

VOLTAIRE, SELECTIONS FROM THE *PHILOSOPHICAL DICTIONARY*

Voltaire was the pen name of François-Marie Arouet (1694–1778), an Enlightenment writer known for his plays and histories and his acerbic criticism of the French Catholic Church. This set of selections is from his *Philosophical Dictionary* of 1764. They demonstrate his range of reading, including travel literature about China, but the main target remains religious bigotry and fanaticism, Voltaire's chief targets throughout his life.

We go to China seeking clay as though we had none of our own; cloth, as though we lacked cloth; a small herb to steep in water, as though we didn't have medicinal plants in our own parts. In repayment, we should like to convert the Chinese; that's very praiseworthy zeal, but we should not question their antiquity, nor tell them they are idolaters. Really, would people like it if a capuchin friar, having been well received in a château of the Montmorencys, tried to persuade them that they were recent nobility, like the secretaries of the King, and accused them of being idolaters because he had found in the château two or three statues of High Constables, for whom they have profound respect?

The celebrated Wolff, professor of mathematics at the university of Halle, one day delivered a fine oration in praise of Chinese philosophy; he praised that ancient species of men who differ from us in their beard, their eyes, their nose, their ears, and their arguments; he praised, I say, the Chinese for worshiping a supreme God and loving virtue; he did the emperors of China, the Kalao, tribunals, the men of letters, full justice. The justice he did the bonzes was of a different kind.

Wolff, I must tell you, attracted to Halle a thousand students from every nation. There was in the same university a professor of theology named Lange, who attracted nobody; in despair at freezing to death alone in his lecture hall, he quite reasonably decided to ruin the professor of mathematics; following the custom of his kind, he promptly accused him of not believing in God.

Some European writers who had never been to China had claimed that the government of Peking was atheistic; Wolff had praised the philosophers of Peking, hence Wolff was an atheist. Envy and hatred never constructed a better syllogism. This argument of Lange's, supported by a cabal and a protector, was considered conclusive by the king of the land, who presented the mathematician with this formal dilemma: leave Halle in twenty-four hours or be hanged. And, excellent reasoner that he was, Wolff promptly left; his departure deprived the King of two or three hundred thousand écus per year which the philosopher had brought to the kingdom through the affluence of his disciples.

This example ought to impress sovereigns that they shouldn't always listen to calumny and sacrifice a great man to the insanity of a fool. But let's return to China.

Why do we presume, on this side of the world, to argue bitterly, amid torrents of insults, over whether there were or were not fourteen princes before Fo-hi, emperor of China, and whether this Fo-hi lived three thousand or two thousand nine hundred years before our common era? I'd like to see two Irishmen take it into their heads to quarrel in Dublin over who, in the twelfth century, was the owner of the lands I occupy today: isn't it obvious that they must refer to me, who has the archives in his hands? In my opinion, the same thing is true of the first emperors of China: we must refer to the tribunals of the country.

Argue as much as you like about the fourteen princes who ruled before Fo-hi, your fine argument will only end by proving that China was very populous at that time, and lived under the rule of law. Now I ask you whether a united nation, with laws and princes, does not suggest prodigious antiquity. Think how much time is needed before an extraordinary conjunction of circumstances leads to the discovery of iron in mines, before it is used in agriculture, before the shuttle and all the other skills are invented.

Those who make children with a stroke of the pen have thought up a very odd calculation. Through a pretty computation, the Jesuit Pétau calculates that two hundred and eighty-five years after the deluge, the world had a hundred times as many inhabitants as we dare estimate it has today. The Cumberlands and the Whistons have made equally comical calculations; these gentlemen need only have consulted the registers of our colonies in America; they would have been greatly astonished: they would have learned how slowly mankind multiplies, and that it often diminishes instead of increasing.

Let us then, men merely of yesterday, descendants of the Celts who have barely cleared the forests of our savage lands—let us leave the Chinese and Indians to enjoy their lovely climate and their antiquity in peace. Above all let us stop calling the emperor of China and the soubab of Decan idolaters. We should not be fanatical about the merits of the Chinese: the constitution of their empire is in fact the best in the world, the only one founded entirely on paternal power (which doesn't prevent the mandarins from caning their children); the only one in which the governor of a province is punished when he fails to win the acclamation of the people upon leaving office; the only one that has instituted prizes for virtue, while everywhere else the laws are restricted to punishing crime; the only one that has made its conquerors adopt its laws, while we are still subject to the customs of the Burgundians, the Franks, and the Goths, who subjugated us. But I must admit that the common people, governed by bonzes, are as rascally as ours; that they sell everything to foreigners very expensively, just as we do; that in the sciences the Chinese are still at the point we were at two hundred years ago; that they have a thousand ridiculous prejudices, as we do; that they believe in talismans and in judicial astrology, as we used to believe for a long time.

Let me admit also that they were amazed at our thermometer, at our manner of freezing liquids with saltpeter, and at all the experiments of Torricelli and Otto von Guericke, just as we were when we saw these scientific amusements for the first time; let me add that their doctors cure mortal illnesses no better than ours do, and that nature cures minor ailments by herself in China, as it does here. Still, four thousand years ago, when we couldn't even read, the Chinese knew all the absolutely useful things we boast about today.

Once again, the religion of the men of letters of China is admirable. No superstitions, no absurd legends, none of those dogmas which insult reason and nature and to which the bonzes give a thousand different meanings, because they don't have any. The simplest cult has seemed to them the best for more than forty centuries. They are what we think Seth, Enoch, and Noah were; they are content to worship a God with all the sages of the world, while in Europe we are divided between Thomas and Bonaventure, between Calvin and Luther, between Jansenius and Molina.

"Dogmas"

On the 18th of February of the year 1763 of the common era, with the sun entering the sign of Pisces, I was conveyed to heaven, as all my friends know. Borac, Mahomet's mare, was not my mount; Elijah's fiery chariot was not my car; I was carried neither on the elephant of Sammonocodom the Siamese, nor on the horse of St. George, patron saint of England, nor on St. Anthony's pig; I confess without guile that I took my trip I don't know how.

You can imagine how dazzled I was; but what you won't believe is that I saw the judging of all the dead. And who were the judges? They were, if you please, all those who had done well by mankind. Confucius, Solon, Socrates, Titus, the Antoinines, Epictetus, all the great men who, having taught and practiced the virtues God demands, alone seemed to have the right to pronounce his judgments.

I won't say what thrones they were sitting on, nor how many million celestial beings were prostrated before the creator of all globes, nor what a crowd of inhabitants from these innumerable globes appeared before the judges. Here I shall only give an account of a few small, quite interesting details that struck me.

I observed that every dead man who pleaded his case and paraded his fine sentiments was instantly surrounded by all the witnesses of his true actions. For example, when the cardinal of Lorraine boasted that he had got the Council of Trent to adopt some of his views, and demanded eternal life as a reward for his orthodoxy, immediately courtesans (or ladies of the court) appeared, each bearing on her forehead the number of her rendezvous with the cardinal. I saw those who had laid the foundations of the League with him; all the accomplices of his perverse plans surrounded him.

Opposite the cardinal of Lorraine was C . . . , who boasted in his crude dialect that he had kicked the papal idol with his feet after others had thrown it down. "I wrote against painting and sculpture," he said; "I made it clear that good works count for nothing at all, and I proved that it is diabolical to dance the minuet: drive the cardinal of Lorraine away quickly, and put me at the side of St. Paul."

As he was speaking, I saw a burning stake near him; a frightful specter, wearing a half-burned Spanish frill around his neck, rose from the flames with dreadful cries. "Monster," he shouted, "execrable monster, tremble! recognize S . . . , whom you put to death by the cruelest of tortures, because he had argued with you about the manner in which three persons can make a single substance." Then all the judges ordered the cardinal of Lorraine thrown into the abyss, but C . . . , to be punished even more severely.

I saw an immense crowd of dead who said: "I believed, I believed"; but on their foreheads it was written, "I acted" and they were condemned.

The Jesuit Le Tellier proudly appeared, the bull *Unigenitus* in his hand. But at his side a pile of two thousand *lettres de cachet* suddenly heaped itself up. A Jansenist set fire to them: Le Tellier was burned to a cinder; and the Jansenist, who had plotted no less than the Jesuit, received his share of the burning too.

I saw troops of fakirs arriving right and left, Buddhist priests, white, black, and gray monks, who all imagined that in order to pay their court to the Supreme Being, they must either chant or scourge themselves, or walk stark naked. I heard a terrible voice ask them: "What good did you do mankind?" This question was succeeded by a gloomy silence; no one dared to answer; presently they were all led off to the madhouse of the universe: that's one of the biggest buildings you can imagine.

One shouted: "We must believe in the metamorphoses of Xaca"; another: "In those of Sammonocodom."—"Bacchus stopped the sun and the moon," said that one. "Here is the bull *In Coena Domini*," said a newcomer; and the judges' usher shouted: "To the madhouse, to the madhouse!"

When all these cases were completed, I heard this judgment promulgated:

"By order of the eternal Creator, Conserver, Rewarder, Avenger, Forgiver, etc., etc., be it known to all the inhabitants of the hundred thousand millions of billions of worlds it has pleased us to create, that we will never judge any of the said inhabitants on their chimerical ideas, but solely on their actions; for such is our justice."

I confess that this was the first time I heard such an edict: all the ones I have read on the little grain of sand where I was born end with these words: For such is our pleasure.

"Fanaticism"

Fanaticism is to superstition what delirium is to fever and rage to anger. The man visited by ecstasies and visions, who takes dreams for realities and his fancies for prophecies, is an enthusiast; the man who supports his madness with murder is a fanatic. Jean Diaz, in retreat at Nuremberg, was firmly convinced that the pope was the Antichrist of the Apocalypse, and that he bore the sign of the beast; he was merely an enthusiast; his brother, Bartholomew Diaz, who came from Rome to assassinate his brother out of piety, and who did in fact kill him for the love of God, was one of the most abominable fanatics ever raised up by superstition.

Polyeucte, who goes to the temple on a solemn holiday to knock over and smash the statues and ornaments, is a less dreadful but no less ridiculous fanatic than Diaz. The assassins of the duke François de Guise, of William, prince of Orange, of King Henri III, of King Henri IV, and of so many others, were fanatics sick with the same mania as Diaz.

The most detestable example of fanaticism was that of the burghers of Paris who on St. Bartholomew's Night went about assassinating and butchering all their fellow citizens who did not go to mass, throwing them out of windows, cutting them in pieces.

There are cold-blooded fanatics: such as judges who condemn to death those who have committed no other crime than failing to think like them; and these judges are all the more guilty, all the more deserving of the execration of mankind, since, unlike Clément, Châtel, Ravaillac, Damiens, they were not suffering from an attack of insanity; surely they should have been able to listen to reason.

Once fanaticism has corrupted a mind, the malady is almost incurable. I have seen convulsionaries who, speaking of the miracles of St. Pâris, gradually grew impassioned despite themselves: their eyes got inflamed, their limbs trembled, madness disfigured their faces, and they would have killed anyone who contradicted them.

The only remedy for this epidemic malady is the philosophical spirit which, spread gradually, at last tames men's habits and prevents the disease from starting; for, once the disease has made any progress, one must flee and wait for the air to clear itself. Laws and religion are not strong enough against the spiritual pest; religion, far from being healthy food for infected brains, turns to poison in them. These miserable men have forever in their minds the example of Ehud, who assassinated king Eglon; of Judith, who cut off Holofernes' head while she was sleeping with him; of Samuel, who chopped king Agag in pieces. They cannot see that these examples which were respectable in antiquity are abominable in the present; they borrow their frenzies from the very religion that condemns them.

Even the law is impotent against these attacks of rage; it is like reading a court decree to a raving maniac. These fellows are certain that the holy spirit with which they are filled is above the law, that their enthusiasm is the only law they must obey.

What can we say to a man who tells you that he would rather obey God than men, and that therefore he is sure to go to heaven for butchering you?

Ordinarily fanatics are guided by rascals, who put the dagger into their hands; these latter resemble that Old Man of the Mountain who is supposed to have made imbeciles taste the joys of paradise and who promised them an eternity of the pleasures of which he had given them a foretaste, on condition that they assassinated all those he would name to them. There is only one religion in the world that has never been sullied by fanaticism, that of the Chinese men of letters. The schools of philosophers were not only free from this pest, they were its remedy; for the effect of philosophy is to make the soul tranquil, and fanaticism is incompatible with tranquility. If our holy religion has so often been corrupted by this infernal delirium, it is the madness of men which is at fault.

"Toleration"

What is toleration? It is the endowment of humanity. We are all steeped in weaknesses and errors; let us forgive each other our follies; that is the first law of nature.

In the stock exchanges of Amsterdam, London, Surat, or Basra, the Gheber, the Banian, the Jew, the Mahometan, the Chinese Deist, the Brahmin, the Greek Christian, the Roman Christian, the Protestant Christian, the Quaker Christian, trade with one another: they don't raise their dagger against each other to gain souls for their religion. Why then have we butchered one another almost without interruption since the first Council of Nicaea?

Constantine began by issuing an edict which tolerated all religions; but he ended up by persecuting. Before him, people denounced the Christians only because they had started to build a party in the state. The Romans permitted all cults, even that of the Jews, even that of the Egyptians, although they had so much contempt for both. Why did Rome tolerate these cults? Because neither the Egyptians nor even the Jews tried to exterminate the ancient religion of the empire; they didn't cross land and sea to make proselytes, but thought only of making money. It is undeniable, however, that the Christians wanted their religion to be the dominant one. The Jews didn't want the statue of Jupiter in Jerusalem; but the Christians didn't want it in the capitol. St. Thomas was candid enough to confess that if the Christians hadn't dethroned the emperors, it was because they couldn't. It was their view that the whole world should be Christian. They were therefore necessarily the enemies of the whole world, until it was converted.

Among themselves, they battled each other over every controversial point. First of all, was it necessary to regard Jesus Christ as God? Those who denied it were anathematized under the name of Ebionites, who in turn anathematized the worshipers of Jesus.

When some of them wanted all goods to be held in common, as they supposedly were in the age of the apostles, their adversaries called them Nicolaites and accused them of the most infamous crimes. When others laid claim to mystical devotion, they were called Gnostics, and people attacked them furiously. When Marcion disputed over the Trinity, he was called an idolater.

Tertullian, Praxcas, Origen, Novatus, Novatian, Sabellius, Donatus, were all persecuted by their brethren before Constantine; and hardly had Constantine made the Christian religion prevail than the Athanasians and the Eusebians tore each other to pieces; and from that time on down to our day the Christian Church has been inundated in blood.

I admit the Jewish people was a pretty barbarous people. It butchered without pity all the inhabitants of an unfortunate little country to which it had no more right than it had to Paris and London. Still, when Naaman was cured of his leprosy by plunging seven times into the Jordan; when, to show his gratitude to Elisha, who had taught him this secret, he told him that he would worship the God of the Jews out of gratitude, he reserved to himself the liberty to worship the God of his king at the same time; he asked Elisha's permission to do so, and the prophet didn't hesitate to give it to him. The Jews worshiped their God; but they were never astonished that each nation should have its own. They thought it right that Chemosh gave a certain district to the Moabites, provided their God gave them one too. Jacob didn't hesitate to marry the daughters of an idolater. Laban had his God as Jacob had his. These are examples of toleration among the most intolerant and cruel nation of all antiquity: we have imitated it in its irrational frenzies and not in its leniency.

It is clear that every individual who persecutes a man, his brother, because he is not of his opinion, is a monster. There is no problem about that. But the government, the magistrates, the princes, how shall they deal with those who have a religion different from theirs? If they are powerful foreigners, it is certain that a prince will make an alliance with them. Francis I, Most Christian, allies himself with the Muslims against Charles the Fifth, Most Catholic. Francis I gives money to the Lutherans of Germany to support their rebellion against the emperor; but he begins by having the Lutherans in his own country burned, as is the practice. He pays them in Saxony for political reasons; he burns them in Paris for political reasons. But what will happen? The persecutions make proselytes; soon France is full of new Protestants. At first they allow themselves to be hanged, and afterward they do some hanging in their own turn. There are civil wars, then comes Saint Bartholomew, and this corner of the world is worse than anything the ancients and the moderns ever said about Hell.

Maniacs, who have never been able to offer pure worship to the God who made you! Wretches, who could never learn from the example of the Noachides, the Chinese literati, the Parsis, and all the sages! Monsters, who need superstitions as the gizzard of a raven needs carrion! We have already told you, and there is nothing more to say: if there are two religions in your country, they will cut one another's throats; if there are thirty of them, they will live in peace. Look at the Grand Turk: he governs Ghebers, Banians, and Greek, Nestorian, Roman Christians. The first man who stirs up a tumult is impaled, and all is peaceful.

"Toleration"—Second Section

Of all religions, the Christian should of course inspire the most toleration, but till now the Christians have been the most intolerant of all men.

Because Jesus stooped to be born in poverty and humble estate, like his brothers, he never deigned to practice the art of writing. The Jews had a law written in the greatest detail, but we don't have a single line from the hand of Jesus. The apostles disagreed on a number of points. St. Peter and St. Barnabas ate forbidden meat with foreigners recently turned Christian and then abstained with Jewish Christians. St. Paul reproached them for this conduct, and this very St. Paul—Pharisee, disciple of the Pharisee Gamaliel, the very St. Paul who had persecuted the Christians with fury, and who turned Christian himself after he broke with Gamaliel—nevertheless went afterward to sacrifice in the temple of Jerusalem, in the temple of his apostolate. For a week

he publicly observed all the ceremonies of the Judaic law, which he had renounced; he even performed supererogatory devotions and purifications; he Judaized completely. For a week the greatest apostle of the Christians did the very things for which men are condemned to the stake in most Christian nations.

Theodas and Judas had called themselves Messiahs before Jesus. Dositheus, Simon, Menander, called themselves Messiahs after Jesus. From the first century of the Church onward, and even before the name of Christian was known, there was a score of sects in Judea.

The contemplative Gnostics, the Dositheans, the Corinthians, existed before the disciples of Jesus took the name of Christians. Soon there were thirty gospels, each of which belonged to a different society; and from the end of the first century we can count thirty sects of Christians in Asia Minor, Syria, Alexandria, and even Rome.

All these sects, despised by the Roman government and concealed in their obscurity, nevertheless persecuted each other in the tunnels in which they crept; that is, they insulted each other, for that was all they were able to do in their abjectness—they were almost wholly made up of the scum of the people.

When at last some Christians adopted the doctrines of Plato and mixed a little philosophy with their religion, they separated from the Jewish cult and gradually won some eminence. But they remained divided into sects; there was never a time when the Christian Church was United. It was born amid the divisions of the Jews—Samaritans, Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Judaites, disciples of John, Therapeutes. It was divided in its cradle; it was even divided during the occasional persecutions it endured under the first emperors. Often the martyr was regarded as an apostate by his brethren, and the Carpocratian Christian expired under the sword of the Roman executioner, excommunicated by the Ebionite Christian, which Ebionite had been anathematized by the Sabellian.

The terrible dissension which has endured for so many centuries is a striking lesson teaching us mutually to forgive our errors; dissension is the great evil of mankind, and toleration is its only remedy.

There is nobody who doesn't agree with this truth, whether he meditates calmly in his study or amicably examines the truth with his friends. Why then do the very men who embrace kindness, beneficence, and justice in private denounce these virtues in public with so much fury? Why? Because their self-interest is their god, because they sacrifice everything to the monster they worship.

I possess a dignity and power founded on ignorance and credulity; I tread on the heads of men prostrate at my feet: if they stand up and look me in the face, I am lost; therefore I must keep them bound to the ground with chains of iron.

Thus argue the men whom centuries of fanaticism have made powerful. They have other powerful men below them, and these have still others, who all enrich themselves at the expense of the poor, fatten on their blood, and laugh at their foolishness. They all detest toleration, as political hackers who have enriched themselves at the public's expense are afraid to give an accounting and as tyrants dread the word freedom. Then, to top it all off, they hire fanatics to shout in a great voice:

"Respect the absurdities of my master, tremble, pay, and shut up."

This is how people have acted for a long time in a large part of the world; but today, when so many sects balance each other in power, how shall we choose among them? Every sect, as we know, is a certificate of error; there are no sects of geometers, algebraists, and arithmeticians because all the propositions of geometry, algebra, and arithmetic are true. In all other sciences men may make mistakes. What Thomist or Scotist theologian would dare to say seriously that he is sure of his facts?

If there is one sect that recalls the times of the first Christians, it is surely the Quakers. None resembles the apostles more closely. The apostles received the spirit, and the Quakers receive the spirit. The apostles and disciples spoke three or four at a time in the assembly on the third floor; the Quakers do the same on the ground floor. According to St. Paul women were allowed to preach, and according to the same St. Paul they were forbidden to; female Quakers preach by virtue of the first permission.

The apostles and disciples swore by Yes and No, the Quakers swear no differently.

No rank, no difference in attire among the disciples and the apostles; the Quakers have sleeves without buttons, and all dress in the same manner.

Jesus Christ did not baptize any of his apostles; the Quakers are not baptized.

It would be easy to push the parallel further; it would be even easier to see how the Christian religion of today differs from the religion that Jesus practiced. Jesus was a Jew, and we are not Jews. Jesus abstained from pork because it was impure, and from rabbit because it ruminated and did not have a cloven foot; we boldly eat pork because for us it is not impure, and rabbit which has a cloven foot and doesn't ruminate.

Jesus was circumcised, and we retain our foreskin. Jesus ate the paschal lamb with lettuce, he celebrated the feast of the tabernacles, and we do neither. He observed the sabbath, and we have changed it; he sacrificed, and we do not sacrifice.

Jesus always concealed the mystery of his incarnation and his rank; he did not say that he was equal to God; St. Paul says expressly in his Epistle to the Hebrews that God created Jesus lower than the angels; and despite all the words of St. Paul, Jesus was acknowledged to be God at the Council of Nicaea.

Jesus gave the pope neither the borderland of Ancona, nor the duchy of Spoleto; and yet the pope has them by divine right.

Jesus did not make a sacrament of marriage or of holy orders; and with us, holy orders and marriage are sacraments.

If we wish to study the matter closely: the Catholic, apostolic, and Roman religion is in all its ceremonies and dogmas the opposite of the religion of Jesus.

But really! Must we all Judaize because Jesus Judaized all his life?

If we were allowed to argue consistently in religious matters, it is clear that we should all turn Jews, because Jesus Christ our Saviour was born a Jew, lived as a Jew, and died as a Jew, and because he said expressly that he came to realize, to fulfill, the Jewish religion. But it is even clearer that we should all mutually tolerate each

other, because we are all weak, inconsistent, a prey to change and error. Should a reed bowed into the mud by the wind say to the neighboring reed, bowed in the opposite direction: "Creep in my fashion, wretch, or I'll send in a request to have you uprooted and burned"?

Source: Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, trans. and ed. Peter Gay, 2 vols. (New York: Basic Books, 1962), I, 166–70, 241–43, 267–69, 482–89.