

1892

Eighteenth century French infidelity

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Eighteenth Century French Infidelity.

Truth and error grow side by side. The pendulum swings from one side now to the other. That which is at the top now, in a turn of the wheel is at the bottom. The religion of Christ has its periods of success and failure. In the land whose plains Jesus traveled teaching and whose mountains He crossed healing, there is now well nigh moral darkness and it is comparatively ignorant of the Teacher whose home it was. The fair land of France once gave her martyrs to the Church, but there came a time when she gave the Church opponents and antagonists. To look at this movement of enmity of Christianity, in two of its chief actors is the purpose of these words. To see how much of an organized movement, what the men and the motives of it, is worth a study.

The leading actor of the drama was Voltaire.

In those tumultuous days of France of the last century peculiar products were begotten. An age will produce men who are like it. Every current has its

bendings and its oppositions. While France and Papery was
increasing tyranny and intolerance, there was a new man
brought forth who was to 'beard the lion in his den'.
Foremost representation of a class which dyked despotism
and shook bigotry was Francois Marie Arouet.

Before entering into the work of the man it is well
to have an introduction to his life and to take a view
of the times producing the man. Born in Paris in
the last decade of the seventeenth century, placed under
Jesuit instruction during youth and of an independent
turn of mind he began as a young man to look
upon the fifty one years of the glittering reign of
Louis XIV, as a magnificent despotism. He saw a
nation decaying under gorgeous pretence to healthful
prosperity, in the shining Kingdom of fashion and manners
so fine and gay there coiled a serpent that was begin-
ing its stealthy work of crushing individuality. The
literature was that of Corneille Boileau and Racine
The sum of the theater was at noon, Tyrian purple
and costly jewels from the east seemed to signi-
fy abundance of life freedom and prosperity. But
beneath the polish and veneer is utter rottenness.

There is Oriental despotism at Versailles. The brilliant parts are servile, the officers hypocritically obsequious, the morals of society corrupt. Harlots are toying with the crown of Saint Louis. The Edict of Nantes has been revoked. Jesuits are draggonading Protestants from the kingdom and at some time they are producing violent heresy. Jansen has written

Upon this sea launches Voltaire as a literary man, fortune balks his genius and the Bastille takes his liberty from him, then genius unbalked leads to freedom him who is to secure freedom for religion and for men. In a visit to England this Voltaire develops deism so early planted in him by his first teachers. The freedom of religious life and thought of Great Britain made him an enemy to his own country's bondage. At home he ascended high in esteem of his nation and rulers. He is made a court officer. But no man had many more ups and downs than he. One day he is the idol of society the next an outcast and an exile. One day a frequenter of literary Cafes the next eating at the kays suspense in the Bastille. Now a courtier then banished from court, and a deserter of his country. Then cour-

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tier again, then disposes. Sometimes a poor beggar but more often the recipient of good luck. His opinions were not so vacillating; for a time he leaned to Skepticism but soon espoused Deism again. He was not specially wanted when he came into this world, but went out of it buried under roses.

So the world this man has stood as an enemy of the true religion. He is classed as a distinguished infidel. This paper has, for one purpose, to investigate the credentials of those statements. To begin the work let the defendant appear and then let the indictment against him be read.

The man: "He was the foremost literary man of his age. That vivacity and grace, that easy flow and humor, that quiet dignity and at times thundering rhetoric not only made his dramas powerful and popular but lent to his poetry and prose indifferently the same charm.

Mr J. W. Goethe thus introduces him. "One is not in the least surprised that without contest, the monarchy of arts has been assured (Volltaire) by Europe. Those who have a title to stand over against him recognise his supremacy and give him as the grandest man of his empire. Volltaire will always be regarded the greatest

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man of modern times and perhaps of all time, in the domain of literature; he will always be regarded as the most astonishing creation of nature, a creation where she has pleased herself to gather together for one only time in the frail and perilous human organization all the varieties of talent, all the glories of genius, all the powers of thought."

The indictment will be read by Joseph de Maistre. "He was always allied to sacrifice and his corruption tempted God to destroy men. With a fury that has no example this insolent blasphemer came to declare himself the personal enemy of the Saviour of men. He dared from the very day of his birth to give him a ridiculous name and this adorable law which the God-man brought upon the earth he called infamous. While other cynics astonished virtue, Voltaire astonished vice. He plunged himself into the mire, he rolled in it and drank himself full of it. He lent to his antagonism the enthusiasm of Hell, which lent him hers, all her powers, to train him up to the limits of evil. Paris crowned him, Sodom had banished him. When I see what he could do and what he has

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done his inimitable talents inspire me no more than
with a wrath that has no name."

Before sentence is pronounced it is well to secure a
few more facts concerning this man. To later ages he is a
dramatist, to his own age he was a poet and philosopher.
Some deny him a title to the last term. Indeed while there
are some metaphysical turns in his writings, it would
be uncomplimentary to the science of this day to entitle
Voltaire as a philosopher, but to his day and generation
he fulfilled that office. His logic was often strained
to gain a point was of more importance to him than
the means of gaining it. In estimating the man's
work and worth as a man of action and as an
achiever of that worked for, care must be taken in
listening to those who speak of him since the
accounts usually are colored according to the sym-
pathy with or dislike of his polemical side. Record-
ing the fact that like all reformers he was one sid-
ed it must be allowed that he remains one of the
most astonishing if not one of the most admirable
figures among letters. His characteristic is super-
human cleverness rather than positive genius.

As a moral man he was of too much of an entirely intellectual nature to judge him easily. In present day vocabulary and standards he would be called an unscrupulous schemer; sordid, lawless, bigoted, prejudiced vain; a liar, a hypocrite and other bad things. But judging the man with his theories and ends in view he would be more than tolerably virtuous. His later years were less of a reproach by Christian standards. In his relations with women ~~he~~ ^{she} are generally believed to have been platonic. While he was vengeful and unforgetful of injuries he was brave, loving, kind, affable and courteous even to complaisance. It must be borne in mind in judging him that "he was a Samaritan amongst many Christian scribes and Pharisees."

The testimony, if carefully considered, shows certain further facts. In religion he was a Deist. Atheism he hated as much as Theism. He could find no good in Christianity for it divided men into sects and one sect sought to destroy the other. It made enemies of brothers and arrayed on two sides those who should have put shoulder to shoulder in help to win the race of life. From to worship God and teach morals was his creed.

Protestantism and Roman Catholicism he despised, Jesuitism he detested.

None should stop to wonder how this brilliant man should be such as he was, what led him to be a Deist ^{etc} would be found that the cause was that the times trained him so. No parental influence to sweeten his nature, a "Jansenist of a brother" to provoke him, the freedom of English life contrasted with Bourbon tyranny, and a tutor of Deism as his life's teacher were the mitigating factors of the defendant's religious impressions.

They say he was the bitterest enemy of Christianity in the last century and contributed to the Revolution that broke down all religion in his land. This is his view of Christianity.

"Its examples are saints, its moral divine,

It controls in secret the heart it illumines

In the greatest misfortunes it offers its support

And if upon imposture it founds its doctrine

It is a good fortune even yet to have its support."

He does not condemn Christianity. The oft repeated phrase of "Ecce homo" does not apply as some say to Christ - Victor Hugo says Kellain would have defended Jesus as he did Calas - nor to the "adorable law"

but "to the persecuting and privileged orthodoxy in general as he found it and as he experienced it in his exiles". It will be allowed that he would "replace all religion by the philosophy of bold seductive and beautiful generalizations by which Newton has discovered and demonstrated at once the immensity and unity of creation".

But it must be looked into this matter farther. If Voltaire had not lived in such a corrupt time, if he had been born in the earliest ages of Christianity when no Jews were damning Protestants, no Romanists dragging Huguenots, when Christianity stood for purity of life and rebuked profligacy, would he have accepted pure Christianity? That was not what he was arrayed against - but it was the intense bitterness of the sects he fought. The bigoted corruption obscured his view of the pure religion; it seemed a mask for persecution and lawlessness. Would he accept Christianity if he were living today when he could catch at least a glimpse of it amid the rivalries and contentions of parties and creeds. It is to be doubted. He was born a cross grained man. He who could not see the beauties of language and pictures of the Bible nor admire the genius of Shakespeare could scarcely

be able to recognise the beauty of pure religion. Infidels crown him, he is the patron saint of Secular Societies, but these dishonour him, he would have disowned them as he did Jesuitism. While ~~one~~ may not honour his opinions it is to be remembered that the times in which he lived caused in him a revulsion to that-parodied Christianity of the French Empire. He may have been left out of the pale of a pure Church but his work for toleration of personal thought and liberty is worthy of the very best of men. That he was not destitute of the highest heroism and courage is proved in the case of Jean Calas whom he rescued from unjust death by Romanism and by the case of a Servian girl rescued from a miserable convent life. The judgment must be pronounced that he was a noble man, a great man, but at the same time it is to be said he was a curious compound of the age.

"He was the most formidable enemy the Roman priesthood ever had since the Reformation. No man since Luther has more profoundly shaken ecclesiasticism of Europe. In this respect rather than by political dogmas he he helped to bring on the great Revolution. Rousseau was the author of its dogmas but Voltaire

is the arch anticlericalist of history". "This was the sum of his life: "He designed to overthrow superstition fanaticism and intolerance, and all the rest of the impurities of his age. He was not only not religious but subversive of the religious idea. It is significant of the life work of the man that when D^r Franklin presented him his grandson for Voltaire's blessing he simply extended his hand over the head of the child and pronounced the benediction: "God and Liberty!"

Luther had a Melancthon; Leclerc and Zuingli Zuzendorf and Spengenberg; Rousseau and Voltaire.

The second great agent of the irreligious movement in France was J. J. Rousseau.

The former man was the great apostle of French Incredulity. He was its practical man. There was also a dogmatician; a compeer a rival an antagonist was beside him. Voltaire was Pontifex Maximus, Rousseau, High Priest. The former gave animation the latter life, the former rather action the latter rather doctrine.

Rousseau as much as his compeer led a vagrant life. His early youth was as unfavorable for training. The biography of the man shows a brave but misanthropic mortal fighting the waves of sensitive and despotic society. Like the foam he is cast

from show to show. No safe abiding place for a long period of time at any place.

He was "that other great infidel later ages speak of. It was he who said 'property was a crime' and that 'all men are free and equal'. The existing 'inequality between men' gave him his theater of action. From him that fiery upheaval of later days, so great in its blaze and results, took its cry "Liberty and Equality".

These two men did largely the same work and have much in common. Their methods differed; one was criticism and sarcasm the other led by sentiment. But both shut out evidence and were unfair in judgment. They fought the same evils in like ways with joint results.

Morally Rousseau was the greater ruin of the two. He was licentious, and disregarded nearly all the common social decencies of life. He was vain selfish changeful, ungrateful in an immeasurable degree, easily provoked and in later years always suspicious and morbidly misanthropic.

But Rousseau better than his age, among his philosophical contemporaries may be said to have been relatively Christian. The evil was in his head not in his heart. His malignance was of intellectual hatred of the abuses of his day. Even John Cairnes says that "it is not

going too far to say that in a large view Rousseau so far as his ultimate creed goes, is a Christian of the school of Channing rather than an Encyclopedist

It was the apostle of naturism. In opposing to the godless humanism of his day the crying need of the human heart, it was his error to confound the unpremeditated sinful heart with the ideal heart, individual participation in nature with personal conformation to nature, the beautiful soul with the moral spirit, the utilitarian with the practical, and therefore remained in contradictions till the end. The highest outcome of naturism is found in the Religion of India. Naturism descends, is unable to lift man up, but lifts other things above man.

In contrast to Calvin he brought out the ideas of individual rights and of personal dignity of man, the very elements of Christian truth so often twisted and isolated by Calvin

Compared with Voltaire Rousseau commands respect by the frankness and the manliness of his protests. As Luther he was ardent of heart passionate in soul impetuous in feeling, but at the same time his soul was never the shy than Voltaire. He was the refuge of tender and passionate souls. He doubted but it was with love his incredulity was still a belief. Mystical often to superstition. With his variations his reveries & his spiritualism he became the Fenelon of Deism. This 'citizen of Geneva' committed

ted more faults against men but the 'Patriarch of Ferney' committed more injuries against God.

These two representations of eighteenth century French Infidelity have now appeared in outline. They represent what might be termed the better class of the movement; the earnest learned and sincere. There was rampant also a reckless atheism and sickly irreligion. The greatest attack upon Christianity was by the highest literary and social powers of France.

Observations.

In concluding this study of unbelief in France in the light of its two greatest unbelievers some remarks may be made, some observations of the activity, recorded.

(1) This activity of unbelief had an aim good in itself. The corruption of the court, of well nigh the whole government was galling the people. Emancipation from political serfdom was a great thing to be gained. But worse than the political was the ecclesiastical. Strictly speaking there was no religion worthy the name, in France, except what was regarded as heretical by the great generality. Fenelon Bossuet and the rest of the great Christian teachers had left no successors. Jansenism had worked its leaven. Protestantism was smoldering beneath the bodies of martyrs. The clergy

were atheists or infidels. Corruption persecution and tyranny were rampant in the ecclesiastical domain. To break up tyranny, to destroy scorching sectarianism, to free from corrupt ecclesiastics and governors was a commendable work.

(2) But the means of attaining this end were subversive of the end itself. There were sarcasm cynicism socialism anarchism. The attempt was to take away without putting a proper equivalent in its place. If a corrupt religion is to be displaced, it must be by a purer one, never by destroying an old one for no religion becomes only a worse more ignorant religion "Teach God and morals" said Voltaire "Remove dogmas of religion, and morality will be found easy and harmonious". But new dogmas arose and they were Liberty Equality and Fraternity. No new religion was intended to be established and naturally enough the old one could be upheaved by only a great Revolution.

(3) It was Theism and Christianity that was assailed but these in a twisted form, yet it was these in a pure form that suffered. The distinction between pure and corrupt religion was not made. No reformation to the thing to be reformed was aimed at. It was an iconoclastic assault

of bitter souls upon a thing decayed.

(4) There was no reply. In all that remains of the literature of the age, there is no weighty reply from any one who espoused the principles attacked or from disinterested ones. Certainly there was no literary opposition that was formidable at the time.

(5) The final success of the movement was aided by other causes. The revolution of 1790 was a logical result but it had more proximate and remote causes than this literary effusion.

The spirit of incredulity still lives, and will live as long as its cause. corrupted Romanism bows. The laud of Valtair is repudiating his religious opinions but taking up his liberal spirit. The movement sketched herein had its work to do and in the great plan of Providence is accomplishing that work.

Henry S. Powell.