

Voltaire: A Treatise on Toleration (1763)

Voltaire was the most eloquent and tireless advocate of the anti-dogmatic movement known as "The Enlightenment." He argued in favor of "deism," a vague substitute for traditional religion which acknowledged a creator and some sort of divine justice, but rejected most of the other fundamental beliefs of Christianity. Instead he preached that all are obliged to tolerate each other. When he defends even false religion as superior to none, it is obvious that his objections to atheism are superficial and that he looks on religious beliefs as useful, but not necessarily true. It should be remembered that atheism was strictly illegal in Voltaire's time, and he had been imprisoned repeatedly and finally exiled for his challenges to traditional religion. Deism provided a convenient (and legal) screen for his attacks on Christianity; but many scholars believe that despite his statements to the contrary, he was in fact an atheist. His arguments for religious freedom have become commonplaces in the modern Western world, even among religious believers.

What reasons does Voltaire give that we should all tolerate each other?

Chapter 22: On Universal Tolerance

It does not require great art, or magnificently trained eloquence, to prove that Christians should tolerate each other. I, however, am going further: I say that we should regard all men as our brothers. What? The Turk my brother? The Chinaman my brother? The Jew? The Siam? Yes, without doubt; are we not all children of the same father and creatures of the same God?

But these people despise us; they treat us as idolaters! Very well! I will tell them that they are grievously wrong. It seems to me that I would at least astonish the proud, dogmatic Islam imam or Buddhist priest, if I spoke to them as follows:

"This little globe, which is but a point, rolls through space, as do many other globes; we are lost in the immensity of the universe. Man, only five feet high, is assuredly only a small thing in creation. One of these imperceptible beings says to another one of his neighbors, in Arabia or South Africa: 'Listen to me, because God of all these worlds has enlightened me: there are nine hundred million little ants like us on the earth, but my ant-hole is the only one dear to God; all the other are cast off by Him for eternity; mine alone will be happy, and all the others will be eternally damned.'"

They would then interrupt me, and ask which fool blabbed all this nonsense. I would be obliged to answer, "You, yourselves." I would then endeavor to calm them, which would be very difficult.

I would then speak with the Christians, and I would dare to say, for example, to a Dominican Inquisitor of the Faith: "My brother, you know that each province of Italy has their own dialect, and that people do not speak at Venice or Bergamo the same way they speak at Florence. The Academy of Crusca near Florence has fixed the language; its dictionary is a rule which one dare not depart from, and the Grammar of Buonmattei is an

infallible guide that one must follow. But do you believe that the consul of the Academy, or Buonmattei in his absence, could in conscience cut the tongues out of all the Venetians and all the Bergamese who persist in speaking their dialect?"

The inquisitor responds, "There is a difference between your example and our practice. For us, it is a matter of the health of your soul. It is for your good that the director of the Inquisition ordains that you be seized on the testimony of a single person, however infamous or criminal that person might be; that you will have no advocate to defend you; that the name of your accuser will not even be known by you; that the inquisitor can promise you mercy, and immediately condemn you; that five different tortures will be applied to you, and then you will be flogged, or sent to the galleys, or ceremoniously burned. Father Ivonet, Doctor Cuchalon, Zanchinus, Campegius, Roias, Felynus, Gomarus, Diabarus, Gemelinus, are explicit on this point, and this pious practice cannot suffer any contradiction."

I would take the liberty to respond, "My brother, perhaps you are reasonable; I am convinced that you wish to do me good; but could I not be saved without all that?"

It is true that these absurd horrors do not stain the face of the earth every day; but they are frequent, and they could easily fill a volume much greater than the gospels which condemn them. Not only is it extremely cruel to persecute in this brief life those who do not think the way we do, but I do not know if it might be too presumptuous to declare their eternal damnation. It seems to me that it does not pertain to the atoms of the moment, such as we are, to anticipate the decrees of the Creator.

Translated by Richard Hooker