



Religious criticism in 18th-century France

Gerhardt Stenger

► To cite this version:

Gerhardt Stenger. Religious criticism in 18th-century France. Marc Mays. A Comprehensive History of Post-Communism, Colonialism, Totalitarianism and Secularism, Nova, pp.1-64, 2024, 9798891134799. <hal-04553868>

HAL Id: hal-04553868

<https://hal.science/hal-04553868v1>

Submitted on 21 Apr 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons CC BY 4.0 - Attribution - International License

Chapter

Religious criticism in 18th-century France

Gerhardt Stenger¹

¹ Département de Lettres modernes, Nantes Université, France*

Abstract

The first defining feature of Enlightenment thinking is the emphasis on what we choose and decide for ourselves, to the detriment of what is imposed on us by an external authority. Religion became an object of examination, subject to the jurisdiction of reason, as in biblical exegesis, which took on considerable importance over the course of the century. From the 1680s onwards, the “truths” of the Christian religion deeply offended the philosophers and scientists of the Enlightenment, whose most striking works contained a vision of the world and a conception of life that broke almost completely with Christianity. The proponents of the new philosophy attack Christian theology as absurd, Christian morality, especially in the field of love and sexuality, which prevents men from being happy, and the dominant position of the Catholic Church in society and its claim to govern all areas of knowledge. Following cases as resounding as they were tragic, philosophers like Voltaire fought the religious intolerance imposed by the Catholic clergy leading to the Declaration of Human Rights and, at the beginning of the 20th century, to a particular form of secularization, *laïcité*.

Keywords: Enlightenment, *laïcité*, tolerance, Bible, Christianity, Morality, Bayle, Buffon, Diderot, d’Holbach, de Maillet, Meslier, Voltaire, theology, Trinity, original sin

Introduction

Écraser l’infâme (“Crush the Infamous”). The criticism of religion in the Age of Enlightenment is sometimes reduced to Voltaire’s devastating war cry. But the Infamous in question is not *religion* itself, or even the Christian religion, but an ecclesiastical institution—the Catholic Church—insofar as it imposes an inviolable truth in all domains of knowledge and persecutes all those who challenge it, starting with Jansenists and Protestants. The philosophers, for their part, went the furthest in criticizing the Catholic Church and its dominant position, because the truth it defended come hell or highwater clashed head-on with the philosophical and scientific rationalism of the classical age. The philosophers of the Enlightenment fought against the “fundamentals” of Christianity, which were imposed by the Catholic Church and can be summarized as follows:

1. The Catholic religion is the only true religion; all others are in error.
2. The truths of Christianity were revealed by God in the Bible, and are superior to all other truths, philosophical or scientific.
3. Only Christians can claim salvation; all others are damned through no fault of their own.

The founding principle of Enlightenment thought (one cannot speak without abusive simplification of *the* philosophy of the Enlightenment, given the abundance of divergent philosophical positions during that period) is to prefer what one chooses and decides oneself, over what is imposed on us by an external authority. In order to shake off the yoke under which men still lived in the 18th century, philosophers claimed complete freedom to examine, question, criticize, and doubt: no dogma or institution was sacred.

* Corresponding Author’s Email: gerhardt.stenger@univ-nantes.fr.

In this context, reason becomes a powerful undermining tool: while acknowledging its own limits, it is employed by philosophers to combat prejudice, challenge authority and question even the most sacred traditions. Broadly speaking, their criticisms of religion will focus on the following points:

1. The history of the foundation of Christianity, that is, the question of its origins and its propagation by fire and blood.
2. Its doctrinal content, certain dogmas that have become unacceptable to reason, such as original sin or the doctrine of the Trinity.
3. The extravagance of superstitious beliefs and practices that seem to defy rationality: religious rituals, in their apparent gratuitousness, are perceived as delusional forms, remarkable illustrations of human folly.
4. The moral role of the Church: the abuses of hierarchy, monastic scandals, corruption within the clergy, popular devotion, and the crimes of fanatics.
5. The political and social function of the Church: privileged and abusive ally of tyrannical power, it serves that power in order to serve itself and thus dominate the world. The Church, as an oppressive force, has always crushed the weak and kept them in ignorance and servility.

The critique of religion refers to the refusal to submit to the sacredness of a discourse involving moral, social or political conduct. It is expressed in various ways, ranging from courteous moderation to passionate diatribes. However, these ideological differences also correspond to literary ones. In terms of style and tone, there is a world of difference between the scholarly, peaceful, somewhat weighty discourse found in L  vesque de Burigny's *Critical Examination of Christian Religious Apologists*, and the aggressiveness, fiery denunciation and passionate rhetoric of Meslier's *Memoir*, d'Holbach's *Christianity Unveiled* and the irony, satire, sarcasm, and even buffoonery with which Voltaire overwhelmed his opponents. Defining the Enlightenment solely on the basis of its rejection of revealed religions risks oversimplifying a very complex issue. The 18th century was also the century of Pietists, Methodists, Hamann and Young, Klopstock and Blake. Rousseau's work, in particular, represents a different vision of the Enlightenment. By reclaiming the impulses of the heart and the value of sensitivity, the author of *The Profession of Faith of a Savoyard Vicar* contributed powerfully to revive a religion whose ardor and vitality seemed to decline under the blows of critical thinking. The uncompromising criticism of religions in general, and the Catholic religion in particular, is a phenomenon specifically linked to the French Enlightenment. Neither in England nor in Germany did it develop to such an extent. In Catholic countries such as Spain, Austria and to a lesser extent in Italy, the Enlightenment did not take firm root. In Protestant countries faith and reason are considered complementary rather than antagonistic. Kant's division in *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason* (1793) between the domain of reason, with its precise limits, and the domain of faith, is an illustration of this. A century earlier, the French philosopher Pierre Bayle asserted in his *Clarification on the Pyrrhonians* (*  claircissement sur les pyrrhoniens*, 1702) that any compromise between philosophy and faith is doomed to failure: "One must necessarily choose between philosophy and the Gospel: if you wish to believe nothing but that which is obvious and in line with common notions, embrace philosophy and forsake Christianity: if you want to believe in the incomprehensible mysteries of religion, choose Christianity and leave behind philosophy; for possessing both evidence and incomprehensibility together is what cannot be done [...]. One must necessarily choose" (vol.IV, p.3004, Bayle, 1720). The radicality of the French Enlightenment is expressed first of all in the rejection of faith, as defined by Voltaire, echoing the Church Father Tertullian¹, in the article *Faith* of his *Philosophical Dictionary*: "Faith consists in believing not what seems true, but what seems false to our understanding" (vol.IV-2, p.326, Voltaire, 1901).

1. Reason versus faith

¹ We know Voltaire's famous *Credo quia absurdum est* (or more precisely: *credibile est quia ineptum est*), which he translated in the article *Faith* of his *Philosophical Dictionary* as: faith "consists in believing things because they are impossible" (vol.IV-2, p.332, Voltaire, 1901). All quotations have been modernized.

In the late 17th century, the development of reason and belief in the immutability of the laws of nature led to the decline of the witch hunts, which had culminated at the very moment when Galileo, Kepler and Descartes were laying the foundations of modern philosophy and science (Easlea, 1980). (It is hardly believable that the 1630s saw more witches burned alive throughout Europe than all previous periods combined). The new worldview that eventually prevailed considered the earth as a mere cog in a vast machine, and eliminated the effective role of spirits and demons in the universe. In 1691, the Protestant pastor and Cartesian philosopher Balthasar Bekker stated that “the common opinion of the devil, of his knowledge, power, and operations, and of people which are accused of having commerce with him, [begins] by little and little to become very suspicious by the help of natural light” (n.p., Bekker, 1695). In the wake of Spinoza’s *Theological-Political Treatise* (1670), which advocated freedom of philosophizing intended to liberate man from theological dogmas and prejudices, philosophical rationality engaged in a critical examination of religions, mainly revealed monotheistic faiths, such as Christianity, and to a lesser extent of ancient polytheisms or Eastern religions deploying another conceptions of divinity. In 1721, Montesquieu published the first major work of Enlightenment philosophical literature, *The Persian Letters*, in which he fiercely criticized society, institutions, and religion under the Ancien Régime. In *Letters XVI* and *XVII*, one of the Persian travelers, Usbek, begins by lavishly praising the mullah Mohammed Ali with hyperbolic flattery: “Your knowledge is an abyss deeper than the ocean, your mind sharper than Zufagar, Hali’s two-pointed sword. [...] You read the Koran on the breast of our divine Prophet, and when you find a passage obscure, an angel, at his order, unfolds his rapid wings and descends from the throne to reveal the secret to you”. After attempting to appease him in this manner, Usbek expresses his doubts regarding certain Muslim rituals. He apologizes in advance for his audacity, aiming to prevent any potential reproach: “I have doubts that must be resolved; I feel my reason wandering; lead it back to the right road. O source of light, come to enlighten me. Destroy with your divine pen the difficulties I am about to propose you. Make me blush, in shame and self-pity, at the questions I am about to ask”. After this preliminary demonstration of submission, Usbek finally gets to the questions: “Why is it that our Lawgiver forbids us to eat the flesh of swine and all meats that he calls unclean? Why does he forbid us to touch a corpse? And why, to purify our soul, does he require that we incessantly wash our bodies? It seems to me that things are neither pure nor impure in themselves, for I cannot conceive of any inherent quality that can make them that way” (p.31-33, Montesquieu, 1999).

In this passage, Usbek reasons as an 18th century philosopher who questions the rituals and practices prevailing in various religions. There is no inherent reason to abstain from eating pork or touching a corpse, nothing that *a priori* elevates such practices to the status of religious precept. Usbek suggests that all of this is perfectly arbitrary: why beef and not pork? There is no real difference between the two meats that would justify this prohibition: “things are neither pure nor impure in themselves”. It just so happens that “objects of sense do not affect all men in the same way. What gives an agreeable sensation to some produces disgust in others”. Hence it follows logically “that everyone can decide as his fancy dictates, and distinguish by himself those things that are pure from those that are not” (p.33, Montesquieu, 1999), which would, of course, overturn the rules established by the holy Prophet.

Mullah Mohammed Ali’s response (*Letter XVIII*) is an excellent example of this genre. Unlike his correspondent’s display of humility, the tone of his response is immediately haughty and aggressive: “You are always asking us questions that have already been asked of our holy Prophet a thousand times. Why do you not read the traditional opinions of the learned? Why not go to that pure source of all intelligence? There you would find your doubts resolved”. There is no point in asking questions, because all imaginable questions have already been asked and have found their answers. To the reasoning and examining mind, the mullah opposes unconditional respect for tradition, which he sees as “that pure source of all intelligence”. The true believer imposes silence on his intellect, because true enlightenment does not come from the earthly realm but from Heaven:

Unhappy man! Always encumbered by worldly things, and never having an eye fixed on heavenly things, you revere the mollah’s condition but dare not embrace and follow it.

O profane ones, who never enter into the secrets of the Eternal! Your light is but abysmal shadow, and the reasonings of your mind are like the dust raised by your feet at noonday in the torrid month of Chahban.

Your mind, at its zenith, is lower than the nadir reached by the least of the imans. Your vain philosophy is the lightening, warning of storm and darkness. You are in the midst of the tempest, wandering at the will of the wind (p.34, Montesquieu, 1999).

To fully grasp the significance of the mullah's scathing response, one must read between the lines. Taking shelter in the Eastern fable, Montesquieu presents the main divide between the Enlightenment philosophers and their Catholic adversaries. On one side, there is the realm of Heaven and the secrets of the Eternal, known only to mullahs and imams. On the other side, there are critical minds that seek to subject traditions and beliefs to the scrutiny of reason. Mohammed Ali reproaches Usbek for displaying superficial respect towards the clerics of his religion—he has perfectly understood that Usbek's previous letter was heavily tainted with hypocrisy—while attempting to break free from their authority. Hence, his open expression of anger towards a "skeptical" correspondent and in general those who employ critical reason.

Mullah Mohammed Ali targets all those who believe that humans possess the faculty to discover facts by themselves. Towards the end of the 18th century, Kant defined the Enlightenment movement as "man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity" (p.263, Kant, 1986), breaking free of submission to the authority and tutelage of others. The light that philosophers look towards is no longer that of Heaven but the light of reason, which questions the reality or probability of "facts" and stories and their interpretations. The critical mind, according to Diderot, begins with doubt: "skepticism is [...] the first step towards truth" (p.45, Diderot, 2016). This proclamation of intellectual autonomy, of the freedom to exercise one's own reason, is vehemently denounced by the mullah. If men start thinking for themselves, they no longer need those who think on their behalf: the mullahs and imams.

The Age of Enlightenment is primarily the age of *criticism*. Even if the word itself is not explicitly mentioned, the idea of criticism is pervasive. To criticize, in the etymological sense of the word, does not mean to disapprove so much as to discern: to distinguish between the true and the false, the just and the unjust, the plausible and the doubtful, and so on. The great philosophers of the 17th century, constructed coherent philosophical systems based on principles and facts that were taken to be self-evident and indisputable. However, in the 18th century, to know is first and foremost to liberate oneself from that which prevents understanding, that is from prejudice and traditional certainties. The Enlightenment marks the definitive abandonment of reliance on dogma and, more generally, on arguments from authority. The critical spirit that characterizes the Enlightenment is not intimidated in the face of Revealed doctrine or the rights of princes. Enlightenment thinkers demand intellectual autonomy, the—natural—right to think for oneself, to criticize freely, that is, to seek truth through reason rather than surrendering to blind faith or following an authority unquestioningly. In the 18th century, to criticize means to question and analyze tradition, to doubt the most sacred truths. The philosophers dismiss alleged "facts" put forward by Christians, such as miracles and the stories of martyrs, as these testimonies have often been distorted by historians' biases or the credulity of the people. The ancient philosophers, as stated in the article *Certitude* in the *Encyclopédie*, were too intelligent to believe in the absurdities of pagan religion (vol.II, p.846, *Encyclopédie*, 1751-72). In *Philosophical Thoughts* (*Pensées philosophiques*, 1746) Diderot goes so far as to challenge the testimony of an entire city when it comes to believing in the authenticity of a supernatural event: "The less probability a fact has the more does the testimony of history lose its weight. I should make no difficulty in believing a single honest man who should tell me that His Majesty had just won a complete victory over the allies; but if all Paris were to assure me that a dead man had come to life again at Passy, I should not believe a word of it" (p.54, Diderot, 2016). It is essential to learn to not to trust supposedly truthful testimonies, miracles, and anything that contradicts reason. Faith, "the first of the Christian virtues [...], consists in an impossible conviction of the revealed doctrines and absurd fables which the Christian religion commands its disciples to believe". Hence, "this virtue exacts a total renunciation of reason, and impracticable assent to improbable facts, and a blind submission to the authority of priests" (p.96,

d'Holbach, 1835). Faith, proclaims d'Holbach, "forbids all doubt and enquiry; and deprives man of the liberty of exercising his reason and reflection" (p.96-97, d'Holbach, 1835). As d'Holbach remarks, it can sometimes lead to a blind acceptance of beliefs without critical examination. The concept of "fake news" in modern times highlights the importance of cultivating a healthy skepticism. This was Diderot's aim in his *Philosophical Thoughts*: the goal is to learn to reason without being guided solely by tradition, authority, or unreliable testimonies. *Dare to think for yourself*.

At the turn of the 18th century, religion can be criticized only indirectly or by taking underground, clandestine routes. Between 1700 and 1750, thousands of anonymous manuscripts, ranging from small pamphlets of a few pages to large materialist treatises, circulate throughout Europe (Benítez, 1996). Some authors ask the need for Revelation if human reason is a reliable guide. If human reason is reliable, then divine Reason must conform to it. The history of religions is seen as a political imposture: religion becomes a tool in the hands of the sovereign, allowing control of the ignorant masses. Other manuscripts undertake systematic critiques of the biblical text, subjecting it to analysis with the same instruments that are used for secular texts: philology, chronology, numismatics, paleography. An eminent scholar, Jean Lévesque de Burigny, composed in the 1730s a *Critical Examination of Christian Religious Apologists* which was published in 1766 under the name of another scholar, Nicolas Fréret. Burigny bases his approach on rigorous historical criticism. He challenges the authenticity of the Gospels and questions the arbitrary selection of the canon: early Christians read apocryphal texts which are now rejected, while there is no evidence that the texts that have been retained are any more truthful. Christianity, from its inception, was the religion of an ignorant, unhappy and gullible people. Its success was the result of the Roman Emperor Constantine's political calculations, and its development the fruit of violence. Arguments based on the supposed moral excellence of Christians do not withstand scrutiny: as one can observe every day, the Christian religion has not changed men, who are neither better nor more enlightened than the wise men of Greece, whose morality was comparable to that of modern preachers. Burigny goes even further: not only did Christianity fail to improve men, it made them persecutors, because of its claim to absolute truth.

Internal criticism is no less damning. The Old Testament is a fabric of absurdities, and many passages are morally outrageous. Burigny notes with irony that the Church prohibits its reading:

Christians indeed claim that their fundamental books were inspired by the Holy Spirit, but how can they reconcile this belief with the imperfections they attribute to them? In all of Italy and in all countries where the authority of the Pope is boundless, Scripture is regarded as dangerous for the majority of the faithful, who are very easily deceived. As a result of this belief, the Bible translated into the vernacular language is only allowed to be sold to those who have permission to read it. This is expressed in the fifth rule of the Index, which is translated as follows: "It being evident, from experience, that if the Bible translated into the vernacular language were permitted indiscriminately to everyone, the temerity of men would cause more harm to arise from it than good; we desire that the judgment of the bishop or inquisitor be consulted in this matter, so that with the advice of the parish priest or the confessor, they may grant permission to read the Bible translated by Catholic authors into the vernacular language to those to whom they judge that this reading will bring no harm; and this permission they must have in writing. But if anyone shall have the presumption to read or possess the Bible without such written permission, they shall not receive absolution." (p.240-241, Fréret, 1766).

Burigny does not position himself as a materialist or an atheist, and never addresses the question of the existence of God. His criticism is historical and erudite, focused on the texts, but his analyses will provide Voltaire with numerous arguments for his future battle against the "Infamous". In response to rising skepticism and unbelief, defenders of Christianity attempt a massive but clumsy defense. They want to prove the truth of Christianity, its "reasonableness". For example, in *The Unbeliever Brought to Reason by Faith* (1710), the Benedictine François Lamy asserts that God is the origin of both reason and faith: the two support each other, even if some mysteries are beyond the capacity of human reason. In 1717, Jean

Denyse publishes *The Truth of the Christian Religion Demonstrated by Geometrical Order*, in which he attempts to prove the greatest mysteries of the Christian religion through demonstrations as certain as those of geometry. However, this method quickly proved to be dangerous: using reason to defend faith against rationalist attacks could lead to insurmountable contradictions. With regard to the reading and interpretation of the Bible, Christian apologists continue to affirm the position of Bossuet in his *Discourse on Universal History* (1681): all the books of the Bible are authentic and the entire Pentateuch was written by Moses. Above all, they insisted on adhering to the *exact letter* or literal sense of the Bible, as they believed it was the only way to understand what God intended to communicate to men. Studying the sacred text using profane methods and striving to uncover its meaning by taking into account not just the grammatical words, but also the syntactical aspects, the cultural and historical background, and the literary genre, is to commit sacrilege, to profane it. Scripture is considered inviolable, containing truth in its purest form. However, when defenders of the Bible engaged in scholarly studies to explain the most implausible details of the Old Testament, they unwittingly provided ammunition to their adversaries. If there are atheists, Voltaire quips, it is also the fault... of theologians:

Men who have fattened on our substance, cry out to us: “Be persuaded that an ass spoke; believe that a fish swallowed a man, and threw him up three days after, safe and sound, on the shore; doubt not that the God of the universe ordered one Jewish prophet to eat excrement, and another to buy two prostitutes, and have bastards by them” [...] Believe a hundred things either visibly abominable or mathematically impossible: otherwise the God of Mercy will burn you in hell-fire, not only for millions of millions of ages, but for all eternity².

A century later, in 1893, Pope Leo XIII promulgated the encyclical letter *Providentissimus Deus* (“On the Study of Holy Scripture”) which gave the first formal authorization for the use of critical methods in biblical scholarship. Leo acknowledged the possibility of errors introduced by scribes and argued that the scientist should not view the biblical writers as explaining the visible world, as that was not their intent. Leo then quotes Augustine: “And if in these Books I meet anything which seems contrary to truth, I shall not hesitate to conclude either that the text is faulty, or that the translator has not expressed the meaning of the passage, or that I myself do not understand” (p.56, *The Scripture Documents*, 2002).

2. Priestly imposture and the birth of Christianity

At the beginning of his philosophical inquiry, Descartes had wiped the slate clean of all prior knowledge to arrive, through logical deduction, at certain truths. By the end of the 17th century, another method of philosophical investigation emerged—the genealogical method. According to this method, one attempts to trace the origin of a given phenomenon, questioning the origin and foundation of society, power, ideas, religions, etc. This method enables one, for example, to challenge the validity of royal absolutism, the concept of innate ideas, or the divine origin of Christianity. In his *Philosophical Letters* or *Letters concerning the English Nation* (*Lettres philosophiques* or *Lettres sur les Anglais*, 1734), Voltaire described, for example, the birth of the Quaker sect in the mid-17th century, drawing a disturbing parallel between the life of the sect’s main founder, George Fox, and the history of Jesus Christ (p.17-20, Voltaire, 1994). Voltaire thus insinuates that the establishment of a religion occurs through natural processes and that Christianity, in particular, has its origin in a... media figure, as we would say today, exploiting the gullibility of the people, and in some other circumstances found in most other religions. By employing the genealogical method to account for the origin of a phenomenon, it often becomes possible to demystify it. One of the first philosophers to use this method was Fontenelle.

² Article *Atheism* of the *Philosophical Dictionary* (vol.III-2, p.127, Voltaire, 1901). Voltaire refers to Numbers 22:28-30; Jonah 2:1-11; Ezekiel 4:15; Hosea 1:2-3.

Published in 1724 but written some thirty years earlier, *Of the Origin of Fables* applies the genealogical method to religion, attributing supernatural events to the ignorance of early humans, who were obliged to resort to superior deities to explain facts whose cause they did not know. To understand the originality of Fontenelle's work, it is necessary to situate his thought in relation to the opinions of his contemporaries. At that time, a number of different explanations for the formation of ancient religions were in contention. The allegorical interpretation saw ancient gods and heroes as symbols of physical or moral truths. The historical interpretation argued that gods were ancient heroes, conquerors, or benefactors elevated to the status of divinities, and that myths were based on real events that were embellished, corrupted, or distorted. The political interpretation, on the other hand, viewed religions as deliberate inventions of impostors and tricksters whose goal was to control the minds of the people. In the 1680s, the discussion of myths took a particular turn, focusing on the similarities between various ancient religions and Jewish and Christian beliefs. To link pagan religions to the "true faith", Christian scholars adopted the theory of plagiarism: ancient mythology and theology were said to derive from biblical traditions, with Phoenicians serving as intermediaries between the Hebrews and the Greeks. In 1679, the Bishop of Avranches, Pierre-Daniel Huet, published an *Evangelical demonstration* (*Demonstratio evangelica*) in which he argued that all pagan theology derived from the acts or writings of Moses. According to Huet, the gods of the Phoenicians, Egyptians, Persians, Germans, Gauls, Bretons, Romans, etc., all came from Moses and were nothing but transpositions of what was presented in Genesis (p.38-39, Huet, 1679).

Fontenelle's essay *Of the Origin of Fables* analyzes the formation and transmission of beliefs and myths in general (p.10-18, Fontenelle, 1972). He seeks to understand why certain myths were accepted claiming that they gained such strong influence due to human cognitive weaknesses and errors in reasoning. Fontenelle observes a surprising disconnect between the absurdity of certain fables and their continued transmission from generation to generation, between the implausibility of the stories and the disconcerting ease with which they are believed and between the crudeness of the deceptions and the subtlety of the speculations that these myths gave rise to. Based on analogies of savages and children, Fontenelle constructs a typical savage mind: weak, credulous, imaginative, given to self-magnification, and in love with marvels. At the starting point lies ignorance: "The more ignorant one is and the less experience one has, the more miracles one will see. The first men saw plenty of them, and naturally, as the fathers told their children what they had seen and what they had done, there were nothing but prodigies in the tales of those times". The frequency of such anecdotes and the prevalence of myths throughout human history demonstrate that human credulity is a common and natural phenomenon. In some cases, myths came about as answers to the questions about the world posed by primitive thinkers. The human mind naturally seeks to understand and explain the world around it. These "just-so stories" were, of course, silly and wrong; but Fontenelle quickly goes on to say that the method involved in this early "philosophy", as he calls it, is exactly the same method as that of modern thinkers in that both try to explain "the unknown things in nature in terms of those we have before our eyes". This is the nature of human imagination: the less it grasps, the more it is open to the extraordinary. Thus, wind, lightning, and storms are "explained" as the actions of super-human beings: gods, goddesses. Early religions are anthropomorphic: the gods take human form because humans project onto their deities that which they have observed in themselves; but that which is insufficient in becomes perfect in the gods. We are, therefore, witnessing a kind of natural divinization of man by himself.

According to Fontenelle, the invention of religions is part of a historical process: men began by projecting onto their gods the ideas they had about force, and as men changed, as the human mind evolved, the gods also changed:

The first men were indeed brutal, and they yielded everything to force; the gods became nearly as brutal, and only a bit more powerful, and thus one gets the gods of the time of Homer. Men began to have ideas of wisdom and justice; the gods picked them up: they began to be wise and just, and became more and more so in proportion to the extent to which these ideas developed among men;

and thus one gets the gods of the time of Cicero, and they are preferable to those of Homer's time because better philosophers had had a hand in the business.

The history of religion is, therefore, an evolutionary history, like that of the human mind. As humans became more perfect, the gods also became all the more perfect. Strength transforms into wisdom, and the gods of Homer become the gods of Cicero. The successive stages of fables reflect in a way the successive stages of the human mind in its long and hesitant search for causes. Fontenelle stresses the natural aspect of all this: "So far, the first men had given birth to fables more or less innocently". We must not ridicule those who have invented fables and myths; it is the natural propensity of the human mind to seek to understand and to find causes for what it does not understand. The origin of fables and myths should not be seen solely as negative; it is a manifestation of intellectual curiosity in the human mind. We want to understand, and when we cannot find a reasonable explanation, we resort to fabulous explanations. Departing from the tradition of plagiarism, Fontenelle asserts that each people followed the same path in inventing gods. Reading between the lines, one can see that the development Hebrews' and Christians' beliefs followed the same course as the pagans. Christianity represents only a moment, only a stage in the history of reason.

Fontenelle's reflections are taken up and radicalized by Baron d'Holbach in *The Sacred Contagion* (*La Contagion sacrée*, 1768). Falsely attributed to the English freethinker John Trenchard, the book argues that religious influence is always harmful to morality, society, and government. Religion has always had its critics, writes d'Holbach, "but few have dared to attack it at the source" (vol.I, p.177, d'Holbach, 1768). Religion, which he systematically calls superstition, can be the object of scientific examination, and must be subjected to the same processes of analysis, to the same criteria of truth as any other phenomenon of nature. The invention of the gods, then that of a God, with the rituals they require, is part of a historical process that begins at the dawn of time and is explained by the ignorance and powerlessness of men in the face of a nature that surpasses and terrorizes them. Threatened by the evils that overwhelmed them, powerless to satisfy their needs, they invented deities and all kinds of occult forces: "Man is superstitious only because he is fearful; he fears only because he is ignorant. [...] calamities everywhere have made us think of divinities and imagine ways to appease them" (vol.I, p.1, 7-8, d'Holbach, 1768). Exploiting men's taste for the marvelous, priests soon became the interpreters of the gods: "they proclaimed their oracles, they foretold the future and, having become participants in their omnipotence, they worked wonders that astonished and confounded the common mind. The prostrate nations received their decrees with trembling; they submitted without a murmur, they adopted without examination the ways prescribed to them to make Heaven propitious; works which were believed to be supernatural because the manner in which they were performed was unknown completed the conviction of the legitimacy of the orders announced, and passed for the sanction of divinity" (vol.I, p.57-58, d'Holbach, 1768). Thus, religion was imposed on people through a sort of monumental and deliberate imposture. The priestly function is an usurpation from the very beginning, which only degenerates over time to maintain its position:

In the midst of nations dismayed, suffering and devoid of experience, there found ambitious, enthusiastic or deceitful men who, taking advantage of the alarmed ignorance of their fellow citizens, turned their calamities, their fears and their stupidity to their own profit, won their confidence, succeeded in subjugating them and made them adopt their gods, their opinions and their cults. [...] Thus impostors identified with divinity exercised the most absolute power; they became despots and reigned by terror; the gods served to justify the excesses and crimes of their tyranny (vol.I, p.9, 12, d'Holbach, 1768).

D'Holbach mercilessly denounces the complicity that religions have always forged with tyranny: "The weakness, ignorance, vices and wickedness of the princes almost always made it impossible for them to do without the help of the priesthood; they needed it to tyrannize safely and contain subjects whose whims and follies made them moan incessantly" (vol.I, p.111, d'Holbach, 1768). In d'Holbach there is a sincere horror for the misdeeds of religion in general and Christianity in particular, an intellectual horror outraged by the

absurdities of the Bible and the childishness of superstition, and above all a moral horror that rejects excuses and forgiveness. *The Sacred Contagion* clearly establishes a cause-and-effect relationship between monotheism and religious violence: “those who admired only one god drew from his very unity a very dangerous consequence: they wanted him to reign alone. They fought to extend his empire and, convinced that their god was the only legitimate king, they regarded the other gods as usurpers, and treated their worshippers as rebels to be exterminated” (vol.I, p.53, d’Holbach, 1768). The very principles of monotheism inherently breed intolerance and violence, because “the dogma of the unity of God made this being a shady sovereign, the natural enemy of all those who wanted to share his throne with him” (vol.I, p.53-54, d’Holbach, 1768). As an institution called to defend the interests of an all-powerful God, the Church can only seek to impose Him on the people; His power can only be tyrannical. On the political level, this translates into the formation of a state within a state. Religious power, as it follows an absolutist logic, inevitably comes into conflict with political power, and “by priestly inventions, the unity of political societies [is] broken, peoples [are] subject to two legislations impossible to reconcile” (vol.I, p.106, d’Holbach, 1768). The two powers are even more incompatible as they oppose each other in their essence. While politics is meant to maintain unity and harmony among citizens, religion always provokes divisions among people due to the divergent interpretations that its followers propose based on sacred texts characterized by their ambiguity. Religion as such, declares Helvétius, is internally inclined toward intolerance and fanaticism. Fanatics are incapable of relativizing their views and affected by a paranoid obsession with otherness. They see in unbelievers or worshippers of different cults “diabolical seducers”, “presumptuous lovers of false wisdom”, “hypocritical zealots” and “firebrands of sedition” but are unable to recognize that they are the first to correspond to this caricature (vol.II, p.193, Helvétius, 1777). Drawing from the history of religion, especially of the Catholic Church, the philosopher highlights the abyss that has always separated the hypocritical outpourings of the priests from their bloody actions: “What does the history of religions teach us? That they have everywhere lighted up the torch of intolerance, strewed the plains with carcasses, imbrued the fields with blood, burned cities, and laid waste empires; but that they have never made men better” (vol.II, p.146, Helvétius, 1777). If the inhumanity of religions is proof of their human origin, persecution appears as a characteristic trait of Christianity: “When we consider the conduct of Catholic Christians, they at first, when feeble, appear to be lambs; but when strong, they are tigers” (vol.I, p.351, Helvétius, 1777). The philosophers particularly denounce the Inquisition, a well-oiled machine that exterminates heretics and troublemakers through denunciation and torture. In 1762, Abbé Morellet published a French translation of excerpts from *The Inquisitors’ Manual (Le Manuel des inquisiteurs)*, a veritable war machine that revealed the perversion of the holy court. He explained in the afterword:

There may be honest people and sensitive souls who will blame us for presenting such horrifying pictures before their eyes; they will wonder what advantage or pleasure can be found in fixing one’s gaze on such revolting objects.

To counter these reproaches, it will suffice to point out that it is precisely because these works are revolting that it is necessary to show them in order to inspire horror; that, after all, these cruelties were applauded for several centuries by nations which we consider civilized and claiming to have morals; that in several countries of Europe, these horrible maxims are still regarded as sacred; and that in others, it is only recently and scarcely allowed to laugh and be indignant about them (p.196-198, Morellet, 1762).

All previous attempts to reform religion having simply pruned the tree, giving it new vitality, radical philosophers like d’Holbach, Helvétius and Diderot call for an abrupt turn from the supernatural to the natural. This return to natural morality, hand in hand with the secularization of government, is the only thing that can bring real happiness to individuals, nations, and humanity in general.

In the struggle against ignorance and credulity, erudition, as we have seen, proves to be an invaluable aid in undermining the authority of the sacred texts. By publishing in 1770 *A Critical Inquiry into the*

History of Jesus Christ, being a Rational Analysis of the Gospels (Histoire critique de Jésus-Christ, ou Analyse raisonnée des Évangiles), d'Holbach claims to subject the sacred history of the origins of Christianity to the same criteria that are valid in other sciences: authenticity of documents, consistency of facts, accuracy of dates, and so on, which are precisely lacking in the Gospels. This evocatively titled work seeks to determine what, from a rationalist or "scientific" perspective, is worthy of belief in the life of Jesus. D'Holbach aims to shake the foundations of Christianity, as the Christian faith and the authority of the Church are based on the sacred texts of the New Testament. But the Gospels are unclear and ambiguous, and their value is disputable. When subjected to objective criticism, the story they tell falls apart:

There is every reason to believe, that if the Holy Ghost had foreseen the transcendent fortune which the religion of Jesus was one day to attain; if he had foreseen that this religion would in the course of time be received by kings, civilized nations, scholars, and persons in the higher circles of life; if he had suspected that this religion could be examined, analyzed, discussed and criticized by logicians; there is, I say, reason to believe that the Holy Ghost would have left us, on the life and doctrine of its founder, memoirs less shapeless, facts more circumstantial, proofs more authentic, and, in short, materials better digested than those we possess. He would have chosen writers, better qualified than those he has inspired, to transmit to nations the speeches and actions of the Savior of the world; he would have made him on the most trifling point, to act and speak in a manner more worthy of a God; he would have put in his mouth a language more noble, more perspicuous and more persuasive; and he would have employed means more certain to convince rebellious reason, and abash incredulity.

None of all this has occurred; the gospel is merely an eastern romance, disgusting to every man of common sense, and apparently addressed only to the ignorant, the stupid, and the vulgar, the only persons whom it can mislead.—Criticism finds there no connection of facts, no agreement of circumstances, no train of principles, and no uniformity of relation. Four men, unpolished and devoid of letters, pass for the faithful authors of memoirs containing the life of Jesus Christ; and it is on their testimony, that Christians believe themselves bound to receive the religion they profess, and adopt without examination the most contradictory facts, the most incredible actions, the most amazing prodigies, the most unconnected system, the most unintelligible doctrine, and the most revolting mysteries! (p.7-8, d'Holbach, 1799)

D'Holbach's narrative aims to strip the life of Christ of all supernatural elements. The Church teaches of Mary a virgin who gives birth thanks to the Holy Spirit, without the assistance of a human father, despite her husband Joseph. D'Holbach adopts a highly immanent reading of this fiction and asserts that in the absence of her husband, the visitation, not by an angel, but by a young man, perhaps a passing soldier, was likely the cause of her maternity: "Nothing is more easy than to disengage the relation of St Luke from the marvelous. The event of Mary's pregnancy follows in the order of nature, and if we substitute a young man in the place of the angel, the passage of the Evangelist will have nothing incredible in it" (p.40, d'Holbach, 1799). D'Holbach contends that the life of Jesus is nothing but a tissue of absurdities. He describes Jesus as an "unskillful juggler", a liar and a deceiver, who manipulates people, presents himself as a magician, and bases his actions on the predictions of the Old Testament to give the illusion that he is the awaited Messiah. D'Holbach accuses Jesus of making false prophecies none of which came true. His miracles, if genuine, would undoubtedly have led to the conversion of the Jews. He may have had some healing abilities, but in that era, where supernatural beliefs were prevalent, a holy man who did not perform miracles would not have been taken seriously. Jesus' behavior appears to resemble that of an ambitious and enthusiastic adventurer who managed to gain the favor of the common people, and whose life was later transformed into legend. "In fine, we shall behold an artisan, a melancholy enthusiast [...] miscarrying in all his projects, himself punished as a public incendiary, dying on a cross, and yet after his death becoming the legislator and the God of many nations, and an object of adoration to beings who pretend to common

sense” (p.7, d’Holbach, 1799). According to d’Holbach, Christianity was from the very beginning the religion of an ignorant, unhappy, and gullible people. Its success was a result of the political calculation of the Roman Emperor Constantine, and its spread was achieved through violence.

The *Critical Inquiry into the History of Jesus Christ* ends with a panorama of the evolution of Christianity up to the contemporary era, a history written in letters of blood. Under the pretext of preaching the Gospel, the Church sowed discord, launched anathemas, ignited wars and seditions, persecutions and crusades, preached slavery and unlimited submission to sovereigns, but also rebellion and regicide against rulers who refused to bend under its yoke. It massacred a part of the world in the name of a god of peace. The final paragraph ends with this question: “If it is demanded of us, what can be substituted for a religion, which at all times has produced only effects pernicious to the happiness of the human race; we will bid men cultivate their reason, which, much better than absurd and deceptive systems, will advance their welfare, and make them sensible of the value of virtue” (p.292, d’Holbach, 1799).

3. Science against Genesis

In the 18th century, the Bible is still unanimously considered the first book of humanity. The Scriptures, the source of religious truth, are also seen as the foundation for indisputable truths in science, history, and politics. It is a time when the creation of the world, as described in the first chapter of Genesis is still taken literally. Charles Darwin’s companion, Thomas Huxley, reported towards the end of his life that the sciences of man and earth remained captive to the literal reading of the Bible until at least the mid-19th century:

At the present time, it is difficult to persuade serious scientific inquirers to occupy themselves, in any way, with the Noachian Deluge. They look at you with a smile and a shrug, and say they have more important matters to attend to than mere antiquarianism. But it was not so in my youth. At that time, geologists and biologists could hardly follow to the end any path of inquiry without finding the way blocked by Noah and his ark, or by the first chapter of Genesis; and it was a serious matter, in this country at any rate, for a man to be suspected of doubting the literal truth of the Diluvial or any other Pentateuchal history (p.401, Huxley, 1892).

According to the sacred chronology still in force during the 18th century and beyond, the creation of the world occurred as follows in the year 4004 BC:

Creation of heaven and earth, along with light, on Sunday, October 23, the first day of the world.

Creation of the firmament, which separated the waters below from the waters above, on the second day of the world, Monday, October 24.

The waters of the sea recede, leaving the land uncovered.

Creation of plants and the Garden of Eden: third day of the world.

Creation of the sun, moon and stars: fourth day.

Fifth day, creation of birds, and fish, etc.

Sixth day, creation of land animals; of man. Adam gives names to the animals. God creates a woman from one of his ribs.

Seventh day, Saturday, October 29. God ceases His work of creation, blesses the seventh day, and sanctifies it.

Sin of the first woman, she persuaded Adam to sin as well: Adam names her Eve, God expels them from paradise. It was apparently the same day they entered it, which is the tenth after creation, corresponding to November 1st (vol.I, p.86, Calmet, 1707-16).

This interpretation of Genesis subordinates the history of the world to the biblical narrative as it is read in the Pentateuch and still practiced by some “creationists” today. From this interpretation, the following postulates arise:

1. About 6,000 years ago, God created the universe in six days, in the order described in Genesis (thus, light was created four days before the sun!).
2. The world was created as we see it today, and there was no evolution.
3. The world was created according to a rational design; it was ordered by God for mankind.

According to the official historiography of the Church, exactly 4,004 years elapsed between the creation of the world and the advent of Jesus Christ. In the year 129 (or 3875 BC), the earth began to fill, and crimes increased. In the year 1656 (or 2348 BC) the Flood episode occurred; in 1757 (or 2247 BC), the sons of Noah attempted to build the Tower of Babel, and so on (vol.I, p.1-4, Bossuet, 1728-29). Voltaire’s *Letters concerning the English Nation* report how Newton, a scientific genius but deeply religious, sought to build by means of extremely precise calculations a chronological framework that irrefutably establishes the precedence of the history of the Hebrews over the history of the Egyptians, Assyrians and Greeks (p.82-86, Voltaire, 1994). By shortening the history of the world by 500 years, Newton reversed the positions of civilizations in relation to each other and preserved the postulate of the Hebrews’ precedence over other peoples. However, in the 18th century, more critical scholars will counter this view by pointing to Chinese annals, which date back 4,000 years, as opposed to the biblical history. Consequently, the existence of Chinese civilization during the time of the Flood challenged the official chronology.

In the mid-18th century, the naturalist Buffon argues in the first volume of his work *Natural History* (*Histoire naturelle*, 1749-1767) that it was not the Flood that caused the presence of marine fossils inland and even in mountains, but rather a long and gradual transformation—“the common course of nature” (vol.I, p.40, Buffon, 1797). This audacious thesis immediately drew the wrath of the Sorbonne, the powerful Faculty of Theology in Paris. To escape censorship, Buffon made a declaration that fully satisfied the members of the Faculty:

I declare:

First: That I have never had any intention of contradicting the text of Scripture; that I believe quite firmly all that is related there concerning creation, be it concerning the order of times or the circumstances of events; and I abandon that, which in my book, concerns the formation of the earth, and, in general, all that which may be contrary to the narration of Moses, having only presented my hypothesis on the formation of planets as a pure philosophical conjecture (p.289, Lyon, 1981).

This declaration, which its author described as “foolish and absurd” thirty years later, allowed Buffon to continue his work. In 1778, Buffon reoffended in *The Epochs of Nature* (*Des Époques de la nature*), published as a supplementary volume of the *Natural History*. The introduction opens with a celebration of the biblical narrative of origins as “the most ancient, the most sacred of all traditions”. Then, almost without transition, Buffon continues: “Everything in the story of Moses is placed within the limits of intelligence of the people. Everything there is represented relative to the common man, to whom it would not do to demonstrate the true system of the Earth, but it was sufficient to instruct about that which he owed to the Creator, in showing him the effects of His omnipotence as so many good deeds” (p.19-20, Buffon, 2018). Buffon then attempts to reconstruct the complete history of the earth, starting from the moment it was torn away from the Sun. By evaluating the duration of its cooling, he proposes the figure of seventy-five thousand years (p.40, Buffon, 2018) (he was still far from the actual age, as the Earth’s age is currently estimated to be 4.56 billion years). The Sorbonne is again stirred into action. The charge is that Buffon tends to “destroy the authority of the Scriptures”. He makes the earth’s age far too old and his epochs contradict the true order of creation: plants were created on the third day and fish on the fifth; Buffon makes both appear in the same epoch. He describes “the first men” as living in a state of terror, while Genesis tells of a single first man, Adam, living in Paradise and already dominating the beasts.

Buffon's theory of the end of the earth by freezing contradicts St. Peter's prediction of a final conflagration. To avoid censorship once, Buffon had to issue another retraction. In 1780, he signed a new formal declaration stating: "I declare that I still hold the same sentiments of respect for their decisions [the theologians'], and in renewing the declaration I made in 1751, I admit that I presented again my system of the formation of the Earth and the planets only in the belief that I could reconcile it with the account of the sacred historian" (p.18-19, *Acta*, 1780).³ The page is turned. Fifty years later, the Scottish geologist Charles Lyell became "the spiritual saviour of geology, freeing the science from the old dispensation of Moses" (p.91, Porter, 1976). Lyell favoured an indefinitely long age for the earth. His major work, the *Principles of Geology* (1830-33), presented the idea that the earth was shaped entirely by slow-moving forces still in operation today, acting over a very long period of time.

At the same time as Buffon, the treatise *Telliamed* by the writer and diplomat Benoît de Maillet shows a profound originality. The book is structured as a series of three speculative conversations between a French missionary and an Indian philosopher, Telliamed (the author's name spelled backwards), who proposes Maillet's heretical ideas. These ideas were so radical that the work was not published until 1748, a decade after de Maillet's death. Written in the early 1720, when Maillet was serving as the king of France's general consul in Egypt, *Telliamed* began circulating in various manuscript versions after the author's return to France in 1720. Maillet retained his original draft of the work (now lost), but made numerous additions and changes to it over the years to incorporate new information, some of which appears only in certain manuscript versions. Between 1732 and his death in 1738 Maillet worked with the Abbé Jean-Baptiste Le Mascrier to prepare *Telliamed* for publication. Recognizing the unorthodox and dangerous nature of Maillet's system of geology, Le Mascrier reworked *Telliamed* extensively in an attempt—ultimately unsuccessful—to soften its heterodoxy and reconcile it with Christian dogma. After Maillet's death, fearing possible repercussions, the Abbé waited ten years to publish what was a bowdlerized version of *Telliamed*; the first printed edition appeared in 1748, followed by a second in 1749 and a third in 1755. The published version provoked outrage from the clergy and other orthodox thinkers, but despite (or because of) this, it became something of a best-seller. Maillet was eager to convince his audience that an understanding of nature should be based on observations and questioning rather than religious authority. His thesis about the history of our planet and its inhabitants was extremely unorthodox for its time: he believed, based on his researches, that the earth was once entirely covered by a universal ocean, and he attributed all of the planet's geological features to the gradual diminution of this ocean, applying present-day marine mechanisms to a geologic past stretching back at least two billion years—a direct contradiction of the Biblical account of creation. His spokesperson Telliamed argues in favor of the aquatic origin of all life including man: as seas receded and terrestrial environments emerged, marine animals adapted (became transformed) to land. Correspondence of sea and land organisms and the presence of life on remote islands are strong evidence that modern terrestrial life began in the sea:

In a word do not herbs, plants, roots, grains, and all of this kind, that the earth produces and nourishes, come from the sea? Is it not at least natural to think so, since we are certain that all our habitable lands came originally from the sea? [...] As for the origin of terrestrial animals, I observe that there are none of them, whether walking, flying, or creeping, the similar species of which are not contained in the sea; and the passage of which from one to these elements to another, is not only possible and probable, but even supported by a prodigious number of examples (p.218, Maillet, 1750).

The Indian sage Telliamed refutes the concept of a personified God as a ruler and creator of everything and assumes an eternal universe, undergoing natural changes under the effects of chance. Maillet was thus a forerunner of 19th-century uniformitarian geologists, and he also anticipated Lamarck in

³ The "sacred historian" is Moses, the alleged author of the Pentateuch.

claiming that present-day terrestrial life forms had adapted themselves from ancient marine flora and fauna through a process of transformation.

Telliamed's basic thesis, which suggests that our planet was once entirely covered with water, bears resemblance to the biblical account of the Great Flood—the second origin of humanity, which is generally believed to have occurred in the year 1656 after creation (or 2348 BC). Dom Calmet recounted this central episode in the history of humanity:

This year 1656 is that of the flood.

Noah enters the ark with his children and all the animals on the 27th day of the second month, which corresponds to Sunday, December 7. The rains falls continuously for 40 days and 40 nights, and the waters remain on the earth for 150 days without receding. Afterward, the waters begin to subside, and the ark comes to rest on Mount Ararat on Wednesday, May 6. [...] Noah opens the top of the ark on Friday, October 23; he leaves the ark on Friday, December 18, and offers thanksgiving sacrifices to God (vol.I, p.87, Calmet, 1707-16)⁴.

In the 18th century, the sciences of humanity and the earth are still bound by the narrative of the Great Flood, which dates the rebirth of humanity to a little over 4,000 years ago, with its origin being traced back to the three families of Noah (his sons Shem, Ham and Japheth, and their wives). One wonders how three couples and their descendants were able to repopulate the whole world in record time. But advocates of literal reading of the Bible have answers to everything. At the turn of the 17th century, Temporarius (or Du Temps) imagined that no sooner had the Flood waters receded than Noah's three sons began producing twins annually—a male and a female—and they, in turn, began procreating at the same rate upon reaching their twentieth year (p.129, Temporarius, 1596). In 1703, the fellow Jesuit Denis Petau (ou Petavius) suggested that the progeny of two of Noah's sons consisted solely of males, while the third son furnished an ample number of females for them. He further postulated that women began procreating at seventeen, and in the subsequent eight years gave birth annually to one child. Under such conditions, Noah's posterity numbered no less than 623,612,358,728 males within 285 years of the Deluge (vol.II, p.35, Petavius, 1627). To enlightened minds, notably Voltaire's, calculations of this sort seemed preposterous, and he often targeted Petau's estimates for ridicule. In *The Philosophy of History* (*La Philosophie de l'histoire*, 1765), he objected that in the 18th century, "of a thousand children, born in one year, there, hardly ever, remain, six hundred, at the end of twenty years" according to the registers of the largest cities (p.139, Voltaire, 1829).

The criticism of the story of Noah's ark was a common topic in philosophical literature during the classical age. Many aspects of the story posed problems. For instance, how could so many animal species have been accommodated on the ark with enough food to sustain them for an entire year? Moreover, how many animals were there in total? If the Flood was universal, the ark would have had to contain representatives of all animal species, both present and extinct. As new species were discovered, especially with the exploration of the New World, it became increasingly difficult to imagine that there was enough space for all of them on the ark. Additionally, some species are found only in specific regions, like in America or distant islands. If the ark indeed made landfall on Mount Ararat in Armenia, why do we find kangaroos only in Australia, for example? It required an explanation of how these animals made the journey and why they are not found in the regions between the starting point and the arrival point. Another objection was how the sloth made its way to South America. Even if it had a direct overland route, it moves so slowly that the journey would have taken twenty thousand years—a particularly strong objection given that the biblical timeline of creation is very short.

The story of the universal flood is the event that most shocked Voltaire: "Was there ever a time when the globe was entirely inundated?", he asks in the article *Inundation* of the *Philosophical Dictionary*. "It is physically impossible" (vol.V-2, p.251, Voltaire, 1901). It is difficult to see, in fact, huge masses of water

⁴ Remember that at that time, the Egyptians had already constructed the pyramids.

covering the entire globe by exceeding the highest mountain peaks by a few cubits without violating the laws of gravity and fluid balance. In fact, the story of the Great Flood in the book of Genesis, when interpreted literally, is crammed with more miracles than any comparable piece of literature anywhere on earth. The history of the Deluge related in the Pentateuch is “the most miraculous event of which the world ever heard [...]: it is one of the mysteries which are believed by faith; and faith consists in believing that which reason does not believe—which is only another miracle” (vol.V-2, p.252-53, Voltaire, 1901). All is miracle in the history of the Flood:

A miracle, that forty days of rain should have inundated the four quarters of the world, and have raised the water to the height of fifteen cubits above the tops of the loftiest mountains; a miracle, that there should have been cataracts, floodgates, and openings in heaven; a miracle, that all sorts of animals should have been collected in the ark from all parts of the world; a miracle, that Noah found the means of feeding them for a period of ten months; a miracle, that all the animals with all their provisions could have been included and retained in the ark; a miracle, that the greater part of them did not die; a miracle, that after quitting the ark, they found food enough to maintain them (vol.V-2, p.252, Voltaire, 1901).

In the last sentence, Voltaire is mocking the work of a certain Jean Le Pelletier entitled *Essays on Noah's Ark (Dissertations sur l'arche de Noé, 1700)*, in which the author attempted to demonstrate how all the animals could have fit and been nourished in the ark. He engaged in scholarly calculations to assess the capacity of the ark, leading him to conclude that the animals had enough space. He then evaluated their water and food requirements. He claimed that the capacity of the freshwater reservoir he placed in the hull was four times greater than necessary, and the capacity of the granary, located on the first floor, was one and a half times larger than needed. Like many other apologists before and after him, Le Pelletier desperately wanted to show that the Bible's claims were consistent with plausibility, nature, and reason. Ad hoc hypotheses were cooked up to suit the occasion, reminding one of historian W. E. H. Lecky's remark about the tendency “to invent, without a shadow of foundation, the most elaborate theories of explanation rather than recognize the smallest force in an objection” (vol.I, p.367, Lecky, 1869). At the end of the century, the Abbé Bergier will still label as ridiculous the stubbornness of unbelievers in challenging the reality of the Flood (vol.I, p.506, Bergier, 1788-90), and Chateaubriand will consider the narrative of the Flood as the true starting point of history. It would take another fifty years before, as reported by Huxley, it became permissible to doubt the literal truth of “Noah and his ark”.

According to the dominant conception during the Classical Age, God imposed His order on nature as part of a rational plan. Since humans were believed to be created in the image of God, they could, at least in part, comprehend the Creator's grand cosmic design and glimpse the divine “plan” that guided creation. The reasons behind natural phenomena are rooted in the purposes set by God; thus, the mission of science is to search for the causes of natural effects based on the Creator's intended purposes for producing those effects. Consequently, scientists and philosophers should limit themselves to observing and describing “the spectacle of Nature”; they cannot provide explanations, as the true explanation lies in the wisdom of God, which is beyond human reach. Reflecting on efficient causes is futile; at most, one can try to infer the final causes, the intentions that God might have had in creating living beings. As an example, Daniel Le Clerc proclaims that all insects were created for the benefit of humans: bees for their honey, silkworms for silk, cochineal insects for dyeing purple, and locusts... to feed Saint John the Baptist in the desert (p.367-368, Le Clerc, 1715). In 1784, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre attempted to prove that nature behaves like an irreproachable mother whose sole concern is the particular well-being of humans. He asserted that “animals of prey are by no means an object of terror to man. [...] Even those who attack the human body are furnished with remarkable indications. They either smell strongly, as the bug; or present oppositions of color to the places on which they fix, as white insects on the hair; or the blackness of the flea contrasted to the whiteness of the skin” (vol.I, p.306-307, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, 1809). Another example is better known: “There is no less marvellousness of adaptation in the forms and sizes of fruits. Many of them are

molded for the mouth of man, such as cherries and plumbs; others for his hand, such as pears and apples; others much larger, such as melons, have the sub-divisions marked, and seem destined to be a social family repast” (vol.II, p.450-51, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, 1809).

To liberate science from the yoke of theology, a new generation of philosophers and scientists demanded that science be independent of God. According to the postulate of objectivity formulated as early as 1644 by Descartes, there is no intention in the universe. The essence of science lies in its refusal to ask “Why?” and “For what purpose?” and, consequently, in its opposition to the method of searching for final causes. A century later, Diderot outlined a history of the universe that not only dispensed with God but also questioned the very idea of the order of nature. In 1749, he published *Letter on the Blind* (*Lettre sur les aveugles*) in which he imagined a dialogue between a dying blind man, the English mathematician Saunderson, and the Anglican pastor Holmes (p.109-114, Diderot, 2016). The conversation between Saunderson and Holmes starts with a quip from the blind man: “If you want to make me believe in God you must make me touch Him”. The argument is a bit thin and the good pastor has no trouble refuting it: “‘Sir’, returned the clergyman, very appositely, ‘touch yourself, and you will recognize the Deity in the admirable mechanism of your organs.’” False, Saunderson retorts: resorting to God to explain a difficulty is not good philosophy. It is better to admit one’s ignorance: “If nature offers us a knotty problem, let us leave it for what it is, without calling in to cut it the hand of a being who immediately becomes a fresh knot and harder to untie than the first”. Diderot asserts that replacing one difficulty with another serves no purpose. He continues then by dismantling the famous physico-theological argument or argument from design, which holds that complex functionality in the natural world which looks designed is evidence of an intelligent creator⁵. The mechanism of the universe as a clock, asserts Diderot, does not necessarily require a supreme clockmaker. The greatest mistake of proponents of the clockmaker theory is precisely assuming an admirable mechanism where there is none. The wonders of nature? Undoubtedly a beautiful spectacle, but who says it emerged fully formed from the hands of a God? For a few moments, consent to close your eyes, become blind to the wonders that impress you, forget them. Now try to go back to the early moments of the universe, before which you are as blind as a true blind person, for your eyes, which only see the present and fixed image, are of no use to you. Let’s dream a little. Can we not imagine that, “if we went back to the origin of things and scenes and perceived matter in motion and the evolution from chaos, we should meet with a number of shapeless creatures, instead of a few creatures highly organized”? Inspired closely by the famous philosophical poem, *De natura rerum*, Saunderson-Diderot endeavors to imagine how, in its original abundance, nature randomly produced unstable combinations, animals without the necessary organs for survival. After much trial and error, “all the defective combinations of matter disappeared, and [...] those only survived whose mechanism was not defective in any important particular and who were able to support and perpetuate themselves”.

By rewinding the evolution’s film, Saunderson demonstrates how our seemingly ordered world slowly emerged from the primitive chaos of molecules animated by eternal motion. Organic matter arises from inorganic matter, step by step, but the conditions for this development are fortuitous circumstances, not a preconceived design by any Supreme Being. Among the monsters arising from the irregular agitations of moving matter, man appeared, and his survival owes itself to the fortunate conformation of his organs and a favorable environment. For if “the first man had his larynx closed, or had lacked suitable food, or had been defective in the organs of generation, or had failed to find a mate, or had propagated in another species, what then, Mr Holmes, would have been the fate of the human race?” Man, the supposed center of the universe created in the image of God, “would have been still merged in the general depuration of the universe, [...] dissolved and dispersed among the molecules of matter”! Indeed, the assertion is stark: the human species is the result of fortuitous circumstances, not a providential purpose that would designate it as the end and culmination of creation.

⁵ “When you see a sundial or a water-clock”, stated Cicero, “you see that it tells the time by design and not by chance. How then can you imagine that the universe as a whole is devoid of purpose and intelligence, when it embraces everything, including these artifacts themselves and their artificers?” (*The Nature of the Gods*, II.34, transl. by Horace McGregor).

In a few words, Saunderson has demolished the physico-theological argument of the spectacle of nature. Rejecting the old static conception of the universe inspired by the first chapter of Genesis, which posited that animals and humans were created in their present form, Diderot outlines biochemical evolution from primitive matter to complex organisms endowed with temporary stability—a bold vision that modern biology would confirm two centuries later. The proof of evolutionary trial and error, continues Saunderson, is the existence, here on Earth, of “monsters” like himself: “the order is not even now so perfect as to exclude the occasional appearance of monstrosities”. Then, in a visionary impulse, this man, blind from birth, invites his interlocutor to close his eyes before the order that dazzles him, and gaze into the distance:

I conjecture, then, that in the beginning, when matter in a state of ferment brought this world into being, creatures like myself were of very common occurrence. But might not worlds too be in the same case? How many faulty and incomplete worlds have been dispersed and perhaps form again, and are dispersed at every instant in remote regions of space which I cannot touch nor you behold, but where motion continues and will continue to combine masses of matter, until they have found some arrangement in which they may finally persevere? O philosophers, travel with me to the confines of this universe, beyond the point where I feel and you behold organized beings; cast your eyes over this new ocean, and search in its aimless and lawless agitations for vestiges of that intelligent Being whose wisdom fills you with such wonder and admiration here!

It is then that the conclusion falls like the blade of a guillotine: “But what is the use of taking you out of your element? What is this world, Mr Holmes, but a complex, subject to cycles of change, all of which show a continual tendency to destruction; a rapid succession of beings that appear one by one, flourish and disappear; a merely transitory symmetry and momentary appearance of order?”

A momentary order: these are the key words of Saunderson’s discourse and, at the same time, one of the most fundamental theses of Diderot’s thought. The blind mathematician is happy to admit the existence of an order, even an admirable order, in a part of the universe, but on one important condition: “I take your word for the present state of the universe, and in return keep the liberty of thinking as I please on its ancient and primitive state, with relation to which you are as blind as myself”. The world in which we live is indeed governed by a certain order, which science aims to describe in mathematical language. However, this order is neither perfect, universal, nor eternal. Assuming that the world around us is orderly and concluding that the entire universe is orderly is not good philosophy. In reality, the order of the world is a mental construct, a mere facade, and the monstrous productions of nature, though rare, are evidence of this. Indeed, if a monster is defined by its inability to survive and/or reproduce, it is evident that we rarely encounter monsters today. Evolution generates order from an initial chaos: by eliminating beings unfit for life, the “general depuration of the universe” leaves only those that can give the illusion of having been directly created by a higher power. Thus, disorder produces order without concretizing any preexisting intention at the origin of its manifestation. But to see this, one must first become a little blind....

Until the mid-19th century, most scientists “naturally” defended a fixist and providentialist view of the universe, in which God created our world as it appears today. Nature had no history: species were fixed, each type of plant, animal, or human was individually created, and pre-adapted to the climate where it was to live. A century before Darwin, Diderot was about to dismantle this beautiful order of the universe created by God with perfect wisdom. Order is not a property of reality but a projection of our mind. The regularity of nature can only be provisional, and it cannot serve as the basis for definitive knowledge. The “spectacle of nature” that sings the glory of God is merely a convenient mathematical reduction intended to build a *provisional* science.

Until the 18th century, it was God who assigned meaning and purpose to science. Science was meant to serve the science of God, and it was seen as the most rigorous exegesis of the book of nature written by God. Today, science has definitively triumphed over the literal reading of the Bible: people no longer believe that a Flood submerged the entire surface of the earth, that a couple of each animal species was saved in Noah’s ark, that Joshua stopped the Sun above the city of Gibeon (Joshua 10:12-13), that there

were only 42 generations between Adam and Jesus (Matthew 1:17), and so on. As Thomas Huxley said at the end of the 19th century, men of science “have more important matters to attend to than mere antiquarianism.” Today, God does not depend on science, and science does not depend on God, and everyone is content.

4. The critique of the Christian God and the absurdity of religious dogmas

The Book of Genesis also contains the story of the Fall and the expulsion of man from Paradise (Genesis 3:1-24). However, the dogma of original sin was formulated by Saint Augustine in the 4th century AD. It became a cornerstone of Christian theology, even though it does not play a significant role in the Old Testament, and the Gospels do not explicitly mention it. The concept of original sin can be found in embryonic form in Saint Paul’s epistles. According to Paul, sin and, as a consequence, death are the result of Adam’s disobedience, which divided mankind from the Creator. As a result of the Fall, the entire human race is destined for eternal damnation: “That criminal nature draws upon itself the most righteous punishment”, declares Saint Augustine (p.24, Augustine, 1992). This is therefore no more than justice, considering the terrible sin committed by the first humans. If God had considered only His justice, He could have abandoned all of humanity to Hell. But in His infinite mercy, God sent Christ to save a portion of humanity, while excluding three-quarters and a half of the human race from this blessing. *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, no salvation outside the Church⁶ : are doomed to hellfire not only the ungodly and the heretics, but also all those who have never heard of Christ, virtuous infidels, well-intentioned heretics, and children who died without baptism (p.28, Augustine, 1992). Abbé Nonnotte reproaches Voltaire for supporting the idea that pagans, infidels, and heretics will be saved. A serious mistake! The New Testament says exactly the opposite: “Jesus Christ tells us that those who have not received a second spiritual birth through baptism cannot enter the kingdom of Heaven. [...] Scripture teaches us that without faith, it is impossible to please God; those who do not have faith will be condemned, and those who do not listen to the Church should be treated as pagans” (vol.II, p.265, Nonnotte, 1762). Following an evolution leading towards increasing rigorism, the official theology has come to favor texts that seem to justify this attitude. Salvation requires faith in God but also necessitates unconditional submission to His representative, the Church. Otherwise, there is no immortal and blissful life, but rather the assurance of equally eternal infernal punishments.

Regarding original sin, Rousseau believes that Scripture is less harsh than Saint Augustine and the theologians of his time: it is not possible, he believes, “that God creates so many innocent and pure souls purposely to join them to guilty bodies., to make them contract moral corruption thereby, and to condemn them all to hell, for no other crime than this union that is his work” (p.29, Rousseau, 2001). In Voltaire’s view, the dogma of original sin is the true scandal of Christianity. Throughout the second part of his life, he dedicated himself to combating the Church and ridiculing its doctrines. However, even in his early works, he fiercely criticized the very foundations of the Christian faith, as seen in the *Epistle to Urania* (*Épître à Uranie*, 1722), his first monument of his freedom of thinking (vol.I B, p.463-502, Voltaire, 1968-2022). Voltaire contends that the priests expect him to venerate and love a cruel and wicked God whom he should rather despise, a God who debases humans created in His image and appears to take pleasure in the suffering of His creatures. The God of Judeo-Christianity is a detestable God, and Voltaire openly declares that he is not Christian:

People say you are a tyrant; but in you I seek a Father;
I am not Christian, but it is in order to love you better.

⁶ Saint Cyprian of Carthage, Epistle LXXII. The doctrine is based largely on Mark 16:15-16: “He said to them, “Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; whoever does not believe will be condemned”.

Guided by the flame of reason, Voltaire rejects the Christian God of wrath, the God who made his creatures sinful so that He could punish them, who made them in His image only then to wish He hadn't, who sent a Great Flood to destroy mankind only then to send His son to die for it instead, and who now continues to punish men for things they have never done. Finally, only Christians can claim salvation; all others are damned—and that encompasses a considerable number—without it being their fault. Such a God, whom the Church still proposes as a model to men, cannot serve as the foundation for an altruistic morality. Instead of encouraging men to love and unite, as d'Holbach emphasizes, the God of the Bible divides them, inciting them to quarrel, despise, hate, persecute, and slaughter one another: “a religion founded on a sanguinary deity must be a religion of blood” (p.8, d'Holbach, 1835).

The absurdity of the Judeo-Christian God who damns all men for a fault committed by Adam and Eve is also lambasted by Diderot in the *Addition to the Philosophical Thoughts* (*Addition aux Pensées philosophiques*, 1762): “The Christian God is a father who makes much of his apples and very little of his children” (p.9, *Faith in Faithlessness*, 2008). Our heavenly Father is not a good father but a tyrant, to whom “no good father would want to resemble” (p.12, *Faith in Faithlessness*, 2008). The rest is more cruel, although not without relevance:

A Catholic who is father of a family, convinced that the maxims of the Gospels must be practiced under penalty of what is called hell, and given the extreme difficulty in reaching this degree of perfection, which human weakness prevents, I see nothing else to be done than for him to take his child by the foot and smash him against the ground, or to suffocate it at birth. By this act he saves it from the peril of damnation and assures him eternal happiness. And I maintain that this act, far from being criminal, should be considered infinitely praiseworthy, since it is founded upon paternal love, which demands that all good fathers do all the good possible for their children (p.13, *Faith in Faithlessness*, 2008).

It is quite understandable, concedes Abbé Bergier with irony, that the dogma of original sin could not fail to displease unbelievers. They cannot conceive that God would entrust the eternal fate of their posterity to our first parents, especially knowing that both would violate the imposed law and make the entire human race miserable; even less understandable to them is how God could punish a sin that is neither free nor voluntary for us. To respond to the unbelievers shocked by Augustine's interpretation of the Fall, Bergier resorts to a comparison from the political realm: just as no one is scandalized when a king degrades one of his ennobled subjects and his posterity for being disloyal, one can conceive without indignation that God punishes the children for the sin of their father. But what of the severity of the punishment inflicted on Adam and Eve in relation to the offense committed? And of the damnation of innocent children who died without baptism? Abbé Bergier justifies them with this fine declaration worth its weight in gold: “When unbelievers weary us with objections, we can limit ourselves to answering them with Saint Augustine: although I cannot refute all their arguments, I see nonetheless that we must adhere to what Scripture clearly teaches us: namely, that no man can attain eternal life and salvation without being associated with Jesus Christ, and that God cannot unjustly condemn anyone or unjustly deprive them of life and salvation” (vol.III, p.57, Bergier, 1788-90).

Like original sin, the dogma of the Trinity is not founded in the Bible, the early Christians were completely unaware of it.⁷ In many places, the Bible presents Jesus as being subordinate to God the Father: “Jesus gave them this answer: ‘Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only

⁷ In *An Historical Account of Two Notable Corruptions of Scripture* on the history of the manifest falsification of two verses of Scripture, first published in 1754, Newton demonstrated that the words “in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one” (1 John 5:7), supposedly supporting the doctrine of the Trinity, did not exist in the original Greek text of the Scriptures. He revealed how this forgery had found its way into the Latin versions, first as a marginal note, and then into the actual text. Newton proved that it was only incorporated into the Greek in 1515. It wasn't until the 19th century that translators of the Bible began correcting these verses...

what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does” (John 5:19); “The Father is greater than I” (John 14:28). From the 1st century AD, passionate there were debates about the nature of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and the relationships between them. In the mid-2nd century, many Christians were drawn to Platonic philosophy, and used it to mold Christian truths into a Platonic framework. In the early 18th century, Jacques Souverain declared in *Platonism Unveiled* (*Le Platonisme dévoilé*) that the dogma of the Trinity has a philosophical origin: it is an invention of Plato and his followers, blindly adopted by the Church Fathers, and has no basis in the Scriptures.

In the eyes of the philosophers of the Enlightenment, the dogma of the Trinity testifies, more than any other, to the fundamental absurdity of Christian theology. Voltaire’s *A Philosophical Dictionary* (*Dictionnaire philosophique*, 1764-1769) extensively denounces the other side of reason, which is unreason, the mania for providing rational foundations for absurdities. The article on *Arianism* presents a strange paradox: great havoc was caused “for more than sixteen hundred years” by “an incomprehensible question”: “Is Jesus the Word? If He be the Word, did He emanate from God in time or before time? If He emanated from God, is He co-eternal and consubstantial with Him, or is He of a similar substance? Is He distinct from Him, or is He not? Is He made or begotten?” (vol.III-2, p.20, Voltaire, 1901). What theological issue is at stake here? The main question at that time was whether Jesus was “only” *the Son of God* or the *Word made flesh, God Himself*. However, a God made man is unthinkable for Voltaire; it is a “monstrous” idea because “the distance from God to man is infinite; and it is impossible for a perishable body to be infinite, immense, or eternal” (vol.IV-2, p.144, Voltaire, 1901). Voltaire recounts that the dogma of the Trinity, the most fundamental dogma of Christianity, was not established and imposed until late, after a long and bloody conflict between the followers of Arius and those of Athanasius, both members of the church in Alexandria, in the 4th century. The Arians regarded Jesus Christ as *created* and not *begotten* by God: the Son is subordinate to the Father, he is of a substance similar *to his own* (*homoiousios*); whereas for the Trinitarians, the Son is consubstantial, meaning of *the same* substance as God (*homoousios*), and He proceeds from the Father as the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.

Thus, the dogma of the Trinity, states Voltaire in the *Examen important de Milord Bolingbroke*, is a “chimerical metaphysics, which has been nothing but a source of discord and was absolutely irrelevant to morality [...]; for as soon as the early Christians started having dogmas, they hurled insults at each other, foreshadowing from afar the civil wars that would devastate the world over such arguments (vol.LXII, p.282-283, Voltaire, 1968-2022). Voltaire considers that theological unreason “has produced more horrors than the ambition of princes, which ambition has occasioned very many”: the worst tyrants of antiquity have done less harm than the Christian quibblers, whose sophisms are responsible for the worst crimes: “The Christians sophisticated, caviled, hated, and excommunicated one another, for some of these dogmas inaccessible to human intellect”. In other words, the more incomprehensible a thing is, the more fanatics are willing to butcher each other: the dogma of the Trinity “has furnished exercise for curiosity, for sophistic subtlety, for animosity, for the spirit of cabal, for the fury of domination, for the rage of persecution, for blind and sanguinary fanaticism, for barbarous credulity” (vol.III-2, p.20, Voltaire, 1901).

Abandoning the God of the Bible to irrational faith, the Enlightenment advocates not so much atheism as a philosophical religion, also known as natural religion or deism, based on the critical examination of revealed religion, its dogmas, and its ritual practices. Deism, one of the major figures of Enlightenment religion, seeks to reconcile faith and reason. According to deism, the divinity or Supreme Being (distinct from the personal God of revealed religions) having completed the creation no longer intervenes in nature, history, or the lives of humans. Similar to Newton’s modern physics, deism views the world as a machine operating without the intervention of its creator. In stark contrast to revealed religions, Enlightenment deism reconciles the existence of a divinity with the rational demands of modern physical science and criticizes the dogmas, articles of faith, miracles, and mysteries of Christianity.

One of the most formidable opponents of the Christian religion knew it from within: he was the priest Jean Meslier, a quiet, modest priest in the tiny Ardennes parish of Étrépigny, who lived at the turn of the 18th century (Deruette, 2008). From his childhood, Meslier had the opportunity to witness the misery of the peasants, burdened with taxes and forced into complete submission. He confessed that he agreed to choose

the priesthood to please his parents even though he never had faith himself. In early 1689, Meslier was appointed as the priest of Étrépigny and Balaives in the Ardennes. When he died in 1729, he left behind a copious manuscript as a legacy for his parishioners, the *Memoir of the Thoughts and Sentiments of Jean Meslier* (*Mémoire des pensées et des sentiments de Jean Meslier*). It's a kind of testament in which the priest tells his former parishioners that he never believed in God. The subtitle of the work sets it out clearly: *Clear and Evident Demonstrations of the Vanity and Falsity of All the Divinities and of All the Religions of the World* (*Démonstrations claires et évidentes de la vanité et de la fausseté de toutes les divinités et de toutes les religions du monde*). Meslier presents a methodical deconstruction of Christianity and the governments that support it, along with a thoughtful defense of the fundamental human rights of liberty, equality, and the pursuit of happiness. He reveals himself not only as a materialist and unbeliever but also as a man of revolutionary sentiments who firmly opposes the governments of his day, which he maintains keep the common people in ignorance, fear, and poverty through religion. For Meslier the books of the Bible were flawed, even fraudulent, works, "stories of fairies" (p.93, Meslier, 2009), while Jesus was "a vile and despicable man who had no mind, talent or knowledge, [...] a fool, a madman, a wretched fanatic, and a miserable scoundrel" (p.214-215, Meslier, 2009). This madman with his extravagant parables also had a perverse side: he glorified suffering, declared on one hand that he came to save all men, and on the other that he came to blind them, and that most would be damned. Meslier had another grievance against religion, which was particularly close to his heart: he reproached it for supporting tyranny and social injustice. A host of parasites lived off the labor of the poor: the clergy, the legal professions, the police, the soldiers. And the Church, rather than fighting injustice, blessed this exploitation of man by man. In his most famous quote, Meslier refers to a man who wished "that all the rulers of the earth and all the nobles be hanged and strangled with the guts of the priests" (p.37, Meslier, 2009). Meslier's manuscript, expanded over several hundred hand written pages, entered the lively world of illicit reproductions after his death in 1729. Various edited abstracts of the *Testament* were printed and circulated, condensing the original manuscript. One of them reached Voltaire, who published a heavily expurgated edition of it in 1762, a grossly distorted "Extract" that portrayed Meslier as a fellow-deist and suppressed Meslier's anti-monarchist and revolutionary opinions.

The 97 chapters of the *Testament* present a collection of eight reasons for rejecting all religious beliefs and practices:

I. Religions are human inventions. Throughout history, people have always endeavored to create idols, deities, rituals, and religions. Gradually, the most cunning among them claimed to possess the ability to speak or act on behalf of supposed powers from above, then allied themselves with rulers to exploit and oppress the people.

II. Faith, which serves as the foundation of religions, is based only on uncertainties, contradictions, and absurdities. Faith is a "blind belief", a principle of errors, illusions, and deceptions. As a result, people who live in blindness, who adhere to religious beliefs without any reasoning, are prone to disputes, disturbances, and persecutions to maintain and defend their religion, which they believe to be the only true one. It is because no religion can be demonstrated that people slaughter each other. Meslier criticizes the supposed miracles meant to prove the truth of the Christian religion. Miracles exist in all religions, and if Christians claim that these are false miracles perpetrated by impostors, there is no evidence that Christian miracle-makers are any more credible.

III. The so-called visions and promises of the Old Testament are vain and false. Meslier aims to dismantle the absurdity of the alleged covenant between God and the Jewish people, to whom he is said to have made absurd promises which have never been fulfilled (such as becoming the most holy, happiest, and triumphant people on earth). According to Meslier, these prophecies were merely concocted by Hebrew leaders to assert their authority over the people through this attribution of divine election.

IV. The prophecies of the Bible are false because they have been contradicted by history. None of the promises made by Christ in particular have been fulfilled.

V. Christian doctrine and morality offend common sense, are absurd and dangerous. In particular, Meslier targets five errors of doctrine (the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Eucharist, the creation of man and sin) and

three errors of morality. He violently attacks Catholic doctrine and morality, which preach renunciation of pleasure in favor of suffering and condemn carnal love by threatening sinners with the flames of hell. But the most serious error, in Meslier's eyes, is the concept of forgiving one's enemies, as it justifies oppression. He believes that advocating love for one's enemies, doing good to those who harm you, and enduring insults without seeking revenge or showing anger only serves to overturn principles of justice, allowing the oppression of the good and weak while favoring the wicked. This, in his view, is the most destructive error of all. Meslier argues that it is a natural right to hate evil and those who unjustly harm us. He contends that people have the right to rebel against their oppressors and should not passively accept unjust treatment.

VI. Christianity allows and promotes oppression, inequality and injustice, which he sees as the root cause of the misery endured by the majority. Meslier denounces the abuses of the Catholic Church, its accumulation of wealth, the tyranny of the powerful elite it supports and legitimizes. The nobles, backed by the Church, possess all the wealth and are nothing but vermin that corrode the social fabric. Meslier proposes a new social regime based on communal ownership of goods. He advocates for a system where the land should belong to those who work it: everyone should have access to equal sustenance, to heated lodgings, and the clothing they need.

VII. God does not exist. If God were real, His existence would be evident and His will would be clearly communicated to humanity, rather than leaving people to dispute and debate over his nature and intentions. Meslier questions the need for humans to abandon their reason in order to believe in God, as he believes this opens the door to deception and manipulation. Furthermore, he finds it inconceivable that a perfect being would create such an imperfect and suffering-filled universe, full of evils, vices, and malevolence. The existence of suffering and the plight of most human beings in this world seem incompatible with the idea of an all-powerful and benevolent God.

VIII. The only necessary existence is that of matter. Why should we assume the existence of another invisible reality? The very idea of creation from nothing is absurd. The soul is not a spiritual substance but a modification of matter, and as such, mortal. Therefore, there is no afterlife to hope for, as there is no existence beyond the physical realm of matter.

In his conclusion, Meslier praises regicide and calls on the oppressed to unite against their oppressors. He encourages those of his readers who are the most enlightened and influential to support the oppressed in their struggle for liberation.

Le *Memoir* de Meslier contains the most violent indictment ever written against Christianity. He attacks religion not in itself due to its perceived absurdity but because he stands against the injustices of his time: the irrationality of religious beliefs reflect the irrationality of the social and political order. He strongly denounces the teachings that advocate enduring the actions of the wicked, loving one's enemies, and doing good to those who harm us: "it is obviously a natural right, natural reason, natural equality and justice to preserve our life and goods against those who want to take them from us unjustly. And as it is natural to hate evil, it is also natural to hate those who unjustly do evil" (p.267, Meslier, 2009). To endure insults not only without seeking revenge but also without becoming angry or complaining is to want to disrupt the order of things, to overturn principles of justice, to allow the good and the weak to be oppressed, and to favor the wicked. Meslier identifies the religious establishment, as it exists in his time, as the major obstacle to the emancipation of oppressed peoples. All religions are instruments of oppression, and to fight against tyranny is first and foremost to destroy religion. This union of religious and social critique constitutes the great originality of Meslier's *Memoir*.

On November 22, 1768, Diderot wrote to his mistress Sophie Volland: "It is raining bombs in the house of the Lord". These bombs are anti-Christian writings like the *Letters to Eugenia* (*Lettres à Eugénie*), *The Sacred Contagion* (*La Contagion sacrée*) or the *Examination of the Prophecies* (*Examen des prophéties*). He could have quoted *Christianity Unveiled* (*Le Christianisme dévoilé*), the first polemical work of his friend Baron d'Holbach, published two years earlier, and which also had the effect of a bomb. In the mid-century, simultaneously with the publication of the final volumes of the *Encyclopédie*, d'Holbach and his friends released a large number of anti-Christian works in quick succession, in which

they vehemently criticized the moral and political influence of the Christian religion and its clergy. Their theses are easy to summarize. History and experience show that supernatural religions are morally useless, politically dangerous, contrary to the progress of reason, and flawed in their origins, doctrines, and representatives. Christian dogma is a fabric of legends, contradictions, impostures, and barbarous precepts. Prophecies and miracles defy common sense. The history of the councils, which gradually elaborated the dogma, is one of immoral bargaining, power struggles, so that theology in its entirety is a vast deception, intended to keep human reason under tutelage. Since human beings seek their own happiness and that of others, religion is not justified, as it makes life a valley of tears and limits itself to promises of happiness in the afterlife, combined with the threat of the worst punishments. *Christianity Unveiled* ends with these words:

We have seen, above, that the Christian religion is not, on account of its fanatic virtues, blind zeal, and pretended perfections, the less injurious to sound morality, right reason, the happiness of individuals, and domestic harmony. It is easy to perceive that a Christian who proposes to himself as a model, a gloomy and suffering God, must take pains to afflict and render himself wretched. If this world be only a passage, if this life be only a pilgrimage, it must be ridiculous for man to attach himself to anything here below. If his God be offended with either the actions or opinions of his fellow creatures, he must do everything in his power, to punish them with severity, or be wanting in zeal and affection to his God. A good Christian must flee the world or become a torment to himself and others.

These reflections are sufficient to answer those who pretend that the Christian religion is the foundation of true policy and morality, and that where it is not possessed there can be neither good men nor good citizens. The converse of this proposition is undoubtedly much truer; for, we may assert, that a perfect Christian, who conforms to all principles of his religion, who faithfully imitates the divine men proposed to him as a model, and practices their austerities in solitude, or carries their fanatic enthusiasm and bigotry into society, must be either useless to mankind, or a troublesome and dangerous citizen (p.141-142, d'Holbach, 1835).

To free oneself from religion is not to fall into immorality. On the contrary, properly developed natural laws of society will create useful and wise citizens, while religion has always engendered countless and monstrous crimes. Far from guiding and obliging man to virtue, religion provides him with the means to exempt himself from it. The practice of confession and penance, the hope that a final repentance will cancel the faults of a whole life, all these maneuvers maintain man in sin rather than removing him from it. Philosophers unanimously denounce the failure of religious morality and the reactionary role of the Church in society. Morality, they declare, must be independent of religion; it is not founded in the word of God but in the very nature of man. In the realm of sexuality in particular, desire is not morally reprehensible, but innocent and natural; what is forbidden by religion is recommended by nature.

5. For a secular morality

In 1683, Pierre Bayle's *Miscellaneous Reflections occasioned by the comet (Pensées diverses sur la comète)* made a splash by declaring that morality is independent of religion. Why? Because virtue is not a matter of belief. Common opinion suggests that men who fear God avoid sin as much as possible, while those who do not believe have no reason to refrain from indulging in all imaginable vices. A serious mistake, replies Bayle:

When one compares the practice of a man pretending to religion, with the general idea conceived of such a man's manners, it is surprising not to find the least conformity between them. The general idea represents a man, who, believing a God, a heaven, and a hell, cleaves to what he

knows most pleasing to him, and shuns what he thinks displeasing. But the man's life shews, he takes the quite contrary cause. [...] He almost always follows the reigning passion of his soul, the biases of his constitution, the force of inveterate habits, and his taste and tenderness for some objects more than others (vol.I, p.272, Bayle, 1708).

As a consequence, a society that did without religious references would be just as moral, or at least no less immoral, than a society of Christians. Daily experience sufficiently proves that "man does not act his principles" (vol.I, p.274, Bayle, 1708). The reason is that man does not act according to his reason but according to his temperament. Religion, Bayle concludes, does not necessarily lead to the practice of virtue; from a social point of view, atheists can behave as well as Christians. In certain cases, atheism may even inspire more dedication and charity than the principles of the Gospel. A century later, d'Holbach will openly state: instead of inspiring love for one's neighbor, the zeal which accompanies a sincere love for God "has been the source of the terrible persecutions of which Christians have so often been guilty", has caused "members of the same state, and the same family, to detest and torment each other for opinions, and puerile ceremonies" and "kindled those religious wars so remarkable for their atrocity" (p.101, d'Holbach, 1835).

It is difficult to appreciate nowadays the scandal that the "Bayle paradox" once aroused. Atheism tends to undermine the foundations of society: no human community can survive without a religion that governs souls. Most of the Enlightenment philosophers were more or less of the same opinion, which Voltaire condensed in 1769 into this famous statement: "If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent Him" (vol.XV, p.22, Voltaire, 1901). At the same time, the Sorbonne vehemently denounced the "false maxims of atheism, deism, materialism, etc., which sever all the ties of society, destroy the restraint of conscience, obliterate the distinction between good and evil, and open the door to all sorts of crimes. Its power also extends to repress any other doctrine capable of shaking the foundations of Catholic doctrine, undermining the purity of its faith, and challenging the sanctity of its morals" (p.120-122, *Censure*, 1767).

Fifteen years after his paradox on atheism, Bayle caused a new scandal with his article *David* in the *Historical and Critical Dictionary* (*Dictionnaire historique et critique*, 1697). In this article, Bayle emphasized the immorality of the second king of the Hebrews: his adultery with Bathsheba, his polygamy, the murder of Uriah, his deadly expeditions, his cruelty, and his illegal actions, etc. If one reads the Old Testament with the eyes of a non-believer, David is undoubtedly one of the greatest criminals in Jewish, if not ancient, history. But the question is precisely whether David can be judged like other men. According to the Bible, David is "the man after God's own heart". Since David is portrayed as a righteous and pious man, the moral criteria that apply to other men cannot be applied to him.

Bayle, on the other hand, does not at all appreciate good King David in this way. "To speak plainly", he exclaims, his "conduct was very unjustifiable [...]. If a private man, how great soever by birth, should behave himself nowadays, as David did [...], he would, undoubtedly, be called by names of little honor" (vol.I, p.368-369, Bayle, 1826). Bayle argues that an individual does not have the right to commit such actions, and that David did indeed commit crimes. This Hebrew king is nothing more than a bloodthirsty condottiere, a traitor, a liar, and a villain of the worst kind. He cannot rightly be excused, for no one is above the law, and even saints must be "judged by the general notions of justice and order" (vol.I, p.370, Bayle, 1826). Two moral perspectives clash in the case of David: on one hand, the principles of a universal morality that applies to everyone, and on the other, a religious and particular morality that allows certain crimes to be excused. For Bayle, morality has a universal value and does not tolerate relativism. Clearly referencing the controversy sparked by Bayle's article on *David*, Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary* contrasts the principles of universal morality with various religious, partisan, and sectarian moralities. "It is to the interest of mankind that crime should in no case be sanctified", he declares in the article *David*. It doesn't matter what name a criminal like David is given, "who massacres the wives and children of his allies; who saws his unhappy captives in two, tears them into pieces with harrows, or burns them in brick-kilns? These actions we judge, and not the letters which compose the name of the criminal" (vol.IV-2, p.61, Voltaire, 1901). "There is but one morality", says Voltaire in the article *Morality*, "as there is but one

geometry [...] morality is the same among all men who make use of their reason” (vol.VI-2, p.19, Voltaire, 1901). Voltaire denies that normally constituted men can find it morally acceptable to kill a poor man or gouge out his eyes instead of rescuing him: “It is evident to the whole world”, he asserts in the article *Just and unjust*, “that a benefit is more honorable to the performer than an outrage, that gentleness is preferable to fury” (vol.VI-1, p.28, Voltaire, 1901). Like knowledge, morality is not a matter of convention, custom... or religion. A religious morality is a partisan morality that necessarily privileges obedience to God and the prophet over virtue-beneficence. “What is virtue?”, asks Voltaire in the article devoted to this notion. The answer is as simple as it is obvious: “Beneficence towards your neighbor” (vol.VII-2, p.163, Voltaire, 1901). One is virtuous whenever one does good, provided it is for others. Virtue is only exercised within society; it resides entirely in the exchange of benevolence between individuals. Voltaire continually praises the great emperors of antiquity, such as Marcus Aurelius, Trajan, and others who ruled with justice and moderation. But at a time when Socrates, Virgil, or Seneca could at best claim a place in Limbo, at the gates of Hell⁸, the virtue of the pagans was not at all self-evident. An extremist position, dating back to Saint Augustine, even postulates that the good actions of pagans cannot be strictly qualified as virtuous. According to this rigorous doctrine, true virtue can only be found in someone who acts for the sake of God; when actions are carried out for personal interest or based on motives other than the love of God, “they were not performed by a good will, for an unbelieving and ungodly will is not a good will”; consequently, “the works of unbelievers [...] do not lead them to everlasting salvation and the kingdom” (p.198, 197, Augustine, 1957). Only the intention allows us to distinguish true virtues from those that only appear to be virtuous: given over to greed, the pagans had virtues that were mostly superficial, closely resembling vices, and as such, useless for salvation. Even in the 18th century, many churchmen believed that it was out of the question to save the great men of antiquity who displayed moral perfection, or the coming of Christ was rendered pointless. The salvation of a Christian cannot be conceived without the three theological virtues: faith, hope, and charity, which are infused by God into the souls of the faithful to make them capable of deserving eternal life. Voltaire, on the other hand, performs a turn this accusation on its head by suggesting that Christian morality is sometimes incompatible with morality in general. To consider virtue as an action pleasing to God and not to men is to open the door to fanaticism. “What can be said in an answer to a man”, he asks in the article *Fanaticism*, “who says he will rather obey God than men, and who consequently feels certain of meriting heaven by cutting your throat?” (vol.V-1, p.18, Voltaire, 1901). This unanswered question echoes Bayle’s disillusioned observation, as he acknowledged in the *Response to a Provincial’s Questions*, that the fanatic can believe, sincerely, that he has the right, even the duty, to commit horrors to the greater glory of God: “a man who convinces himself that by exterminating heresies, he advances the kingdom of God and earns a higher degree of glory in paradise [...]; such a man will trample upon all moral rules, and far from being restrained by remorse, he will feel impelled by his conscience to use all means to prevent blasphemy against the holy name of God and to establish orthodoxy on the ruins of heresy” (vol.IV, p.292, Bayle, 1704-07).

Great men are neither assassins in the name of their faith nor ascetics who, preoccupied with their own salvation, impose on themselves an austere life of mortification and abstinence. A hermit is not virtuous, says Voltaire in the article *Virtue* of the *Philosophical Dictionary*, because he leads a perfectly useless life. In Montesquieu’s *The Persian Letters*, the Persian Usbek sends a letter to his brother, a Mohammedan monk (“santon”) at the monastery of Casbin, whose hyperbolic oriental style brings out all the more the ironic criticism of monastic life:

I humble and prostrate myself before you, holy santon; your footprints are to me as the pupils of my eyes. Your sanctity is so great that you seem to have the heart of our sacred Prophet; your austerities astonish heaven itself; the angels have watched you from the summit of glory and have

⁸ We remember *The Divine Comedy* where Virgil explains to Dante that Limbo houses the souls of those who lived before the birth of Christ and therefore could not have the true faith, as well as those who lived after Christ and were not baptized (*Hell*, Canto IV, v. 24-42).

said, “How is it that he is still on earth, since his soul is with us, flying about the throne borne up by the clouds?”

How should I not honor you, I who have learned from our doctors [...] that God has chosen from all regions of the earth some souls more pure than others, whom he has separated from the impious world, that their mortifications and fervent prayers might hold in suspense his anger, ready to fall upon the rebellious multitudes?

The Christians tell of the miracles of their early santons, thousands of whom sought refuge in the fearful Theban deserts under the leadership of Paul, Anthony, and Pachomius. If what is said of them is true, their lives were as full of prodigies as those of our most sacred imams. Ten entire years sometimes passed without their seeing a single man, but day and night they lived with demons and were ceaselessly tormented by malignant spirits who sought them out of bed and at table; no asylum from them was possible (p.154-155, Montesquieu, 1999).

The philosophers reject the religious fanaticism of those who deprive themselves of earthly pleasures for the love of God, all those saints whose (often legendary) lives are still read and recounted for the greater edification of the faithful. Christian morality is in itself impracticable and alienating; it is even corrupting and asocial: if everyone acted like Pachomius and the stylites, human society would cease to exist. In the name of universal morality, declares Diderot in *Philosophical Thoughts*, hermits and other denouncers of the flesh are not saints but enemies of society, and even of humanity: “It is the very height of madness to propose the ruin of the passions. A fine design, truly, in your devotee, to torment himself like a convict in order to desire nothing, love nothing, and feel nothing. He would end by becoming a monster, if he were to succeed” (p.28-29, Diderot, 2016). The demands of Christian morality are incompatible with human nature, adds d’Holbach; a good part of humanity’s woes come from the fact that “the practices and duties alleged which superstition prescribes to men” have everywhere “taken the place of the true duties which Nature imposes on them” (vol.II, p.81, d’Holbach, 1768).

The Fifth Proof of Meslier’s *Memoir* outlines the fundamental reasons why the atheistic priest believes that the natural rules of behavior oppose those that Christian morality seeks to impose on humanity. As mentioned in Chapter 40, three moral errors are denounced. The first is that it considers the pursuit of suffering as a perfection of virtue; the second is that it condemns sexuality, whether it be in “the natural pleasures of the body” or in desires and thoughts alone, as “lecherous inclinations and vices worthy of eternal punishment and reprobation” (p.265-66, Meslier, 2009). All of this is not only contrary to natural morality but also against common sense: it is ridiculous and absurd. Nature has created man to be happy, but Christian morality does everything to prevent it.

To understand the Church’s attitude towards women and sexuality, one must go back to the first chapter of Genesis and the story of the creation of woman. Based on this passage and the account of the Fall, women were considered fundamentally different from men and afflicted with an original curse. Unlike Adam, woman was not created in the image of God but from man, as a tool for man, his housekeeper. “Man was not created for woman, but woman for man”, explains Saint Paul (1 Corinthians 11:9). It follows that “the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man” (1 Corinthians 11:3). Hence the advice: “Wives, be subject to your husbands” (Ephesians 5:22-23). In Paul’s writings, there is a deep hatred and contempt for the body, love, desire, and pleasure. He admits to the Corinthians: “I punish my body and bring it into subjection” (1 Corinthians 9:27). Although the Gospels themselves do not provide a systematic discussion on these topics, they do represent Jesus as teaching on “becoming a eunuch for the Kingdom of Heaven” (Matthew 19:12). Paul detests sexuality, celebrates chastity and abstinence, and praises celibacy; marriage is considered second best: “But if they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn” (1 Corinthians 7:9). The First Epistle to the Corinthians and the Epistle to the Ephesians form the basis of Catholic dogma that God conferred preeminence to men over women: “The established order of God is that the inferior is subject to the superior, the less perfect to the more perfect, and therefore woman to man. Man is nobler than woman, as taught by Saint Augustine, first because man is the principle of woman, the first woman having been formed from man; second because man is stronger, more

industrious, and has more authority to preside” (p.289, Maillard, 1643). After the Epistles of Saint Paul, it was the writings of Saint Augustine that had a lasting influence on the Church’s position on women and sexuality: “Saint Augustin says, she becomes the scholar of a serpent, the gate of sin, the fountain of error and the rust of piety [...]. The first woman ungrateful towards God, a traitress to her husband, a murderess of her race, made a bridge for Satan to pass into the world” (p.101, Caussin, 1664). According to Saint Augustine, sexuality only has meaning when it aims at procreation. Outside of this purpose, when it is exercised solely for pleasure, it falls under the condemnation of sin. Unlike in other civilizations, including among the Jews, Christian marriage is not merely a human institution but possesses a spiritual dimension. It is considered a “great sacrament”, and as such, it is deemed indissoluble. The primary purpose of marriage is procreation; sexual pleasure alone is not considered legitimate (Clark, 1996).

During the Classical Age, there were two kinds of libertinism, though the distinction between them is somewhat artificial. The first kind consisted of libertines of the spirit or free-thinkers who displayed a critical attitude towards the dominant influence of the Church and religion over all areas of knowledge and daily life. The second kind practiced moral libertinism, which involved the denial of sin. In reality, the terms “libertine” and “atheist” quickly became synonymous. According to defenders of religion, impiety inevitably leads to immorality; therefore, an intellectually free person is also seen as morally libertine, debauched, and depraved, as it is believed that the nonbeliever lacks a moral compass. It is true that free-thinkers also engaged in behaviors, at least in their works, that were considered part of moral libertinism at the time. Libertine wisdom revalued that which was repressed and denied by the Catholic Church and conventional morality: namely, sex and women (Girerd, 2007). This is a real “erotic ethic” that includes a moral critique of modesty, particularly female modesty, which the libertine opposes with openness and emancipation. Many erotic novels of the Classical Age revolve around the initiation of a young girl into libertinism, with this sexual initiation often depicted as liberation from any form of authority. Based on the transgression of accepted norms, libertine literature fully participates in the Enlightenment project by aiming to “reveal the truth” and combat authorities, prejudices, and obscurantism. Around 1658, we read in *The Dialogues of Luisa Sigea (Aloisiae Sigeae Toletanae satyra sotadica)*, a famous novel attributed to Nicolas Chorier or Denis Salvaing de Boissieu: “The virile spear that opens our vulva also opens our concealed therein” (p.69, Chorier, 1965). This means that women gain access to reason on the day they lose their virginity. It is through sexual experience that young girls acquire enlightenment: positive knowledge about sexuality enables them to break free from religious discourse and the guilt associated with the body. The libertine who initiates a young woman into sexuality also opens her mind, liberating her from obedience to parental or religious authorities. Religion denies the erotic body and directs Eros towards an invisible and transcendent dimension, reserving love only for God. The libertine, on the other hand, rehabilitates sexuality and pleasure, redirecting love away from transcendence and transforming it into libidinous desire. Taking on the role of the priest, the libertine proclaims what is healthy, removing chastity and continence from the catalog of virtues, and refusing to consider masturbation as a vice. Virginity is a false honor with no rational justification, imposed on young girls as a divine obligation. In many cases, libertine literature aims at emancipation, highlighting that both men and women should freely utilize all their senses to achieve full intellectual development. Breaking free from subjugation and ignorance, rejecting the guardianship of mother and future husband, and embracing independence, knowledge, erotic awareness, and pleasure: this is the truly philosophical dimension of many texts depicting a woman’s sexual education.

In the 18th century, the most famous erotico-philosophical novel of the Enlightenment, *Thérèse the Philosopher (Thérèse philosophe)* published anonymously in 1748 and long attributed to the Marquis d’Argens, critiques the sexual morality of Judeo-Christianity by presenting the story of a progressive sexual and philosophical initiation, where the discovery of physical pleasures goes hand in hand with the broadening of intellectual horizons. It represents a counter-education, opposed to Christian education. At the age of seven, the precocious heroine starts experiencing pleasure through “fingering” activities, described by her mother using terms like “indecenty” and “mortal sin”. Between nine and ten years old, Thérèse engages in erotic games with other boys and girls of the same age in an attic. At eleven, she is sent

to a convent where she confesses for the first time before an “old Father Guardian”, a Capuchin monk who also advises her mother’s conscience. Thérèse believes she has nothing to confess, but she is cruelly disillusioned. Her confessor is aware of the nightly activities she engages in, and he informs her that her mother had told him “of your lack of chastity, this foulest of all evils”. The condemnation of masturbation is delivered in the strongest terms, which terrifies Thérèse. Her reaction is in line with the shock of what she has just heard: “My cheeks were covered with a deep red blush and my eyes dropped to the floor. I remained mute and silent. For the first time I had an inkling that our harmless little games could have been sinful”.

To combat her passions, the confessor commands fasting, prayer, meditation, and a hair shirt, then ends with urgent counsel:

“Never,” he told me, “never ever touch with your hand that filthy part of your body. Don’t even cast a glance upon it. It is the very apple which tempted Adam and which caused the fall of the race of man and the expulsion from Paradise. In it lives the devil who brought us to our doom. It is his home, his throne. Don’t allow yourself to be captured by this enemy of God and man. Soon, nature will cover this filthy part of your belly with ugly hairs, like those of the wild beasts in the forest. It is our punishment to remind you that you have to be ashamed of it, and from then on it will be hidden in darkness, and, God grant you, forgetfulness. But, my child, be even more careful with that piece of flesh the little boys have. You may have thought it fun up there in the attic, but, my daughter, that piece of flesh is the snake who tempted the mother of us all, Eve. Don’t allow yourself to become dishonored by touching this piece of meat, or even by looking upon it. It is intent upon biting you, poisoning you, and, if it can, gorging itself upon you.

From the outset, sexuality is explained through a reference to the story of the Fall, caused by the woman, which led to the expulsion of the first humans from paradise and the emergence of evil on earth. The confessor begins by using a morally connoted term, “filthy”, to devalue Thérèse’s genital organ; then, he resorts to two biblical metaphors, the apple and the serpent, to designate—and depreciate—sex itself. The woman’s sex is the “home” of the demon, the “enemy of God”, a medieval concept that linked Satanism, witchcraft, and female sexuality: a witch was not only someone who practiced malevolent magic but also a person who had made a pact with the devil, paying him homage in orgiastic encounters. The confessor insinuates that women should behave like nature, which covers their sex with “ugly hairs”: that is, hide and forget sexual desire, a pure animal instinct. Nature is seen here as obeying divine providence: pubic hair is not the natural result of puberty; interpreted as a blemish, it is meant to mark the shameful nature of sex and sexuality.

The man’s sex, on the other hand, is not burdened with guilt. While it is identified with the serpent that tempted Eve, it is not the embodiment of the devil, who, as just learned, only resides in the female sex. This “piece of flesh” is the “snake” that Eve did not mistrust enough in paradise. Thérèse is thus invited to do better than Eve in order not to become guilty in turn. It is the man who tempts the woman by darting the venom, but it is the woman who must avoid succumbing to temptation; otherwise, all the blame falls on her.

The entrance of Abbe T... in the novel marks the beginning of a new type of discourse, a materialistic, concrete, and non-symbolic discourse. We move away from fantasy to discover a simple and clear explanation of sexuality. According to Abbe T..., sexual desire is a natural instinct, just like hunger and thirst: one does not offend God by yielding to it. The moralizing discourse of the confessor, which blames and condemns, and has instilled a strong sense of guilt in Thérèse, gives way to an almost clinical or technical discourse, where masturbation is presented as a necessary action: since it is a “feeling which nature has implanted in us, [...] it is necessary to release the tensions which it creates at times. And mother nature also gave us a hand with fingers to satisfy the needs of our body”. Thus, the taboo that weighs on non-procreative sexuality is reversed: it becomes a duty to oneself. It is humanly impossible to live against

nature; nature is not corrupt, and man should not struggle against it to sanctify himself. Man should not exchange earthly happiness, which is partly within his grasp, for a future bliss.

Usbek and Thérèse, in their own ways, are united in a common struggle. The wise Persian and the libertine philosopher both dare to think for themselves, both question traditions and authorities, and both encounter fierce resistance from a “mullah”.

6. From tolerance to *laïcité*

If the Catholic religion is the only true religion, it follows that all others are false: the various Protestant denominations as well as the Jewish, Muslim, and other pagan beliefs. As Bossuet stated in the *Pastoral Instruction on the Church's Promises* (*Instruction pastorale sur les promesses de l'Église*): “The heretic is someone who has an opinion; and that is what the word itself means. What does it mean, to have an opinion? It means following one's own thought and one's particular sentiment. But the catholic is catholic; that is to say, he is universal, and without having any particular feeling he follows unhesitatingly that of the Church” (vol.XVII, p.112, Bossuet, 1862-66). Truth cannot be the object of opinions; to have an opinion concerning the truth is to be a “heretic”. The weakness of man in general and the insufficiency of his reason in particular do not plead for the tolerance of error but on the contrary for the unconditional submission to the truth that God has revealed to us and of which the Catholic Church is the depositary. Rousseau had understood well this incapacity of Catholics to tolerate heterodoxy, as they can only be intolerant: “It is impossible to live cordially in peace with those whom we firmly believe devoted to damnation: to love them would be to hate the Deity for punishing them; it is therefore absolutely necessary for us either to persecute or to convert them” (p.197, Rousseau, 1893).

The Catholic Church has a duty of intolerance towards those who are in error in order to bring them back to the right path, through persuasion or force. According to Abbé Malvaux, it is the essence of all truth not to tolerate the contradictory principle: “truth is essentially one, and therefore essentially intolerant” (p.x, Malvaux, 1762). The truth saves, and error damns: it is clear that this type of argumentation denies heretics any right to claim freedom of conscience. Tolerance automatically leads to impiety: to tolerate all religions, declares Abbé Yvon, is to have none at all (vol.I, p.86, Yvon, 1754). Tolerance is assimilated to indifference: to tolerate deviations and heresies is to be indifferent to the salvation of one's neighbor. The duty of a good Catholic, therefore, is to bring back those who deviate from the right path. The love of one's neighbor commands that we should not abandon them when we know that truth is one, and that eternal salvation depends on the knowledge of truth. When Bayle published his famous book on tolerance, *Philosophical Commentary* (*Commentaire philosophique*, 1686), in favor of religious toleration as a matter of principle, the Edict of Nantes had been abolished one year before. Religious toleration in Europe had for all purposes ended for the time being: revocation of the Edict renewed persecution of Protestants. In many parts of France, a Protestant had no civil existence, the legal fiction being that everyone was a Roman Catholic. There was no such thing as a civil marriage, and Protestant marriages were not recognized, nor was the legitimacy of Protestant children. Children could be taken away from their parents' custody in order to be raised by a Catholic relative. Boys could be placed in a Jesuit grammar school and girls in a convent; their conversion was declared valid as soon as they reached the age of seven. Public worship, of course, was out of the question. Many Protestants did not abjure their faith, and, having not sought refuge abroad, gathered in remote places (the “Desert”) to celebrate an outlawed worship service, and organized an underground church risking death, prison, and the galley-ships. To a Protestant at this time religious peace and freedom must have seemed almost a lost cause.⁹

⁹ It must be remembered that in eighteenth-century Geneva, the nerve-center of Calvinism, there was no such thing as religious tolerance either. No Roman Catholic could be a citizen of Geneva, and conversion to Roman Catholicism involved the loss of civil rights.

It is from the *Philosophical Commentary* principally that the ideas of the Enlightenment on the question of tolerance derive: what Bayle brings into the debate is an approach to tolerance conceived as a positive value. Bayle organizes his entire argument around the inviolable rights of conscience. The ultimate criterion of truth for man is not the authority of a Church, it is his conscience. There is no greater evil, declares Bayle, than denying one's conscience. Anything he does against what the voice of conscience commands him to do is sin. Bayle denies that God requires absolute knowledge of the truth from man. For salvation, he proclaims, "reputed truth" suffices, that is, the conviction, *true or false*, of being in the truth. In the field of belief, only the sincerity of the conviction—which can be the same in a Catholic or a Protestant—makes it possible to evaluate and validate the faith. Bayle's argument for toleration rests squarely on the assumption that there is no rational way to ascertain which is the true faith—or whether there is in fact a true faith. This argument provides the basis of Bayle's famous doctrine of the "erring conscience": an act done against one's beliefs is a sin and there may be nothing blameworthy in the dogmatic errors of a heretic. From this it follows that the erring conscience constraint, even in the perceived interest of the errant individual, is never justified: the man who makes mistakes in good faith should benefit from the same rights as the one who is—or at least believes himself to be—in immediate possession of the truth. God "requires no more of us, than to examine and search after it diligently; and that when we have examined it to the best of our power, he will accept of our assent to the objects which to us appear true, and of our love for them as for a present from Heaven" (vol.I, p.331, Bayle, 1708). Bayle keeps insisting "we are obliged to have the same deference for a reputed as for a real truth" (vol.I, p.340, Bayle, 1708). Consequently, the only reasonable course is to grant freedom of conscience and religious practice to dissenting minorities, including those whom virtually everyone thinks utterly mistaken in their beliefs.

In France the strictly repressive policy in the 18th century, sometimes bloody and cruel as in the persecution of the Protestants, sometimes minutely vexatious as in the persecution of the philosophes, had the natural effect of provoking general exasperation with the church and its intolerance of Enlightenment and hatred of knowledge. The fury of intolerance, exclaims Helvétius, prompts not only devotees of different religions to "snatch the torch from each other's hands to burn their brethren" (vol.I, p.347, Helvétius, 1777), but also those of the same religion, under the guise of charity and mercy, to slit each other's throats for "frivolous objects" (vol.II, p.304, Helvétius, 1777). Voltaire's slogan, "Crush the Infamous!", sums up the hostility of the Enlightenment against the Church. Unlike Rousseau, who wanted to stabilize the State through religion, Voltaire demanded that religions be stabilized by the State. During his stay in England in 1726-1728, he had experienced the (relative) religious tolerance which was established there and guaranteed by the Act of Toleration passed in the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution. In 1733, his *Letters concerning the English Nation* hold up English toleration of dissident protestant sects as a model for the French:

Take a view of the Royal-Exchange in London, a place more venerable than many courts of justice, where the representatives of all nations meet for the benefit of mankind. There the Jew, the Mahometan, and the Christian transact together, as though they all professed the same religion, and give the name of infidel to none but bankrupts. There the Presbyterian confides in the Anabaptist, and the Churchman depends on the Quaker's word. At the breaking up of this pacific and free assembly, some withdraw to the synagogue, and others to take a glass. This man goes and is baptized in a great tub, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost: that man has his son's foreskin cut off, whilst a set of Hebrew words (quite unintelligible to him) are mumbled over his child. Others retire to their churches, and there wait for the inspiration of heaven with their hats on, and all are satisfied.

If one religion only were allowed in England, the government would very possibly become arbitrary; if there were but two, the people would cut one another's throats; but as there are such a multitude, they all live happy and in peace (p.30, Voltaire, 1994).

In England, the problem was how to organize peaceful coexistence between the Anglican church and all of the various religious sects; in France, it was how to prevent the Catholic church from persecuting its fellow-citizens. When philosophes were writing and working in behalf of toleration, they campaigned principally for the right not to believe, rather than the right to believe. And that of course puts a totally different complexion on the matter.

Abbé Nonnotte was one of the first to understand that in the mid-18th century, the repression against Protestants was no longer appropriate. He believed that the true enemies of Catholics were the modern philosophers and their “tolerantism”, which was nothing more than a poorly disguised impiety. According to him, “tolerantism is nothing more than a disdainful indifference towards all kinds of religion, a love of independence that leads one to refuse to be subjected to any law of conscience, an air of philosopher that one assumes, and by which one feels entitled to examine and judge all religions, even though one esteems and respects none” (vol.II, p.160-161, Nonnotte, 1762). It is therefore no longer towards heretics but towards philosophers that Nonnotte calls for state intervention, in other words, civil intolerance. “It is not surprising”, he wrote, “that they preach tolerance so zealously. There is no one who needs it more than they do, and who deserves less; Because there is no one who does more harm in religion. The punishment for their audacity is within the jurisdiction of the law” (vol.II, p.161, Nonnotte, 1762). From the perspective of Catholicism as the State religion, the civil magistrate has the duty to promote Catholicism as the only true religion at the expense of other religions. Nonnotte’s book attacking “the errors of Voltaire” was published the same year the Protestant pastor Rochette was hanged for the crime of exercising his functions in Languedoc and the Protestant merchant Jean Calas was broken on the wheel in Toulouse. Voltaire’s *Treatise on Religious Toleration (Traité sur la tolérance)*¹⁰ condemned Jean Calas’ execution as legal murder, assailed religious intolerance, called for greater French tolerance of Protestants in the manner of English tolerance toward Catholics, and declared that all civilizations ultimately worship the same god—a claim that logically implies Christianity is not the only true faith. For strategic reasons, however, Voltaire did not overtly repudiate the desirability of an established religion: to do so would be to adopt a posture that would have offended his readers.

A concise summary of Voltaire’s argument for tolerance can be found in the entry on *Toleration* in his *Philosophical dictionary*: “What is toleration? It is the appurtenance of humanity. We are all full of weakness and errors; let us mutually pardon each other our follies—it is the first law of nature.” (vol.VII-2, p.100, Voltaire, 1901). Voltaire’s claim is that toleration follows from human frailty and error. Since none of us has perfect knowledge, and since we are all weak, inconsistent, liable to fickleness and error, we should pardon one another for our failings. Building on Bayle’s epistemological argument that infallible knowledge is not available to human beings, Voltaire’s approach slips toward philosophical skepticism and religious relativism. If all truths are relative, he argues in the article *Sect*, we ought to relativize our own beliefs: “If you are a Mahometan, as there are many men who are not Mahometans, you may possibly be in error” (vol.VII-1, p.181, Voltaire, 1901). A true tolerance would be one which, out of prudence, thinks that after all, one is not sure of anything and that the truth of the other may be the real truth. Since there are men who disagree with me in any area, I could be the one who is wrong.

Voltaire then approaches tolerance from another angle: in the article *Toleration*, he wonders why intolerance still persists today, because nowadays everyone accepts the validity of tolerance: “There is nobody who does not assent to this truth”. If intolerance persists, it is because the powerful and the clergy, whose power is based on the dominant religion, are imposing it for their benefit:

I possess dignity and power, which ignorance and credulity have founded. I trample on the heads of men prostrated at my feet; if they should rise and look me in the face, I am lost; they must, therefore, be kept bound down to the earth with chains of iron.

Thus have men reasoned, whom ages of fanaticism have rendered powerful. They have other persons in power under them, and these latter again have underlings, who all enrich themselves with

¹⁰ The French word for “toleration” is *tolérance*. In English “tolerance” is never used in the title of books in English up to 1780; the word used is always “toleration”, which has no equivalent in French.

the spoils of the poor man, fatten themselves with his blood, and laugh at his imbecility. They detest all toleration, as contractors enriched at the expense of the public are afraid to render their accounts, and as tyrants dread the name of liberty. To crown all, in short, they encourage fanatics who cry aloud: Respect the absurdities of my master; tremble, pay, and be silent (vol.VII-2, p.106-107, Voltaire, 1901).

In 1785, La Fayette, who was back from the American War of Independence, protested in favor of the “emancipation” of the French Protestants. He got in touch with the new superintendent of the “Churches of the Desert”, pastor Rabaut Saint-Étienne who, through La Fayette, met the government minister Malesherbes, the latter being well-known for his views in favor of a civil marriage for Protestants. Nine years after Voltaire’s death, King Louis XVI promulgated an Edict of Tolerance which granted to non-Catholics the right to practice a profession or handicraft without molestation, permission to be legally married before magistrates, and to have births officially recorded (1787). Protestants were henceforth “tolerated” in Roman Catholic France according to the very definition of the word, which implies enduring, suffering, bearing, and forbearance. In granting tolerance to Protestants without freedom of worship, the King was in reality asking his Catholic subjects that they “put up with” this religion that they viewed as inferior. One century after the Act of Toleration, the French Protestants obtained approximately the same rights as the Catholics in England. But by this time, Bayle’s concept of tolerance was supplanted by Voltaire’s, which included liberty. On the 22nd of August 1789 Rabaut Saint-Étienne called for the recognition of full freedom for all:

But Gentlemen, it is not even tolerance which I demand: it is liberty. Tolerance! Support! Pardon! Mercy! All ideas which are overwhelmingly unjust to all dissenters for as long as it is true that difference in religion or opinion is not a crime. Tolerance! I demand that the very word be banished; and it will be, this unfair word, which presents us only as citizens deserving of pity, as criminals to be pardoned [...]. Error, gentlemen, is not a crime: the person who has fallen into it takes it as the truth; it is the truth for him; he is obliged to believe in it, and no man or society has any right to prevent him (p.70-71, Warman, 2016).

A few days later, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen delineated a set of individual rights and of collective rights. It provided for freedom of speech and of the press, and a slightly weaker guarantee of freedom of religion: “No one may be disturbed on account of his opinions, even religious ones, as long as the manifestation of such opinions does not trouble the public order established by the law” (Article 10). In fact, and with hindsight, this article founded religious freedom by proclaiming first that religion is only an opinion, having no special status, and secondly that any religion can be admitted from the moment when it does not affect public safety. As soon as a religion risks being a factor of disturbance with regard to public order or compromising the common good of the social group, it is for the State to enforce the law. Article 10 of the Declaration of Human Rights lays the foundation for the edifice of secularism in that it subordinates the practice of religion to the laws of the nation. A year later, the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, which obliges men of the Church to swear “to be faithful to the Nation, to the Law, to the King”, submits the Church of France to the State. This is the first legacy of the French Enlightenment: religious beliefs are only “opinions”, the truth of which is uncertain. Far from granting unlimited freedom to all faiths in the kingdom, the men of 1789 restrained the power of the Churches, at least when they claim to interfere in public affairs. Pope Pius VI was not mistaken and strongly rejected in his brief *Quod aliquantum* (1791) “this absolute freedom [...] which not only guarantees the right not to be disturbed because of one’s religious opinions, but, beyond that, grants the freedom to think, say, write and even print as one wills everything and anything that may pass through the most unruly of imaginations” (p.352, Zamagni, 2011). For Pius VI, such religious liberty was a “monstrous right”, a form of madness.

Although the Declaration was heavily influenced by the declarations of human rights contained in the U. S. Declaration of Independence (1776), there is a fundamental difference with the First Amendment of

the Bill of Rights which states as follows: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.” Whereas this Free Exercise Clause allows governmental authority and the authority of organized religion to peacefully coexist, the Declaration of 1789 founds the French conception of secularism (*laïcité*) by clearly subordinating religious practice to public order (the article 10 is the only one that mentions public order). When a religion begins to undermine human rights and is in danger of fomenting civil disorder or compromising the well-being of society, the state must see to it that law and order are maintained.

After the Revolution, the ideal of catholic political organization—a tightly interwoven structure of the Catholic Church and secular rulers, with the Catholic church having a favoured place in the political structure—was again defended during the Restoration. The reign of Louis XVIII gave way to a struggle between ultra-monarchists and those who saw the changes wrought by the Revolution as irreversible. King Charles X, pursuing the same catholic policy as his predecessor (he made sacrilege and irreligious writing criminal offences and re-established clerical control in education), handled the conflict between reactionaries and liberals with great ineptitude. During the whole century, France was split up between “Voltaireans” and “anti-Voltaireans”, i. e. between anti-clerical republicans who wished to reduce religion to a purely private belief-system with no public profile or influence, and clerical conservatives who supported the power and influence of the clergy. At the start of the 1880s, Jules Ferry, Minister of Education, began to expel religious effigies from public schools. Then his government passed the “Jules Ferry laws”, establishing free, mandatory and lay education (1882). On 9 December 1905, a law was passed in France separating church and state. This law was based on three principles: neutrality of the state, freedom of religious observance, and protection of the public power from the influences of religious institutions. This was not a friendly separation; it was a traumatic divorce after a “high-conflict” marriage. The law of 1905 providing separation of church and state made churches an unfortunate fact to be borne, not a good to be embraced and defended. Since religion was the primary cause of conflict and war, the argument went, peace could only be achieved through a lessening of people’s passion for religion and commitment to specific doctrines. No wonder the Holy See urged Catholic priests to fight in the name of Catholicism. In 1906, Pope Pius X issued the *Vehementer Nos* encyclical denouncing the law as “a thesis absolutely false, a most pernicious error”. Sixty years later, *Dignitatis humanae*, the Vatican II declaration on religious freedom (1965), taught likewise that religion is a human good to be promoted, not an evil to be tolerated. While government should not presume to command religious acts, it should “take account of the religious life of the citizenry and show it favour”.

Many countries agree that religious practice forms part of the common good of society and should be encouraged rather than marginalized. There are three distinct church-state models applied in the United States and Western Europe. Briefly summarized, the United States employs a model that allows limited cooperation between religious organizations and government, but bars direct funding; celebrates a diverse and expressive public square, but bars state-sponsored religious expression; and treats all people equally, regardless of their religious beliefs. Western Europe, on the other hand, has two antithetical models. With the exception of France, Western European governments fund religious organizations, teach religion in public schools and have officially preferred, if not established, Churches. France’s version of Church-State separation, or *laïcité*, makes it the most secular country in Europe.

The divorce French style called *laïcité*—in other words secularism—is based on equality of rights of all citizens, independently of their opinion (ideology, philosophy, belief, religion). It is not compatible with the existence of an official ideology or religion since this would necessarily create a discrepancy of rights between the citizens adopting this official ideology or religion, and the others. The nature of the problem remains unchanged if, instead of one official religion or ideology, a pluralist society gives recognition to different religions or ideologies: this would differentiate between citizens who adopt one of the official ideologies or religions, and those who hold a different opinion. *Laïcité* is a system or an arrangement that confines religion to the strictly private domain. It is an arrangement that ensures the absence of religious affairs from political matters... and from education.

The first two principles on which the French system of education rests are freedom of education (free choice by the parents of public or private schools) and secularism. The French conception of secular education can be summarized by the distinction between education and instruction. It considers that the state would overreach its rights if it were giving “education” to children. Public school is the melting pot of the nation; its children are not yet citizens, they are future citizens. Schools should only instruct, teach facts and truths; in public school, children have to be protected from all proselytizing: public schools are proselytism-free zones, whether this proselytizing is political or religious.

Keeping religious signs out of public schools was a non-written rule for many years. It became a rule in writing (by ministerial decree) in 1937. It has never been controversial except very recently. Many comments have been made, including those of religious establishments. A declaration of Patrick Klugman, president of UEJF (French Jewish students union), at a meeting of May 6, 2003, will clearly illustrate this point of view:

France is in danger because it is losing sight of its core principles, because in schools, I no longer see citizens but tribes. Increasingly, Jews see themselves only as Jews, Christians as Christians, Muslims as Muslims [...]. I clearly state, as a young, practicing Jewish person, that neither the hidjab nor the kippa have any place in public schools. Because they do not symbolize freedom when worn by children. Who can claim that a fourteen-year-old girl is sufficiently emancipated from the weight of tradition and the authority of her family first to know what she wants and then to do it? Because a girl wearing a hidjab will be considered a Muslim before being seen as a girl, a little boy wearing a kippa will always be seen as a Jew before being seen as a little boy. The Republic has no reason to accept this injustice in the name of a so-called tolerance that may be nothing more than weakness. In so doing, it would reduce individuals to symbols.

While many states or nations permit freedom of religious *belief*, no country allows completely unrestricted freedom of religious *practice*. National laws, when they reflect important or fundamental governmental interests, may prohibit certain acts, which some citizens may claim represent the free exercise of their religious belief. In France, the understanding of *laïcité à la française* is shared by the enormous majority of French citizens and their representatives at the national parliament, whatever their religion or absence of religion; renouncing secularism would affect the nation as a whole.

Conclusion

The 17th century was the century of rationalism, of the great metaphysical systems of Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, and their followers; the Enlightenment century is the century of reason, not systematic reason but critical reason. Dogmatism was succeeded by skeptical rationalism, and its first victim was religion. The invention of philology in the Renaissance, as well as the scientific revolution of the 17th century, have left their mark: it becomes increasingly difficult to believe in Revelation—at least as preached by the men of the Church—when it contradicts reason. It becomes increasingly difficult to bear the authority of the Catholic Church when it becomes clear that the history of the Christian religion is purely human and written in letters of blood. Philosophers rebel against its deemed absurd dogmas (the Trinity, original sin, etc.) and the image of a petty God who punishes men on a whim and condemns the majority to hell, starting with the Protestants who still did not have legal existence in the “all-Catholic France” (Bayle). The idea begins to take hold that man does not need religion to live in peace with other members of society, that morality is independent of religion, and that the precepts of the Christian religion, in particular, are often opposed to human nature. The Declaration of the Rights of Man, directly inspired by Enlightenment philosophy and the U.S. Declaration of Independence, provoked the wrath of the Pope and triggered a violent reaction from the Catholic Church against modernity, culminating in the law of 1905 codifying *laïcité*, a system or arrangement that confines religion to the strictly private domain.

Bibliography

- Acta sacrae Facultatis theologiae parisiensis occasione libri qui inscribitur: Histoire naturelle, générale ou particulière, contenant les Époques de la nature.* Paris: Clousier; 1780.
- Augustine S. *Against Julian*. Translated by Matthew A. Schumacher. New York: Fathers of the Church; 1957.
- Augustine S. *On Nature and Grace*. In: *Four Anti-Pelagian Writings*. Translated by J Mourant and W Collinge. The Catholic University of America Press; 1992.
- Bayle P. *Dictionnaire historique et critique*. Troisième édition, revue, corrigée et augmentée par l'auteur. Rotterdam: M. Bohm; 1720, 4 vols.
- Bayle P. *An Historical and Critical Dictionary, selected and abridged*. London: Hunt and Clarke; 1826, 4 vols.
- Bayle P. *Miscellaneous Reflections, occasioned by the comet which appeared in December 1680*. London: J. Morphew; 1708, 2 vols.
- Bayle P. *A Philosophical Commentary on These Words of the Gospel, Luke XIV. 23: Compel them to come in, that my House may be full*. London: J. Darby; 1708, 2 vols.
- Bayle P. *Réponse aux questions d'un provincial*. Rotterdam: R. Leers; 1704-07, 5 vols.
- Bekker B. *The World Bewitched, or an Examination of the Common Opinions Concerning Spirits*. London: R. Baldwin; 1695.
- Benítez M. *La Face cachée des Lumières. Recherches sur les manuscrits philosophiques clandestins de l'Age classique*. Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation; Paris: Universitas; 1996.
- Bergier N-S. *Dictionnaire de théologie*, Paris: Panckoucke; Liège: Plomteux; 1788-1790, 3 vols.
- Bernardin de Saint-Pierre J-H. *Studies of nature*. Translated by H Hunter. Fifth edition. London: C. Dilly; 1809, 4 vols.
- Bossuet J-B. *Instruction pastorale sur les promesses de l'Église*. In: *Œuvres complètes*. Paris: Louis Vivès; 1862-66, 31 vols.
- Bossuet J-B. *An Introduction To, Or a Short Discourse Concerning, Universal History*. London: R. Reily; 1728-29, 2 vol.
- Buffon G-L Leclerc. *Natural History*. London: Printed by the proprietor; 1797, 10 vols.
- Buffon G-L Leclerc. *The Epochs of Nature*. Translated and edited by J Zalasiewicz, A-S Milon, and M Zalasiewicz. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press; 2018.
- Calmet A. *Commentaire littéral sur tous les livres de l'Ancien et du Nouveau Testament*. Paris: P. Emery; 1707-16, 23 vols.
- Cambridge Companion to Voltaire (The)*. Cambridge University Press; 2009.
- Caussin N. *The Holy Court*. Translated into English by T H[awkins] and others. Third edition. London: J. W.; 1664.
- Censure de la Faculté de théologie de Paris contre le livre qui a pour titre Bélisaire*. Paris: Veuve Simon; 1767.
- Chorier N. *The Dialogues of Luisa Sigea*. North Hollywood, CA: Brandon House; 1965.
- Clark EA (ed.). *St. Augustine on Marriage and Sexuality*. Washington D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press; 1996.
- Cotoni M-H. *L'Exégèse du Nouveau Testament dans la philosophie française du XVIIIe siècle*. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation; 1984.
- Curran A. *Diderot and the art of thinking freely*. New York: Other Press; 2019.
- Denyse J. *La Vérité de la religion chrétienne démontrée par ordre géométrique*. Paris: J. Delaulne; 1717.
- Deruette S (ed.). *Jean Meslier, curé et athée révolutionnaire*. Bruxelles: Éditions Aden; 2008.
- Diderot D. *Early Philosophical Works*. Translated and edited by M Jourdain. Chicago: Open Court; 2016.

- Easlea B. *Witch Hunting, Magic, and the New Philosophy: An Introduction to Debates of the Scientific Revolution, 1450-1750*. England: Harvester Press Ltd.; 1980.
- Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*. Paris: Le Breton et al.; Neuchâtel: S. Faulche; 1751-72, 28 vols.
- Fontenelle B. Le Bouvier de. *Of the Origin of Fables*. In Feldman B, Richardson R. *The Rise of Modern Mythology. 1680-1860*. Bloomington/London: Indiana University Press; 1972.
- Fréret N. *Examen critique des apologistes de la religion chrétienne*. 1766.
- Girerd C. *La Sagesse libertine*. Paris: Grasset; 2007.
- Helvétius C-A. *A Treatise on Man, his Intellectual Faculties and his Education*. A posthumous work of M. Helvetius. Translated from the French, with additional notes, by W. Hooper. London: B. Law and G. Robinson; 1777, 2 vols.
- Holbach P d'. *Christianity Unveiled, Being an Examination of the Principles and Effects of the Christian Religion*. From the French [...] by W. M. Johnson. New York: 1835.
- Holbach P d'. *Ecce homo! A Critical Inquiry into the History of Jesus Christ, being a Rational Analysis of the Gospels*. London: 1799.
- Holbach P d'. *La Contagion sacrée, ou Histoire naturelle de la superstition*. Londres: 1768, 2 vols.
- Huet P-D. *Demonstratio evangelica*. Paris: Michallet; 1679.
- Kant E. *Answer to the question: What is Enlightenment?* In: *Philosophical Writings*. New York: Continuum; 1986.
- Kors A-C. *D'Holbach's Coterie. An Enlightenment in Paris*. Princeton University Press; 1976.
- Lecky W-E-H. *The History of European Moral from Augustus to Charlemagne*. London: Longmans, Green, and Co; 1869, 2 vols.
- Le Clerc D. *Historia naturalis et medica latorum lumbricorum*. Geneva: de Tournes; 1715.
- Le Pelletier J. *Dissertations sur l'arche de Noé, et sur l'hémine et la livre de saint Benoît*. Rouen: Besogne; 1700.
- Lyon J. The Sorbonne's Condemnation of the *Histoire naturelle* (1751). *From Natural History to the History of Nature*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press; 1981: 283-94.
- Maillard C. *Le Bon mariage, ou le moyen d'être heureux et faire son salut en état de mariage*. Douai: J. Serrurier; 1643.
- Maillet B de. *Telliamed, or Discourses between an Indian Philosopher and a French Missionary, on the Diminution of the Sea, the Formation of the Earth, the Origin of Men and Animals, and other Curious Subjects, relating to Natural History and Philosophy*. London: T. Osborne; 1750.
- Malvaux. *Accord de la religion et de l'humanité sur l'intolérance*. 1762.
- Meeker N. 'I Resist no Longer': Enlightened Philosophy and Feminine Compulsion in Thérèse philosophe. *Eighteenth-Century Studies* (2006) 39(3): 363-76.
- Meslier J. *Testament: Memoir of the Thoughts and Sentiments of Jean Meslier*. Translated by Michael Shreve. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books; 2009.
- Montesquieu C Secondat de. *The Persian Lettres*. Translated, with Introduction by G R Healy. Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company; 1999 [1964].
- Morellet A. *Le Manuel des Inquisiteurs, à l'usage des Inquisitions d'Espagne et de Portugal. Ou abrégé de l'ouvrage intitulé: Directorium inquisitorum, composé vers 1358 par Nicolas Eymeric, Grand Inquisiteur dans le royaume d'Aragon. On y a joint une courte histoire de l'établissement de l'Inquisition dans le royaume de Portugal, tirée du latin de Louis de Paramo*. Lisbonne: 1762.
- Mortier R. La remise en question du christianisme au XVIIIe siècle. *Problèmes d'histoire du christianisme* (1973) 1: 39-69.
- Nonnotte C-F. *Les Erreurs de Voltaire*. Avignon: 1762, 3 vols.
- Petavius (Petau) D. *De doctrina temporum*. Paris: S. Cramoisy; 1627, 2 vols.
- Porter R. Charles Lyell and the Principles of the History of Geology. *The British Journal for the History of Science* (1976) 32(2): 91-103.

- Rousseau J-J. *Letter to Beaumont, Letters Written from the Mountain, and Related Writings*. Translated by C Kelly and J Bush. Hanover/London: Dartmouth College/University Press of New England; 2001.
- Rousseau J-J. *The Social Contract: Or, Principles of Political Law. Also, A Project for a Perpetual Peace*. New York: P. Eckler; 1893.
- Rousseau and *l'Infâme: Religion, Toleration, and Fanaticism in the Age of Enlightenment*. Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi; 2009.
- Roussopoulos D (ed.). *Faith in Faithlessness. An Anthology of Atheism*. Montreal/New York/London: Black Rose Books; 2008.
- Scripture Documents (The): An Anthology of Official Catholic Teachings*. Edited and translated by D Béchard, Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press; 2002.
- Stenger G. From toleration to *laïcité*: Bayle, Voltaire and the *Declaration of the Rights of Man*. *Dialogue and Universalism* (2021) 31: 145-161.
- Stengers J. Buffon et la Sorbonne. *Études sur le dix-huitième siècle* (1974) 1: 97-127.
- Temporarius (Du Temps) J. *Chronologicarum demonstrationum libri tres*. Francfort: Wecheli heredes; 1596.
- Thérèse the Philosopher and the Story of Mrs. Bois-Laurier*. Translated by C Carrington, Locus Elm Press; 2014: Kindle Edition.
- Voltaire: *Letters concerning the English Nation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 1994.
- Voltaire: *Œuvres complètes*. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation; 1968-2022, 148 vols.
- Voltaire: *The Philosophy of History*. Translated [...] by H W Gandell. London: T. North; 1829.
- Voltaire: *A Treatise on Religious Toleration, occasioned by the execution of the unfortunate John Calas*. London: B. Johnson; 1820.
- Voltaire: *Works. A Contemporary Version*. Trans. W Fleming. New York: DuMont; 1901, 21 vols.
- Tolerance. The Beacon of the Enlightenment*. Translated by Caroline Warman et al. Open Book Publishers; 2016.
- Young D. *The Biblical Flood: A Case Study of the Church's Response to Extrabiblical Evidence*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; 1995.
- Yvon C. *Liberté de conscience resserrée dans les bornes légitimes*. Londres: 1754, 3 vols.
- Zamagni G. Re(dis)covering humanity: the catholic church and human rights. In: *The Quest for a Common Humanity. Human Dignity and Otherness in the Religious Traditions of the Mediterranean*. Leiden/Boston, MA: Brill; 2011: 349-61.