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## Écrasez l'infâme : Voltaire's Philosophy of Religion

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## *Écrasez l'infâme*: Voltaire's Philosophy of Religion

The author presents the basic premises of Voltaire's philosophy of religion, based on a recreation of its historical and philosophical context, as well as an analysis of source texts. This includes: the declared elitism of Voltaire and *les philosophes*, referring to the "brilliant" philosophical and scientific mind; their affirmation of the necessity to separate elite and common knowledge; and their conviction that religious faith (religious fanaticism) is obviously the source of all evil in the world. Such a discursive field renders the dispute between deists and atheists insignificant, as both deism and atheism are included as forms of "philosophical religion", that is, two forms of religious knowledge meriting popularization. Elite philosophical knowledge considers deism to be safer than atheism, nonetheless regarding the "brilliant" human mind as the proper object of worship in the so-called "religion of *les philosophes*". One of the dogmas in this "religion" is a ruthless, albeit bloodless, war on evil.

**Key words:** philosophy, religion, Voltaire, belief, fanaticism, atheism, deism

France had been expecting the beginning of a new age since the early eighteenth century. The revolutionary democratization and liberalization of the state and the society that was about to occur was preceded by a systematic deconstruction of Catholicism as the spiritual base of the *ancien régime*. This deconstruction was facilitated by many factors, two major ones being the extremely strong alliance of "the throne and the altar" and the divisions within the French Church. The Church in France had always been strongly influenced by Gallicanism, and has thus mostly fallen under the monarch's authority. Therefore Catholicism was the State religion in a literal sense, with the Church involved in everyday political life. The integrity of the Church as an institution and as a community was undermined not only by the conflict between Gallicanists and ultramontanists, but also by its struggle against Jansenism and Quietism. The full extent of this crisis was seen as early as 1719, when Pope Clement XI ordered the French Clergy to adopt the

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anti-Jansenist bull *Unigenitus Dei Filius* “purement et simplement” (completely and unconditionally). In spite of political manipulations and the king’s orders, the French episcopate was not unanimous in adopting the bull. Attempts to prevent a politically dangerous division within the episcopate were undertaken, a compromise was sought between the ultramontanists and the Gallicanists and Jansenists – all to no avail. Ultimately, the two authorities – the king and the Church – made unpopular decisions. The disobedient bishops were forced to withdraw from public life, pro-Jansenist publications were burned, proponents of the condemned doctrines were imprisoned, insubordinate priests were defrocked. Thus, the issue of the persecuted religious minority, encompassing approximately 5% of the clergy and society, became a public and political cause, evoking widespread solidarity with the victims, and gained many fervent and influential supporters in the French Parliament. As a result, King Louis XV made significant concessions to Parliament, including the dissolution of the Society of Jesus. This became a strong influence for actions that permanently changed the balance of political power between secular and spiritual authorities in Catholic France. Since then, the king and Parliament, together with the higher clergy, would pressure conservative church circles into reforms supporting or triggering secularization and dechristianization processes.

The philosophers of the eighteenth century claimed to live in a world different from the problematic, conflict-ridden realm where politics and religion clashed. In the narrative of the Enlightenment, theirs was an exclusive, elitist world, accessible to those who uncompromisingly rejected all tradition, especially religious, and relied solely on their own reason and knowledge. This elite community of people, enjoying a particular kind of freedom (freethinkers), was perceived as the only entity working towards a new and better reality. The world of religion and politics were represented as grim, fanaticized, intolerant and irrational with the image reinforced in the minds of the public by typical cases, such as the immoral and self-interested conduct of the clergy, or atypical examples such as the Saint-Médard Convulsionaries received promises of universal redemption from the beautiful world of the enlightened few<sup>2</sup>, its only price being the acceptance of the new elite’s spiritual authority.

It was from this bright, charming world, that François Marie Arouet, also known as Voltaire, was sending his letters, concluded with the call: *écrasez l’infâme*. It reminded the addressees about the author’s continuous fight against the darkness of religion, and about his appeal to others to persevere in eradicat-

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<sup>2</sup> In 1728, while still in England, Voltaire prepared critical notes on some of Blaise Pascal’s “thoughts”. These were added to the 1734 French edition of *Lettres* as the twenty-fifth letter. Late in his life, Voltaire revisited his comments on Pascal. He amended and annotated them in 1777 in his own “critical” edition of *Éloge et Pensées de Pascal*, first published the year before by J.A. Condorcet, who had quoted some of the remarks from the letter. A confrontation of the two texts, one written in the philosopher’s youth, and the other at the age of 83, or a year before his death, enables one to verify the notion of Voltaire’s invariable confession of unfaith.

ing this darkness from a world appropriated and corrupted by religion. *Écrasez l'infâme* can be considered the motto of all the writings of this darling of the Parisian salons and European courts: both his prose and poetry, and his philosophical works. Among the latter, two are especially significant to the issue at hand: an early work known as *Lettres philosophiques ou Lettres anglaises* with a treatise, added later, entitled *Sur Pensées de M. Pascal*, and his *Dictionnaire philosophique*. Both works can be considered Voltaire's philosophical summae – an early one and a late one, respectively.

There is a quite widespread consensus in literature on the subject (see i.a.: Pomeau 1956) that Voltaire's attitude towards religion was becoming more adverse with time, with the thinker gradually passing from deism, supported by his *Lettres*, to atheism, expressed in *Dictionnaire*. I will not, however, try to test this thesis regarding the philosopher's private beliefs, though they were of course promoted in his published writings; instead, I will search for theses that might be considered the fundamental premises of Voltaire's philosophy of religion. These theses are, in my opinion, the framework for Voltaire's general discourse on religion.

The thesis that structures the 24 philosophical "Letters on the English" is the (Baylean) axiom on the intellectually unresolvable conflict between healthy, enlightened reason and religious faith. Religious faith is, and always has been, fanatical; and fanaticism is the principal cause of all evils plaguing humanity. Reason must then be a fierce opponent of fanaticism. All of the cases discussed in the letters are subject to this premise. Thus, there was a lot of good to be said of religion in England: both for the simple and natural morality of the Quakers, and for Anglicanism, tolerant towards other denominations with the exception of Catholicism. However, one must consider the unwavering Quaker faith in the Scripture a sign of dangerous fanaticism, and the Anglican faith an illusion, as in most cases it is limited only to political activity. A "community" of various nationals gathering on the Royal Exchange in London proves then to be superior to all religious communities. There, people of different faiths come to multiply wealth, forgetting their fanatical devotion to their dogmas, and thus they simply "serve mankind". The history of England seems to be marked by the folly of religious wars, each "reserved for those who devoutly preach humility and patience" (Voltaire 2007: 20).

This folly of religious wars in England was ended by the development of the sciences, which started with the gradual liberation of minds from secular and spiritual tyrannies. This liberation owes a debt to merchants and artisans, wise and virtuous people whose work also consisted in multiplying wealth; to do this well, they studied law and respected empirical knowledge. This enabled the development of true, i.e. useful, scientific knowledge, which made it possible to rationalize the human world and to liberate it from the greatest evil – war.

The author deplores the fact that in society in general, and in French society in particular, the minority consisting of true lovers of knowledge – philosophers, scientists and writers – do not enjoy the high standing that is rightly theirs, and are persecuted for their alleged impiety. Meanwhile, all the misfortunes befalling

humanity could be avoided, and the wellbeing of the majority could be improved, if the majority were guided by reason. Since this remained impossible, the majority should obey the rational minority.

Voltaire added his remarks on Pascal's *Pensées* to the 1734 French edition of *Lettres*, as *Letter XXV*. For Arouet, the case of Pascal was a kind of intellectual scandal. Pascal who, being a mathematician, physicist, inventor and writer, undoubtedly belonged to the rational few, put his talent at the service of religion, giving up his critical, self-sufficient mind voluntarily, and surrendering to revelation. A great mind believed in the Christian God and Christian dogma, and wanted to persuade other rational people – scholars and philosophers – that holy books contain wisdom different from that sought by reason; a higher wisdom, bringing them a full understanding of man and mankind. This astonishing case might be explained by a disastrous coincidence: an illness preventing rational judgment combined with a fanatical environment aggravating that mental confusion. The great mind, if only he had found himself among the enlightened *philosophes*, “he himself would have corrected many of those *Pensées*” (Voltaire 2007: 101). Regrettably, deprived of his intellectual strength by his illness, and subjected to the detrimental influence of religionists, one of “the greatest of men [made] mistakes like the rest of us” (122).

When Voltaire wrote the *Lettres*, then, he had already fully accepted the Baylean diagnosis: that European society and culture suffered from a disease – religious fanaticism. The disease can also affect great minds if they inadvertently leave the elite “republic of the learned”, losing the support of the rational community, and expose themselves to the harmful influence of superstition. This first premise of Voltaire's philosophy of religion is accompanied by a second one. In the face of a disease as serious and contagious as religion, decisive and coordinated action is required from a united rational community. Therapy must be administered by agencies of the “republic of the learned” operating outside its territory, a sanctuary, a place free from the disease, home to those whose minds are immune to religious folly. In his letter to Helvetius, Voltaire writes, in a comforting tone: “The Enlightenment will disseminate in France, as it did in England, in Prussia, in the Netherlands, in Switzerland, and even in Italy; yes, in Italy. Your spirit would be lifted by the great number of philosophers silently rising in the realm of superstition... enlightening people is the greatest good we can bring to society, it is the only way of civilizing our ways, made savage by superstition” (Voltaire 1824a).

The “great number of philosophers” that bring enlightenment to people has its elite doctrine. This is not a strictly philosophical doctrine, of the normal kind, that thrives on internal and external criticism, on clashes between theses and the arguments that support them. This one, on the other hand, though contrasted with religious doctrines, shares their structure. It is founded entirely on specific dogmas that may not be challenged, as this would automatically exclude one from the “philosophical discourse” and the elite community forming the “republic of the learned”. As a reminder, J.J. Rousseau was among the most famous heretics

who rejected this philosophical doctrine, which I will call the “religion of *les philosophes*” because of its similarity to religious doctrines. Rousseau also combated positive forms of religion and promoted a natural religion rising from within the human being, but was motivated by “truths” other than those subscribed to by Voltaire and his supporters.

The doctrine of the “religion of *les philosophes*” was introduced in *Dictionnaire philosophique portatif*, a work expanded and supplemented with subsequent editions, which later also included entries from *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie, par des amateurs*. One of its editions was titled *La Raison par alphabet* (Kehl, 1769). The title directly refers to the (well-known) fundamental dogma of the “religion of *les philosophes*” which states that Enlightenment reason – i.e. individual reason subject to common sense, common experience, and a common interpretation of the empirical sciences – is the highest instance in all human matters.

The entry titled in the *Dictionnaire* is a parable, but its content should be taken seriously, in the same way as biblical parables are taken seriously in Christianity. In this parable, reason is represented by “a man who [is] always in the right” (Voltaire 1901a). This man can perfectly see and clearly demonstrate all discrepancies between beliefs and actions on the one hand, and common sense, experience and science on the other. He is well-versed in all areas: he sees the foolishness of economists (Law's system), the violations of (their own) moral principles by papists, the nonsense of old customs, and the empirically unfounded fantasy of religious beliefs. Because of these exceptional skills he makes enemies among the powerful, i.e. those who, in their own self-interest, disseminate and support erroneous beliefs. In return, he gains authority among the “lesser mortals” who, though deceived by the powerful, have kept their healthy sense of the truth thanks to their mental simplicity and closeness to nature. This man, endowed with a reason that effectively establishes the truth, persecuted by promulgators of falsehood and listened to by the simple people, is of course the right-minded philosopher. The doctrine also states that right-minded philosophers must promote a new religion, which is not, however, explicitly called the religion of reason. The entry entitled *Philosopher* reads: “Philosopher, *lover of wisdom*, that is, of *truth*. All philosophers have possessed this two-fold character; there is not one among those of antiquity who did not give examples of virtue to mankind, and lessons of moral truth” (Voltaire 1901b).

Let us point out that being a philosopher does not essentially consist in acquiring true knowledge (that is, knowledge that is useful and able to explain empirical facts), as this is a task better left to scientists, but in being its judge and champion. Knowledge (the truth) gives one freedom from moral wrongdoing, as it sweeps away false beliefs and allows moral instinct to be heard. Thus a philosopher, being an expert on truth, is also *l'honnête homme*, a wise and virtuous man. We could say he is so involuntarily, as he has been given this exceptional predisposition for wisdom and virtue by nature. His duty, to himself and to others, is to honour them as the highest values and to protect them from outside influences, so as not



to succumb as Pascal did: “The philosopher is the lover of wisdom and truth; to be a sage is to avoid the senseless and the depraved. The philosopher, therefore, should live only among philosophers. [...] [H]e should be a madman with the mad, and foolish among fools; no one, however, has yet ventured to say that he should be a knave among knaves” (Voltaire 1901c).

The obligation to protect oneself originates in another notion, already present in the *Letters*, however in an uncrystallised form. It is the conviction that the diagnosis of the world given by the Baylean critical mind was adequate. The world is not morally ill, as “[m]oral evil, upon which so many volumes have been written is, in fact, nothing but natural evil” and “[a]s the greatest of natural evils is death, the greatest of moral evils is, unquestionably, war”, which however “is the result of the laws of nature [...] all is connected; all is necessary” (Voltaire 1901c). As to the true evil plaguing humanity, that is ignorance, which can take on two forms. One is curable and less serious, albeit requiring long therapy. It is “intellectual emptiness”, an innocent ignorance typical of primitive minds that do not possess (proper) philosophical and scientific knowledge. The other form of ignorance is “fanaticism”, a serious, even fatal, illness. What is worse, it is contagious, and particularly threatening to “empty minds” that absorb all knowledge uncritically. The source of this plague is the institutional dogmatic religion (the Church), with the clergy being its terminally ill carriers. Fanaticism is an illness of reason, or, as Voltaire writes, “the effect of a false conscience, which makes religion subservient to the caprices of the imagination, and the excesses of the passions” (Voltaire 1901d).

Now we can move on to the next belief upon which the doctrine of *les philosophes* was built: the belief that only a philosophical mind, that is, a healthy, critical and outstanding mind, is able to develop the principles for effective therapy. Simple minds should be cured by enlightening, i.e. by filling them carefully and gradually with philosophical and scientific knowledge, appropriately adjusted to their average capabilities by philosophers. As to fanaticism, it should be destroyed absolutely. This is the purpose of Voltaire’s call: *écrasez l’infâme!*, “crush the monstrosity”. Philosophers are armed with their merciless words that, sparing the physical life of the enemy kills their false conscience. This is a noble weapon that befits *les philosophes*, as they are the apostles of new truths, virtuous in a new, non-religious way; thus, to use d’Alembert’s term, they are irreproachable. “*Les philosophes*,” Voltaire wrote to his friend Etienne-Noël Damilaville, “cannot fight force with force; their weapons are silence, patience, friendship among brothers... The more others seek to destroy them, the more united they should become. I repeat: nothing is more shameful for human nature than the sight of fanaticism united through all times under one banner, ordering fools and madmen to follow the same laws, while the few wise men are ever scattered and dispersed, defenseless, disunited, constantly exposed to the mockery of the evil and the hatred of the mindless” (Voltaire 1824b).

These “dogmas” of the “religion of *les philosophes*” can only be propagated in their purest form inside the “republic of the learned”, as the “religion” founded

on them is not only a religion of the initiated, but first and foremost, a religion of those endowed with brilliant minds. Such people deserve the greatest respect of all humankind. Thus, ordinary minds, instead of professing the “religion of *les philosophes*”, should adopt some kind of a “philosophical religion” that is, in essence, a cult of brilliant minds, or a cult of the enlightened man. This “philosophical religion” could mean deism, natural religion and similar beliefs acceptable to average minds. By adopting the “philosophical religion”, these minds will be freed from false judgments and directed towards true ones, which will empower them to act in a virtuous manner, in line with natural morality. “[P]hilosophize as much as you please among yourselves”, says Voltaire to *les philosophes*. “If [however] you have but a village to govern, it must have a religion” (Voltaire 1901e). “[A] distinction must be made between the people, properly so called, and a society of philosophers above the people” as “the populace require the strongest curb [...], a rewarding and avenging God” (Voltaire 1901f).

Deism and atheism, the best-known and most convenient variants of “philosophical religions”, can also be professed by philosophers; indeed, like all human beings, they are subject to emotions and desires, and so they find it difficult to consistently adhere to a world created by the brilliant, enlightened mind. However, as a philosopher's private confession of faith, atheism leads to unpleasant consequences. The consequences are by no means moral in nature, and as such only affect commoners. Atheism deprives a philosopher, especially an aesthete like Voltaire himself, of the pleasure derived from his own uniqueness. As all natural things, a unique mind and other talents lose their divine element, which is pleasing to an aesthete, giving him an admiration for himself and his likes, and allowing him to request the respect due to great minds from the rest of the humanity.

It is noteworthy that Voltaire's thoughts on society do not include a design for a social utopia. According to Voltaire, the creation of an ideal (happy) society is not an objective that a right-minded, fact-oriented philosopher would pursue. A great mind deserves praise and respect not because it knows the principles for an ideal society and strives to implement them, but because it enlightens the populace, reducing its suffering. Suffering as a physical evil is inevitable, as it is more or less inscribed in the natural order of things. There exist, however, “unnatural” evils, resulting from ignorance; it is this kind of suffering that a philosopher reduces by promoting the “philosophical religion”.

Voltaire seems, overall, to consider faith a problematic, although not easily eliminated, human need. Philosophers may succumb to it as well – a telling and regrettable example being Pascal. They should satisfy the need by believing in what supports Enlightenment rationality. As to the populace, it must not be left alone; otherwise it will be deprived once again by fanatics and politicians, and unnecessary suffering will once again plague the human world. There is, though, a significant difference between the private faith of philosophers and the faith of the commoners. The entry titled *Faith* reads: “Faith consists in believing not what seems true, but what seems false to our understanding [...] There is a faith for



things that are merely astonishing and prodigious, and a faith for things contradictory and impossible” (Voltaire 1901g).

The “philosophical religions” prompt their followers to believe the former, that is, the astonishing. What is surely astonishing is that some people are born with exceptional intellectual or artistic gifts; such is the order of nature and the resulting natural moral order. As people possessing outstanding minds, philosophers are able to unmistakably tell truth from falsehood; consequently, they are knowledgeable and, somewhat by definition, atheistic. However, as people sensitive to the beauty of the world (order) and subject to the need for faith, they should choose deism (or, in Voltaire’s terms, theism).

The master of *les philosophes* himself was a follower and apostle of deism as an elevating human religion. But Voltaire’s arguments for deism merit a more detailed discussion. In the entry titled *Philosophy*, he provides a theoretical reason: we should accept the existence of a supreme intelligence as a hypothesis to “complete” physical theories; a hypothesis that cannot be reconciled with the true notion of matter being eternal and necessary. “We are, however, obliged to swallow this difficulty, which more astonishes the imagination than contradicts the principles of reasoning”. Another reason is provided further: “I have intelligence; I am in space; therefore, he is intelligent and is in space” (Voltaire 1901e). Therefore, the god of the philosopher exists because of the philosopher’s existence, and is “created in his image and likeness”. Moral reasons are expounded in *Atheism*. The first part of the article criticizes the unjustified comparison between atheism and idolatry. What is interesting for the present discussion is Voltaire’s conclusion that atheism is better than idolatry. One could comment on this as follows: for moral reasons, it is better to preach atheism (the nonexistence of God) than to present morally wrong gods to the populace. This, however, is just one side of the issue. The other is that, for the same reasons, the atheistic doctrine must be held in lower esteem than the deistic doctrine. “[A] distinction must be made between the people, properly so called, and a society of philosophers above the people”, the author writes at the end of the passage discussing numerous historical examples of atheism and idolatry. For all those who, like Voltaire and his *philosophes*, are interested in “politics and society” – that is, for those who provide the people with a new religious doctrine – it is obvious that, as has already been mentioned, “the populace require the strongest curb [...], a rewarding and avenging God”. In the same piece, the philosopher attacks atheists: “We are intelligent beings [...]. The world is assuredly an admirable machine [...]. [I]n this universe there are intelligent beings, and you cannot prove it possible for motion alone to produce understanding [...]. [A]cknowledge that, in reptiles [author’s note: the example is obviously not random], everything is admirably proportioned”. Furthermore: “Atheism is the vice of some intelligent men, and superstition is the vice of fools. And what is the vice of knaves? — Hypocrisy”. Then follows a list of “wise men”, from antiquity to modern times, unjustly accused of atheism and persecuted by “knaves”. Atheism, writes Voltaire provocatively, was extremely rare among the philosophers of the

time, because a wise man would not say: "our teachers represent God to us as the most insensate and barbarous of all beings; therefore, there is no God", but rather: "our teachers represent God as furious and ridiculous, therefore God is the reverse of what they describe Him; He is as wise and good as they say He is foolish and wicked" (Voltaire 1901f).

Unlike deism, revealed religions require faith "for things contradictory and impossible". A brilliant mind can effortlessly prove that religious faith, that is, faith in what is "contradictory and impossible", cannot be considered a proper manner of fulfilling the need for faith. Human beings are reasonable, so even if they surrender to religious folly, they will not accept as true any belief that goes against reason, common sense and experience. "Thus," Voltaire says, "speaking philosophically, no person believes in the Trinity; no person believes that the same body can be in a thousand places at once; and he who says, I believe these mysteries, will see, beyond the possibility of a doubt, if he reflects for a moment on what passes in his mind, that these words mean no more than, I respect these mysteries; I submit myself to those who announce them. [...] I and my reason cannot possibly be two different beings. It is an absolute contradiction that I should receive that as true which my understanding rejects as false. Faith, therefore, is nothing but submissive or deferential incredulity. [...] This is what divines call external faith. [...] This is not faith; it is nothing more than obedience" (Vol. IV, *A Philosophical Dictionary: Faith*)<sup>3</sup>.

The enormity of evil brought to the world by religions is vividly described in the article titled *Religion*. Voltaire begins the piece with praise for deism: it involves very few and simple dogmas (which curbs the madness of non-reason), no specific form of cult, a tolerance allowing for universal brotherhood, and beautiful ceremonies that impress the populace but do not offend the taste and reason of unbelievers. Then he tells a parable about a philosopher admiring the great spectacle of nature, who is awakened from this blissful state by an "angel". He is then transported to a strange kind of paradise with avenues of evergreen trees running between heaps of human remains – the bones of innocent victims of religious intolerance and fanaticism. The dead are looked upon with compassion by statues of "great men". The philosopher speaks then with these dead heroes of humanity. His last encounter is with the grieving, mutilated Jesus. It presents an opportunity to remind those who consider themselves Christians what true Christianity is, and to show them to what extent they have corrupted their religion. The true "Christianity" according to Voltaire's Jesus is, obviously, deism (theism).

Atheism is discussed in Voltaire's article entitled *Atheist*. There, the author describes the intellectual and moral havoc wreaked by (vulgar) atheism, which is

<sup>3</sup> It is no surprise, then, that Voltaire considers women the most susceptible to this kind of "faith". In *Devotee* he writes: "We pardon this folly in women; their weakness and frivolity render them excusable; they pass, poor things, from a lover to a spiritual director with perfect sincerity [...]. No young women without lovers; no elderly devotee without a director" (Voltaire, *A Philosophical Dictionary*, vol. IV: *Devotee*).

propagated by none other than religionists. He remarks, mockingly: "There were once many atheists among the Christians; they are now much fewer. It at first appears to be a paradox, but examination proves it to be a truth, that theology often threw men's minds into atheism, until philosophy at length drew them out of it. [...] Sound philosophy, therefore, has destroyed atheism, to which obscure theology furnished weapons of defence", as "many arguments can be developed to draw atheism out of philosophy". Only religious fanatics and scheming depraivers make atheism a "monster which may tear society in pieces," just like religious fanaticism. They do it by maintaining faith in revealed religion among commoners, violating reason and undermining virtues (of the Enlightenment). But the damage done by such fervent atheism cannot be compared to the evils of fanaticism, as atheism is always kept in check by reason, while religious fanaticism is fed by unchecked madness. According to the greatest of *les philosophes*, "true" philosophers are "apostles of Divinity" to commoners and to the enlightened but intellectually mediocre (Voltaire 1901h). Philosophers preach theism/deism, which is the most common religion of the world – because it is natural, and so, reasonable. This is the kind of religion that should soon be adopted by the state. A long piece titled *God--Gods* clearly states that the only true god of this religion, concealed from the commoners, would be the great human mind, the reason of *les philosophes*. Voltaire describes selected thoughts of "great men", leading to the conclusion that the name "God" ("gods") is given to some presumed beings, towards which people are driven by the aforementioned metaphysical and aesthetic instinct. The article features another "attack" against atheism, represented by a philosopher, d'Holbach. Nonetheless, the famous "atheism versus deism" dispute among *les philosophes* is not as significant as it is commonly believed to be. In this and other writings, the Master of Ferney provides the same arguments for deism over and again. He defends the "God hypothesis", referring to the astonishing order of the world, to the respect due to every brilliant mind, and to the aesthetic sense of beauty and harmony of the world. The existence of a deist god is then a postulate of reasonable faith, and not of knowledge, which is an attribute of philosophers. Moral considerations are of lesser importance here, since the dispute involves "true philosophers", people virtuous by nature. Still, the author of *Dictionnaire* argues with Holbach that maintaining religion in the society is, for obvious reasons, necessary. Not only that – so is accepting the existence of a clergy, controlled by the state and by philosophers.

In the reverse story, the story in which religious faith is presented as atheism, unfaith and depravity, and the philosophical atheist is a rational, virtuous deist of a sensible faith, the philosopher becomes obliged to "crush the monstrosity". The philosopher, who is sensible and happy, should participate in this joint venture – minimizing unnecessary suffering of that part of the human race which is ranked below philosophers. It is not a particularly difficult task and it should not be taken too seriously. "Monstrosity" does not deserve that the philosopher treat it too seriously. Neither does the better part of humanity. Let us bear in mind: "Hap-

pily, men are so light, so frivolous, so struck with the present and so insensible to the past, that in ten thousand there are not above two or three who make these reflections [...] If you would tolerate life, mortals, forget yourselves, and enjoy it" (Voltaire 1901i).

These are the great minds that deserve glory and admiration of the common people. They are specific "natural wonders" and the only saviours of the humanity. After all "when the human mind has once quitted the luminous track pointed out by nature, it returns to it no more; it wanders round the truth, but never obtains of it more than a few faint glimmerings, which, mingling with the false lights of surrounding superstition, leave it, in fact, in complete and palpable obscurity [...] When once fanaticism has gangrened the brain of any man the disease may be regarded as nearly incurable". The history of Christianity is the history of crime: "In a word, let us contemplate the horrors of fifteen centuries, all frequently renewed in the course of a single one; unarmed men slain at the feet of altars; kings destroyed by the dagger or by poison; a large state reduced to half its extent by the fury of its own citizens; the nation at once the most warlike and the most pacific on the face of the globe, divided in fierce hostility against itself; the sword unsheathed between the sons and the father; usurpers, tyrants, executioners, sacrilegious robbers, and bloodstained parricides violating, under the impulse of religion, every convention divine or human — such is the deadly picture of fanaticism". And since "in all ages has religion been employed as an instrument in the persecution of great men", the cult of the great minds simply does them justice and, above all, it is something of a vaccine that is supposed to protect common minds from the "monstrosity" disease: "We understand by fanaticism at present a religious madness, gloomy and cruel. It is a malady of the mind, which is taken in the same way as smallpox [...] There is no other remedy for this epidemical malady than that spirit of philosophy, which, extending itself from one to another, at length civilizes and softens the manners of men and prevents the access of the disease. For when the disorder has made any progress, we should, without loss of time, fly from the seat of it, and wait till the air has become purified from contagion. Law and religion are not completely efficient against the spiritual pestilence. Religion, indeed, so far from affording proper nutriment to the minds of patients labouring under this infectious and infernal distemper, is converted, by the diseased process of their minds, into poison" (Voltaire 1901d).

For the enlightened philosophical mind, religion as such becomes institutionalized evil and slavery; faith, according to religious dogma, becomes an anti-philosophical ungodliness. What bigots perceive as faithlessness and ungodliness, is a "philosophical belief" (deserving the greatest praise) in innate reason, instincts and the natural law. Furthermore it is belief in the power to emancipate man from – causing unnecessary suffering – religious bewilderment. If you believe in the Christian God, you believe in Satan, created by mad "prophets"; if you know that the only natural wonder is the unique human mind, and to appreciate this wonder you become a deist, you reject the alleged existence of Satan. When you reject the

existence of Satan, you reject the fictional evil and become capable of eliminating unnecessary suffering from the human life.

Therefore, for the enlightened philosophers, deism was an ideology. An ideology invented by the elite and worthy of sensible faith. The ideology administered to the common people as a remedy for religious bewilderment. Philosophers themselves also accepted this ideology for their own purposes. Atheism, on the other hand, is a crucial component of the aforementioned philosophical doctrine. I call it the “religion of *les philosophes*” doctrine. One has to bear in mind though, that according to Voltaire, the philosopher is not one who believes, but one who knows. Hence, for philosophers the doctrine is about knowledge in the most precise meaning of the word, knowledge similar to scientific knowledge; knowledge which indeed rules out the “existence of God hypothesis”. This philosophical atheism, as we may call it, has to be separated from the atheism discussed by Voltaire, which can be defined as common atheism. The former would be based on solid knowledge. The latter would be derived from lack of reason and therefore would have to be deemed almost fanatical. As opposed to the former, followed only by the intellectual elite, the latter is dangerous for social order and thus cannot be accepted by philosophers in pursuit of making “philosophical religions” common. Philosophical atheism is a part of the “religion of *les philosophes*” dogma and if the right-minded philosophers reject it, they will be excluded from the most elite circles of the enlightened. Faith, in general, is a human weakness to which the philosopher must also give in, but serious faith should not take possession of *le philosophe*. The enlightened philosopher is not a true believer in a deistic God. He is “the one who knows”, hence “the one who does not believe”. “Believer” and “philosopher” are mutually exclusive notions. We should once again refer to *l'enfant terrible* of the eighteenth century republic of scholars, J.J. Rousseau. Rousseau believed in deism and recognized it as a religion worthy of the true philosopher – to the great astonishment of his philosopher friends. In their opinion he deserved to be called, just as Pascal, a mad philosopher who had betrayed his own reason. He should not have discarded the elegant distance towards deism he had assumed – “the religion of the enlightened masses” and a private religion of those philosophers who wanted to enjoy the glory emanating from it. Let me also remind you here that although Voltaire accepted deism and criticized atheism, he did not mind publishing letters promoting (aggressive) atheism. On many occasions he published a slightly censored version of the *Testament* by J. Meslier. He probably censored it to protect the common people from common atheism.

We should also note that it is not merely “secular” philosophy that unites *les philosophes* in their battle against religious evil. As Freud and Lacan would say, what unites them is love and hate. Love for their enlightened reasoning (infallibility) and hate for everything that has been (infallibly) recognized as evil: the source of fanaticism, superstitions, indignation and wars. “*Écrasez l'infâme!*” expresses the obligation of all the followers of the “religion of *les philosophes*” to ruthlessly



fight evil. Evil, which can (as in the case of Rousseau) hide behind a mask of seriously regarded deism.

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