had been working on for several years.

The book is an amusing, and thoughtful, attack on religion, the Bible and the Catholic Church. When it appeared it was condemned by all the establishments, religious and governmental, but read by everyone, at least everyone who could afford to buy a copy. Some of the pieces are half a page, others are several pages long. It's a great book to have at your bedside for a few chuckles before you fall asleep. But it's more than that. As you page through it you asked yourself "How did he do it? How did this man amass so much knowledge? There was no internet. He had no access to universities or their libraries. He lived in the remote countryside; the French Alps.

On ethical issues Voltaire would be classified as a relativist. He questioned whether there really was anything like universal human nature which would give rise to universal ethical norms. What values did he and Emperor Nero have in common? Ethics vary across time and across cultures. Slavery was acceptable in 5th Century Athens but it was not acceptable in 18th Century Paris. The Bible was not the standard for ethical values, which vary as civilization matures. It was this kind of thinking that earned him the undying enmity of religious and conservative thinkers.

Voltaire was relentless in pursuit of justice. One famous instance was the Calas affair. That Protestant family had a son who was depressed and suicidal and who eventually hung himself. But the authorities accused the family of murdering their son because he was planning to convert to Catholicism. The father was tortured and killed, and the daughters were sent to nunneries. Voltaire saw this as a case of judicial murder and undertook to rehabilitate the family and to have the verdict overturned. In sum, Voltaire can be considered the father of modern liberalism just as his long-term antagonist, Edmund Burke, is considered the father of modern conservatism.

In 1778, in his 84th year, Voltaire was invited to return to Paris, where he received a hero's welcome in the city that had banished him 40 years earlier. He was feted by the academics and the elites and celebrated by ordinary Parisians as well. Perhaps the celebration was too strenuous for Voltaire fell ill and decided to return to Fernay. He stopped at Scellieres, a small town outside Paris, too ill to travel on. There followed a comic opera scenario in which the Church authorities tried to get Voltaire to repent so his excommunication could be lifted and he could be buried in a cemetery. Otherwise this cultural icon would be consigned to an unmarked grave. Whether he ever repented is doubtful but the local Church officials finally allowed him to be secretly buried in the town cemetery.

During the Revolution his casket was unearthed and removed to the Pantheon in Paris, the resting place for all French heroes. In 1860 his coffin was opened and found to be empty. The remains of this celebrated Frenchman have never been found.