
The Philosophical Dictionary

Voltaire

Selected and Translated by H.I. Woolf

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Religion

I MEDITATED last night; I was absorbed in the contemplation of nature; I admired the immensity, the course, the harmony of these infinite globes which the vulgar do not know how to admire.

I admired still more the intelligence which directs these vast forces. I said to myself: " One must be blind not to be dazzled by this spectacle; one must be stupid not to recognize the author of it; one must be mad not to worship Him. What tribute of worship should I render Him? Should not this tribute be the same in the whole of space, since it is the same supreme power which reigns equally in all space? Should not a thinking being who dwells in a star in the Milky Way offer Him the same homage as the thinking being on this little globe where we are? Light is uniform for the star Sirius and for us; moral philosophy must be uniform. If a sentient, thinking animal in Sirius is born of a tender father and mother who have been occupied with his happiness, he owes them as much love and care as we owe to our parents. If someone in the Milky Way sees a needy cripple, if he can relieve him and if he does not do it, he is guilty toward all globes. Everywhere the heart has the same duties: on the steps of the throne of God, if He has a throne; and in the depth of the abyss, if He is an abyss."

I was plunged in these ideas when one of those genii who fill the intermundane spaces came down to me. I recognized this same aerial creature who had appeared to me on another occasion to teach me how different God's judgments were from our own, and how a good action is preferable to a controversy.

He transported me into a desert all covered with piled up bones; and between these heaps of dead men there were walks of ever-green trees, and at the end of each walk a tall man of august mien, who regarded these sad remains with pity.

" Alas! my archangel," said I, " where have you brought me? "

" To desolation," he answered. *devastation, ruin, sorrow, grief
barrenness*

" And who are these fine patriarchs whom I see sad and motionless at the end of these green walks? they seem to be weeping over this countless crowd of dead."

" You shall know, poor human creature," answered the genius from the intermundane spaces; " but first of all you must weep."

He began with the first pile. " These," he said, " are the twenty-three thousand Jews who danced before a

calf, with the twenty-four thousand who were killed while lying with Midianitish women. The number of those massacred for such errors and offences amounts to nearly three hundred thousand.

" In the other walks are the bones of the Christians slaughtered by each other for metaphysical disputes. They are divided into several heaps of four centuries each. One heap would have mounted right to the sky; they had to be divided."

" What! " I cried, " brothers have treated their brothers like this, and I have the misfortune to be of this brotherhood!"

" Here," said the spirit, " are the twelve million Americans killed in their fatherland because they had not been baptized."

Native Americans

" My God! why did you not leave these frightful bones to dry in the hemisphere where their bodies were born, and where they were consigned to so many different deaths? Why assemble here all these abominable monuments to barbarism and fanaticism? "

" To instruct you."

" Since you wish to instruct me," I said to the genius, " tell me if there have been peoples other than the Christians and the Jews in whom zeal and religion wretchedly transformed into fanaticism, have inspired so many horrible cruelties."

" Yes," he said. " The Mohammedans were sullied with the same inhumanities, but rarely; and when one asked *amman*, pity, of them, and offered them tribute, they pardoned. As for the other nations there has not been one right from the existence of the world which has ever made a purely religious war. Follow me now." I followed him.

A little beyond these piles of dead men we found other piles; they were composed of sacks of gold and silver, and each had its label: *Substance of the heretics massacred in the eighteenth century, the seventeenth and the sixteenth*. And so on in going back: *Gold and silver of Americans slaughtered*, etc., etc. And all these piles were surmounted with crosses, mitres, croziers, triple crowns studded with precious stones.

" What, my genius! it was then to have these riches that these dead were piled up? "

" Yes, my son."

I wept; and when by my grief I had merited to be led to the end of the green walks, he led me there.

" Contemplate," he said, " the heroes of humanity who were the world's benefactors, and who were all united in banishing from the world, as far as they were able, violence and rapine. Question them."

I ran to the first of the band; ^{*2nd king of Rome, succeeded Romulus*} he had a crown on his head, and a little censer in his hand; I humbly asked him his name. " I am Numa Pompilius," he said to me. " I succeeded a brigand, and I had brigands to govern: I taught them virtue and the worship of God; after me they forgot both more than once; I forbade that in the temples there should be any image, because the Deity which animates nature cannot be represented. During my reign the Romans had neither wars nor seditions, and my religion did nothing but good. All the neighbouring peoples came to honour me at my funeral: that happened to no one but me."

I kissed his hand, and I went to the second. He was a fine old man about a hundred years old, clad in a white robe. He put his middle-finger on his mouth, and with the other hand he cast some beans behind

Voltaire ... is ... by pillaging and robbing.

him. I recognized Pythagoras. He assured me he had never had a golden thigh, and that he had never been a cock; but that he had governed the Crotoniates with as much justice as Numa governed the Romans, almost at the same time; and that this justice was the rarest and most necessary thing in the world. I learned that the Pythagoreans examined their consciences twice a day. The honest people! how far we are from them! But we who have been nothing but assassins for thirteen hundred years, we say that these wise men were arrogant.

Zoroaster - of Persia

In order to please Pythagoras, I did not say a word to him and I passed to Zarathustra, who was occupied in concentrating the celestial fire in the focus of a concave mirror, in the middle of a hall with a hundred doors which all led to wisdom. (Zarathustra's precepts are called doors, and are a hundred in number.) Over the principal door I read these words which are the precis of all moral philosophy, and which cut short all the disputes of the causists: "When in doubt if an action is good or bad, refrain."

"Certainly," I said to my genius, "the barbarians who immolated all these victims had never read these beautiful words."

burned

We then saw the Zaleucus, the Thales, the Anaximanders, and all the sages who had sought truth and practised virtue.

Greeks

When we came to Socrates, I recognized him very quickly by his flat nose. "Well," I said to him, "here you are then among the number of the Almighty's confidants! All the inhabitants of Europe, except the Turks and the Tartars of the Crimea, who know nothing, pronounce your name with respect. It is revered, loved, this great name, to the point that people have wanted to know those of your persecutors. Melitus and Anitus are known because of you, just as Ravaillac is known because of Henry IV.; but I know only this name of Anitus. I do not know precisely who was the scoundrel who calumniated you, and who succeeded in having you condemned to take hemlock."

Melitus, Anitus - greeks who accused Socrates
Ravaillac - assassinated Henry IV of France

"Since my adventure," replied Socrates, "I have never thought about that man; but seeing that you make me remember it, I have much pity for him. He was a wicked priest who secretly conducted a business in hides, a trade reputed shameful among us. He sent his two children to my school. The other disciples taunted them with having a father who was a currier; they were obliged to leave. The irritated father had no rest until he had stirred up all the priests and all the sophists against me. They persuaded the counsel of the five hundred that I was an impious fellow who did not believe that the Moon, Mercury and Mars were gods. Indeed, I used to think, as I think now that there is only one God, master of all nature. The judges handed me over to the poisoner of the republic; he cut short my life by a few days: I died peacefully at the age of seventy; and since that time I pass a happy life with all these great men whom you see, and of whom I am the least."

death

currier's leather

teachers, philosophers

After enjoying some time in conversation with Socrates, I went forward with my guide into a grove situated above the thickets where all the sages of antiquity seemed to be tasting sweet repose.

I saw a man of gentle, simple countenance, who seemed to me to be about thirty-five years old. From afar he cast compassionate glances on these piles of whitened bones, across which I had had to pass to reach the sages' abode. I was astonished to find his feet swollen and bleeding, his hands likewise, his side pierced, and his ribs flayed with whip cuts. "Good Heavens!" I said to him, "is it possible for a just man, a sage, to be in this state? I have just seen one who was treated in a very hateful way, but there is no comparison between his torture and yours. Wicked priests and wicked judges poisoned him; is it by priests and judges that you have been so cruelly assassinated?"

He answered with much courtesy--"Yes."

"And who were these monsters? "

"They were hypocrites."

"Ah! that says everything; I understand by this single word that they must have condemned you to death. Had you then proved to them, as Socrates did, that the Moon was not a goddess, and that Mercury was not a god? "

"No, these planets were not in question. My compatriots did not know at all what a planet is; they were all arrant ignoramuses. Their superstitions were quite different from those of the Greeks."

"You wanted to teach them a new religion, then? "

"Not at all; I said to them simply--' Love God with all your heart and your fellow-creature as yourself, for that is man's whole duty.' Judge if this precept is not as old as the universe; judge if I brought them a new religion. I did not stop telling them that I had come not to destroy the law bitt to fulfil it; I had observed all their rites; circumcised as they all were, baptized as were the most zealous among them, like them I paid the Corban; I observed the Passover as they did, eating standing up a lahmb cooked with lettuces. I and my friends went to pray in the temple; my friends even frequented this temple after my death; in a word, I fulfilled all their laws without a single exception."

"What! these wretches could not even reproach you with swerving from their laws? "

"No, without a doubt."

"Why then did they put you in the condition in which I now see you? "

"What do you expect me to say! they were very arrogant and selfish. They saw that I knew them; they knew that I was making the citizens acquainted with them; they were the stronger; they took away my life: and people like them will always do as much, if they can, to whoever does them too much justice."

" But did you say nothing, do nothing that could serve them as a pretext? " *a reason to kill you*

"To the wicked everything serves as pretext."

" Did you not say once that you were come not to send peace, but a sword? "

"It is a copyist's error; I told them that I sent peace and not a sword. I have never written anything; what I said can have been changed without evil intention."

" You therefore contributed in no way by your speeches, badly reported, badly interpreted, to these frightful piles of bones which I saw on my road in coming to consult you? "

"It is with horror only that I have seen those who have made themselves guilty of these murders."

" And these monuments of power and wealth, of pride and avarice, these treasures, these ornaments, these signs of grandeur, which I have seen piled up on the road while I was seeking wisdom, do they come from you? "

"That is impossible; I and my people lived in poverty and meanness: my grandeur was in virtue only."

I was about to beg him to be so good as to tell me just who he was. My guide warned me to do nothing of

the sort. he told me that I was not made to understand these sublime mysteries. Only did I conjure him to tell me in what true religion consisted. *"Have I not already told you? Love God and your fellow-creature as yourself."*

" What! if one loves God, one can eat meat on Friday? "

"I always ate what was given me; for I was too poor to give anyone food."

" In loving God, in being just, should one not be rather cautious not to confide all the adventures of one's life to an unknown man?"

"That was always my practice."

" Can I not, by doing good, dispense with making a pilgrimage to St. James of Compostella? "

"I have never been in that country."

" Is it necessary for me to imprison myself in a retreat with fools? "

"As for me, I always made little journeys from town to town."

" Is it necessary for me to take sides either for the Greek Church or the Latin? "

"When I was in the world I never made any difference between the Jew and the Samaritan."

"Well, if that is so, I take you for my only master." Then he made me a sign with his head which filled me with consolation. The vision disappeared, and a clear conscience stayed with me.

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