

From... **Treatise on Tolerance**

By Voltaire, 1763

**I** venture to think that some enlightened and magnanimous minister, some humane and wise prelate, some monarch who knows that his interest consists in the number of his subjects and his glory consists in their welfare, may deign to glance at this badly structured and defective paper. He will improve it by his own insights, and say to himself: 'What would I risk in seeing my land cultivated and enriched by a larger number of industrious workers, the revenue increased, the State more flourishing?'

Germany would be a desert strewn with the bones of Catholics, Evangelicals, Calvinists and Anabaptists, slain by each other, if the peace of Westphalia in 1648 had not at last brought freedom of conscience.

We have Jews in Bordeaux and Metz and in Alsace; we have Lutherans, Molinists [see Glossary], and Jansenists [see Glossary]; can we not allow and control Calvinists in about the same conditions as Catholics are tolerated at London? The more sects there are, the less dangerous each of them is; multiplicity weakens them; they are all restrained by just laws that forbid disorderly meetings, insults and sedition, and are constantly enforced by the police.

We know that many heads of families who have made large fortunes in foreign lands are ready to return to their homeland. All they ask for is

- the protection of natural law,
- the validity of their marriages,
- security as to the condition of their children,
- the right to inherit from their fathers, and
- their personal freedom.

They do not ask for public chapels, or the right to municipal offices or to dignities, which Catholics do not have in England or in many other countries. It is not a question of giving immense privileges and secure positions to a faction, but of allowing a peaceful people to live, and of moderating the laws that may once have been necessary but are no longer so. It is not for me to tell the ministry what is to be done; I merely plead to it on behalf of the unfortunate.

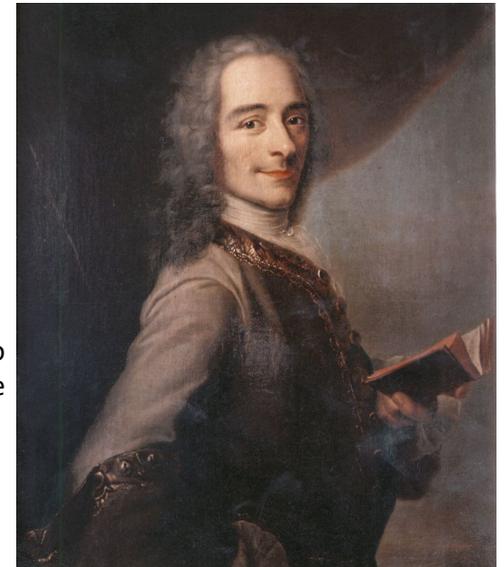
How many ways there are of making them useful, and of preventing them from ever being dangerous! The prudence of the ministry and the Council, supported by force, will easily discover these ways that are already employed so 11 Treatise on Tolerance Voltaire 5. How tolerance may be admitted successfully by other nations.

There are still fanatics among the Calvinist populace, but there are certainly even more among the convulsionaries [see Glossary]. The dregs of the crazed people at the cemetery of St. Medard count as nothing in the nation, whereas the dregs of the Calvinist prophets are annihilated. The great means to reduce the number of maniacs, if any remain, is to submit their mental disease to the treatment of reason, which slowly but surely enlightens men. Reason

- is gentle,
- is humane,
- inspires leniency,
- eliminates discord,
- strengthens virtue, and
- has more power to make obedience to the laws attractive than force has to compel it.

And shall we take no account of the ridicule that attaches today to the enthusiasm [see Glossary] of these good folk? This ridicule is a strong barrier to the extravagance of all sectarians. The past is as if it had never been. We must always start from the present—from the point nations have already reached.

There was a time when it was thought necessary to issue decrees against those who taught a doctrine at variance with •the categories of Aristotle, •the abhorrence of a vacuum, •the quiddities, •the universal apart from the object. We have in Europe more than a hundred volumes of jurisprudence on sorcery and how to



Voltaire was the pseudonym for François-Marie Arouet, a French aristocrat and philosopher. Voltaire's biting wit and sarcasm was instrumental in popularizing the philosophy of The Enlightenment.

distinguish false sorcerers from real ones. The excommunication of grasshoppers and insects harmful to crops has been much practised, and still survives in certain rituals. But the practice is over; Aristotle and the sorcerers and grasshoppers are left in peace. There are countless instances of these follies, once thought so important; others arise from time to time; but once they have made themselves felt and people have had their fill, they vanish. If today a man called himself a Carpocratian, a Eutychean, a Monothelite, a Monophysite, a Nestorian or a Manichean or the like, what would happen? He would be laughed at, like a man dressed in the doublet-and-high-collar style of a century ago.

The French nation was beginning to open its eyes when the Jesuits Le Tellier and Doucin put together the bull [= 'papal edict'] Unigenitus and sent it to Rome for adoption by the Pope. They thought that they still lived in those ignorant times when the most absurd statements were accepted without inquiry. They went so far as to condemn the proposition, a truth of all times and all places:

The fear of unjust excommunication should not prevent anyone from doing his duty.

They were proscribing reason, the liberties of the Gallican Church [see Glossary], and the foundations of morality. They were saying to men:

God commands you never to do your duty if you fear being treated unjustly for doing so.

Never was common sense more outrageously challenged! The counsellors of Rome were not on their guard. The papal court was persuaded that the bull was necessary, and that the nation desired it; it was signed, sealed, and dispatched. You know the results; if they had been foreseen, the bull would surely have been modified. There were angry quarrels, which the prudence and goodness of the king have settled.

So it is with regard to many of the points that divide the Protestants from us. Some are of no consequence; others are more serious, but even with them the fury of the controversy has abated so far that the Protestants themselves no longer preach about the controversy in any of their churches.

So we can seize on this time of disgust, of satiety, or rather of reason, as an historical benchmark and a guarantee of 12 Treatise on Tolerance Voltaire 7. Whether intolerance was known to the Greeks public tranquility. Controversy is an epidemic disease that is near its end, and this plague that we are now cured of requires only gentle treatment. It is in the State's interests that its expatriated sons should return modestly to the home of their father; humanity demands this, reason counsels it, and politicians need not fear it.



Voltaire's Treatise on Tolerance was written in response to the trial and execution by breaking of Jean Calas. Calas was tried for killing his son. It soon became clear that there was no evidence against him, but rather that he was being persecuted for his religious beliefs. Calas was a Heugonot, a French Protestant. The unfairness of his trial and the brutal way he was executed inspired the Voltaire to take up his cause and advocate for everyone getting along and letting live... a radical idea for his time.