

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, and even if it might be ridiculous to sacrifice to fauns, or sylvans, or naiads,¹ 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....

¹ Minor gods and goddesses in Greek mythology.

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. . . .

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