

Excerpts from
Voltaire's
A Treatise on Toleration (1763)

Whether it is Useful to Maintain People in their Superstition

Such is the feebleness of humanity, such is its perversity, that doubtless it is better for it to be subject to all possible superstitions, as long as they are not murderous, than to live without religion. Man always needs a rein [a control, like on a horse], and even if it might be ridiculous to sacrifice to fauns, or sylvans, or naiads [mythological Greek gods], it is much more reasonable and more useful to venerate these fantastic images of the Divine than to sink into atheism. An atheist who is rational, violent, and powerful, would be as great a pestilence as a blood-mad, superstitious man. When men do not have healthy notions of the Divinity, false ideas supplant them, just as in bad times one uses counterfeit money when there is no good money. The pagan feared to commit any crime, out of fear of punishment by his false gods; the Malabarian fears to be punished by his pagoda. Wherever there is a settled society, religion is necessary; the laws cover manifest crimes, and religion covers secret crimes.

But whenever human faith comes to embrace a pure and holy religion, superstition not only becomes useless, but very dangerous. We should not seek to nourish ourselves on acorns when God gives us bread....

We know that when Monsieur de Noailles, the Bishop of Châlons, removed and threw into the fire the false relic of the holy navel of Jesus Christ, then the entire village of Châlons began proceedings against him; however, he had as much courage as he had piety, and he succeeded in making the Champenois believe that they could adore Jesus Christ in spirit and truth, without having his navel in the church....

It is the same with excommunications. Our historians tells us that when King Robert was excommunicated by Pope Gregory V, for marrying his godmother, the princess Bertha, his domestic servants threw the meats to be served to the king right out the window, and Queen Bertha gave birth to a goose in punishment for the incestuous marriage. One could seriously doubt that in this day and age the servants of the king of France, if he were excommunicated, would throw his dinner out the window, or that the queen would give birth to a goose....

If the masters of errors, and I'm speaking here of the grand masters, so long paid and honored for abusing the human species, ordered us today to believe that the seed must die in order to germinate; that the world is immovable on its foundations, that it does not orbit around the sun; that the tides are not a natural effect of gravitation; that the rainbow is not formed by the refraction and the reflection of rays of light, and so on, and they based their ordinances on passages poorly understood from the Holy Bible, how would educated men regard these men? Would the term "beasts" seem too strong? And if these wise masters used force and persecution to enforce their insolent stupidity, would the term "wild beasts" seem too extreme?

The more the superstitions of monks are despised, the more the bishops are respected and the priests listened to; while they do no good, these monkish superstitions from over the mountains [Rome] do a great deal of harm. But of all these superstitions, is not the most dangerous that of hating your neighbor for his opinions? And is it not evident that it would be much more reasonable to worship the

Holy Navel, the Holy Foreskin, or the milk or the robe of the Virgin Mary, [all of these were relics worshipped at the time] than to detest and persecute your brother?....

Virtue is Better than Science

The fewer dogmas, the fewer disputes; the fewer disputes, the fewer miseries: if this is not true, then I'm wrong.

Religion was instituted to make us happy in this life and in the other. What must we do to be happy in the life to come? Be just.

What must we do in order to be happy in this life, as far as the misery of our nature permits? Be indulgent.

It would be the height of folly to pretend to improve all men to the point that they think in a uniform manner about metaphysics. it would be easier to subjugate the entire universe through force of arms than to subjugate the minds of a single village. . . .

Voltaire Questions:

1. What good role does Voltaire see in religion?
2. What two reasons does Voltaire give, for labeling the religious leaders of his day, “wild beasts”?
3. In Voltaire’s eyes, what was the worst and most dangerous superstition?

Excerpts from
Of the Balance of Trade
by David Hume¹

Hume was taking an Enlightenment approach to economics, specifically the mercantilist approach that had dominated the thinking of Europeans up till this point. He articulated a growing opinion (held by Adam Smith, among others), what was called "free trade." He went right to the heart of the matter, and attacked the notion that accumulating gold was a worthwhile economic pursuit. He says that if England had five times its current amount of gold, it would be no better off; if it were faced with a sudden five-fold reduction of its money supply, it would be no worse off. Pay attention to what Hume says would happen to English foreign trade, if either of these two events were to happen. Keep in mind that Hume was not criticizing Britain for being greedy, and insisting that it shouldn't try to become wealthy; he was simply saying that accumulating gold through raising high tariffs was not an effective means to that end. Wealth for economists of the Enlightenment was not measured in terms of gold, so much as the productive capacity of the nation.

Suppose four-fifths of all the money in Great Britain to be annihilated in one night,.... what would be the consequence? Must not the price of all labour and commodities sink in proportion, and every thing be sold [very cheaply]...? What nation could then dispute with us in any foreign market, or pretend to navigate or to sell manufactures at the same price, which to us would afford sufficient profit? In how little time, therefore, must this bring back the money which we had lost, and raise us to the level of all the neighbouring nations? Where, after we have arrived, we immediately lose the advantage of the cheapness of labour and commodities; and the farther flowing in of money is stopped by our fulness and repletion. Again, suppose, that all the money of Great Britain were multiplied fivefold in a night, must not the contrary effect follow? Must not [the price of] all labour and commodities rise to such an exorbitant height, that no neighbouring nations could afford to buy from us; while their commodities, on the other hand, became comparatively. so cheap, that, in spite of all the laws which could be formed, they would be run in upon us, and our money flow out; till we fall to a level with foreigners, and lose that great superiority of riches, which had laid us under such disadvantages? Now, it is evident, that the same causes, which would correct these exorbitant inequalities, were they to happen miraculously, must prevent their happening in the common course of nature, and must for ever, in all neighbouring nations, preserve money nearly proportionable to the art and industry of each nation.

Hume then attacked the notion that a country gains anything by raising its tariffs (taxes on goods coming in from another country); he argued that English tariffs were actually hurting England:

Our jealousy and our hatred of France are without bounds; and the former sentiment, at least, must be acknowledged reasonable and well- grounded. These passions have occasioned innumerable barriers and obstructions upon commerce, where we are accused of being commonly the aggressors. But what

¹ First published in 1752. <http://www.econlib.org/Library/LFBooks/Hume/hmMPL.html>. David Hume was a leading Enlightenment figure, primarily as a philosopher, but also as a historian. The archaic practice of capitalizing words for emphasis was not retained.

have we gained by the bargain? We lost the French market for our woollen manufactures, and transferred the commerce of wine to Spain and Portugal, where we buy worse liquor at a higher price. There are few Englishmen who would not think their country absolutely ruined, were French wines sold in England so cheap and in such abundance as to supplant, in some measure, all ale, and home-brewed liquors: But... [were we to] lay aside prejudice, it would not be difficult to prove, that nothing could be more... advantageous. Each new acre of vineyard planted in France, in order to supply England with wine, would make it... [necessary] for the French to take the produce of an English acre, sown in wheat or barley, in order to subsist themselves; and it is evident, that we should thereby get command of the better commodity. There are many edicts of the French king, prohibiting the planting of new vineyards, and ordering all those which are lately planted to be grubbed up: So sensible are they, in that country, of the superior value of corn, above every other product.

Hume then made two quick arguments about the advantages of lowering tariffs on wine and corn, which protected the corn and ale producers of England:

It can scarcely be doubted, but if the duties on wine were lowered to a third, they would yield much more to the government than at present: Our people might thereby afford to drink commonly a better and more wholesome liquor; and no prejudice would ensue to the balance of trade, of which we are so jealous. The manufacture of ale beyond the agriculture is but inconsiderable, and gives employment to few hands. The transport of wine and corn would not be much inferior.

Hume Questions

1. Express Hume's points (his hypothetical situations about changes in the gold and money supply, and the harm England's tariffs have done to England) in your own words.
2. Which system--the mercantilist system with tariffs, or the free trade system, without tariffs--would be more likely to get different nations at each other's throats? Why might this be the case?
3. One of the problems of reforming any part of government and policy, is the concept of vested interest—a group that benefits from the current policies, even if they are to the detriment of the country as a whole. In regards to Hume's example of wine, what vested interests might benefit from the current tariff structure that Hume was complaining about?

African Slavery In America

by Thomas Paine

The essay was written in 1774 and published March 8, 1775 in the Pennsylvania Journal and the Weekly Advertiser. Just a few weeks later in April 1775, Paine was a founding member of the first anti-slavery society in America. Paine in this essay addresses certain arguments used to justify slavery, namely, that slavers simply employ war captives from Africa that are already enslaved; that it is allowed in the Bible; that it was practiced in antiquity. Certain grammar and spellings have been modified to make it more like modern English; apart from this, no words have been changed.

To Americans:

That some desperate wretches should be willing to steal and enslave men by violence and murder for gain, is rather lamentable than strange. But that many civilized, nay, Christianized people should approve, and be concerned in the savage practice, is surprising; and still persist, though it has been so often proved contrary to the light of nature, to every principle of Justice and Humanity, and even good policy, by a succession of eminent men, and several late publications.

Our traders in me (an unnatural commodity!) must know the wickedness of the slave-trade, if they attend to reasoning, or the dictates of their own hearts: and such as shun and stifle all these, willfully sacrifice conscience, and the character of integrity to that golden idol.

The managers the trade themselves, and others testify, that many of these African nations inhabit fertile countries, are industrious farmers, enjoy plenty, and lived quietly, averse to war, before the Europeans debauched them with liquors, and bribing them against one another; and that these inoffensive people are brought into slavery, by stealing them, tempting kings to sell subjects, which they can have no right to do, and hiring one tribe to war against another, in order to catch prisoners. By such wicked and inhuman ways the English are said to enslave towards one hundred thousand yearly; of which thirty thousand are supposed to die by barbarous treatment in the first year; besides all that are slain in the unnatural ways excited to take them. So much innocent blood have the managers and supporters of this inhuman trade to answer for to the common Lord of all!

Many of these were not prisoners of war, and redeemed from savage conquerors, as some plead; and they who were such prisoners, the English, who promote the war for that very end, are the guilty authors of their being so; and if they were redeemed, as is alleged, they would owe nothing to the redeemer but what he paid for them.

They show as little reason as conscience who put the matter by with saying - "Men, in some cases, are lawfully made slaves, and why may not these?" So men, in some cases, are lawfully put to death, deprived of their goods, without their consent; may any man, therefore, be treated so, without any conviction of desert? Nor is this plea mended by adding- "They are set forth to us as slaves, and we buy them without farther inquiry, let the sellers see to it." Such man may as well join with a known band of robbers, buy their ill-got goods, and help on the trade; ignorance is no more pleadable in one case than the other; the sellers plainly own how they obtain them. But none can lawfully buy without evidence that they are not concurring with Men-Stealers; and as the true owner has a right to reclaim his goods that were stolen, and sold; so the slave, who is proper owner of his freedom, has a right to reclaim it, however often sold.

Most shocking of all is alleging the sacred scriptures to favor this wicked practice. One would have thought none but infidel cavillers [picky fault-finders] would endeavor to make them appear contrary to the plain dictates of natural light, and the conscience, in a matter of common Justice and Humanity; which they cannot be. Such worthy men, as referred to before, judged otherways; Mr. Baxter declared, "The slave-traders should be called Devils, rather than Christians; and that it is a heinous crime to buy them." But some say, "The practice was permitted to the Jews." To which may be replied,

1. The example of the Jews, in many things, may not be imitated by us; they had not only orders to cut off several nations altogether, but if they were obliged to war with others, and conquered them, to cut off every male; they were suffered to use polygamy and divorces, and other things utterly unlawful to us under clearer light.
2. The plea is, in a great measure, false; they had no permission to catch and enslave people who never injured them.
3. Such arguments ill become us, since the time of reformation came, under Gospel light. All distinctions of nations and privileges of one above others, are ceased; Christians are taught to account all men their neighbors; and love their neighbors as themselves; and do to all men as they would be done by; to do good to all men; and man-stealing is ranked with enormous crimes. Is the barbarous enslaving our inoffensive neighbors, and treating them like wild beasts subdued by force, reconcilable with the *Divine precepts*? Is this doing to them as we would desire they should do to us? If they could carry off and enslave some thousands of us, would we think it just? One would almost wish they could for once; it might convince more than reason, or the Bible.

As much in vain, perhaps, will they search ancient history for examples of the modern slave-trade. Too many nations enslaved the prisoners they took in war. But to go to nations with whom there is no war, who have no way provoked, without farther design of conquest, purely to catch inoffensive people, like wild beasts, for slaves, is an height of outrage against humanity and justice, that seems left by heathen nations to be practiced by pretended Christian. How shameful are all attempts to color and excuse it!

As these people are not convicted of forfeiting freedom, they have still a natural, perfect right to it; and the governments whenever they come should, in justice set them free, and punish those who hold them in slavery.

So monstrous is the making and keeping them slaves at all, abstracted from the barbarous usage they suffer, and the many evils attending the practice; as selling husbands away from wives, children from parents, and from each other, in violation of sacred and natural ties; and opening the way for adulteries, incest, and many shocking consequences, for all of which the guilty Masters must answer to the final Judge.

If the slavery of the parents be unjust, much more is their children's; if the parents were justly slaves, yet the children are born free; this is the natural, perfect right of all mankind; they are nothing but a just recompense to those who bring them up: And as much less is commonly spent on them than others, they have a right, in justice, to be proportionably sooner free.

Certainly, one may, with as much reason and decency, plead for murder, robbery, lewdness and barbarity, as for this practice. They are not more contrary to the natural dictates of conscience, and feeling of humanity; nay, they are all comprehended in it.

But the chief design of this paper is not to disprove it, which many have sufficiently done; but to entreat Americans to consider.

1. With what consistency, or decency they complain so loudly of attempts to enslave them, while they hold so many hundred thousands in slavery; and annually enslave many thousands more, without any pretence of authority, or claim upon them?
2. How just, how suitable to our crime is the punishment with which Providence threatens us? We have enslaved multitudes, and shed much innocent blood in doing it; and now are threatened with the same. And while other evils are confessed, and bewailed, why not this especially, and publicly; than which no other vice, if all others, has brought so much guilt on the land?
3. Whether, then, all ought not immediately to discontinue and renounce it, with grief and abhorrence? Should not every society bear testimony against it, and account obstinate persisters in it bad men, enemies to their country, and exclude them from fellowship; as they often do for much lesser faults?
4. The great Question may be - What should be done with those who are enslaved already? To turn the old and infirm free, would be injustice and cruelty; they who enjoyed the labors of their better days should keep, and treat them humanely. As to the rest, let prudent men, with the assistance of legislatures, determine what is practicable for masters, and best for them. Perhaps some could give them lands upon reasonable rent, some, employing them in their labor still, might give them some reasonable allowances for it; so as all may have some property, and fruits of their labors at the own disposal, and be encouraged to industry; the family may live together, and enjoy the natural satisfaction of exercising relative affections and duties, with civil protection, and other advantages, like fellow men. Perhaps they might sometime form useful barrier settlements on the frontiers. Thus they may become interested in the public welfare, and assist in promoting it; instead of being dangerous, as now they are, should any enemy promise them a better condition.
5. The past treatment of Africans must naturally fill them with abhorrence of Christians; lead them to think our religion would make them more inhuman savages, if they embraced it; thus the gain of that trade has been pursued in oppositions of the redeemer's cause, and the happiness of men. Are we not, therefore, bound in duty to him and to them to repair these injuries, as far as possible, by taking some proper measure to instruct, not only the slaves here, but the Africans in their own countries? Primitive Christians, labored always to spread the *divine religion*; and this is equally our duty while there is an heathen nation: But what singular obligations are we under to these injured people!

These are the sentiments of justice and humanity.