

THE SOUL OF DOUBT

*The Religious Roots of Unbelief
from Luther to Marx*



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In Search of a Father

VOLTAIRE'S CHRISTIAN ENLIGHTENMENT

I see the mercy of God where you would see only his power.—VOLTAIRE, "On the Interpretation
OF THE NEW TESTAMENT," 1767

WHEN E. P. THOMPSON defined history as the "rescue" of ordinary people from "the enormous condescension of posterity," it was not Enlightenment philosophers that he had in mind.¹ Powdered prophets, preaching revolution under the instruction of the finest Burgundy, represented the wrong kind of history, a confusion of status with influence. History is from "below." Greatness has been greatly exaggerated. Scholars who place more emphasis on ideas, meanwhile, have often been no kinder to the Enlightenment. From the terror of the French Revolution to the horrors of industrialism, no malaise of modernity has escaped association with the self-admiring *philosophes*. Since the early 1800s, exposing the follies of Enlightenment reason has been the chosen blood sport of the Western intellectual—a tradition that goes back to Edmund Burke, Romanticism, and the in-house criticism of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The situation reaches absurdity when men who campaigned for religious tolerance, penal reform, and a profusion of humanitarian concerns are routinely implicated in the dissolution of Western morality—even the barbarism of Auschwitz; when a gritty human rights agenda, pursued over decades by scholar-activists like Voltaire, can be dismissed as a philosophical "fiction"; when an era of hopeful and historic reform can be damned as a game of innocents—"the Enlightenment project," in the reductive appellation of an influential critic.²

If the first fallacy of historical analysis is to look at the evidence from the wrong end of the telescope—to judge the past by the present—the

second is downright distortion. The revolutionary violence of the 1790s was no more the fruit of a naked and instrumental reason than the Enlightenment itself was. The “reason” for which the eighteenth century contended was not the all-seeing eye of René Descartes. It was a cautious, chastened, and deeply moral phenomenon, rooted in a Christian tradition that the philosophers at once challenged and refined. Finding classic expression in Rousseau’s “Profession of Faith of a Savoyard Vicar” (1762) or Kant’s *Religion within the limits of Reason alone* (1793), Enlightenment reason did not symbolize the imperialism of the intellect so much as the battered protest of the soul. And in Voltaire, the supreme embodiment of Enlightenment vigor, the ratio of moral to intellectual certainty was arguably greatest. Voltaire fought religious authority with the righteous sword of conscience. Where Rousseau and Kant allowed the flashing blade to eclipse theology altogether,³ Voltaire remained open and attentive to the supernatural. The leading critic of Christianity in the modern era was a stubbornly religious thinker, whose fury against a persecuting orthodoxy was again rooted in positive theological convictions.

Although Kant’s perorations on a law “inscribed in the heart of all human beings,” “free from every dogma,” place him within the tradition of Christian moral dissent, he cannot be allowed to speak exclusively for it. He represents the conclusion of a drama that is very much alive in figures like Pierre Bayle and Voltaire. However resounding the echoes of a Pietist tutelage, the triumph of the independent conscience over the “infancy” of faith is, in Kant, vigorous and decisive. He is clear that “morality in no way needs religion . . . but is rather self-sufficient by virtue of pure practical reason,” the law written on the heart.⁴ Kant’s aversion to prayer, to the “foreign influence” of grace, or any of the principles of “ecclesiastical faith,” is unwavering.⁵ He mocks the “crafty hope” and “lazy confidence” of those who expect moral goodness to fall “in their lap, as if it were a heavenly gift from above.” “Universal human reason must be recognized and honored as supreme commanding principle in a natural religion,” he writes. Any “revealed faith” which “is to come ahead of” such a religion “is a *counterfeit service* through which the moral order is totally reversed,” a “slavish” piety, a “groveling delusion,” a “fetish-making,” a “courtly service”; a “surrogate” for the honest work of “conscience.” “Enthusiastic religious delusion is,” Kant suggests, “the moral death of the reason without which there can be no religion.”⁶

The kinship of such sentiments to the sterner currents of the radical Reformation and the early, “spiritualist” Enlightenment, is unmistakable.

Yet Kant was not one to fret over access to the means of grace. The door was now closed. When Kant spoke of “deny[ing] knowledge in order to make room for faith,” the faith he had in mind was a strangely circular affair. Ripping through what remained of the great medieval “proofs” for God’s existence, Kant built a fortress of conscience. But it was a haunting security that swore a rescued God to silence. The moral law reverberates in the soul, but prayer is for weaklings. “Once the doctrine of the purity of conscience . . . has been sufficiently propagated,” Kant wrote to a friend, “when this true religious structure has been built up so that it can maintain itself in the world—then the scaffolding must be taken down.”⁷ By “scaffolding,” Kant meant the dogmatic structures of Christian faith. In Kierkegaard’s arresting summary: “If in this connection I then say that it is my duty to love God, I am actually pronouncing only a tautology.” “God” and “duty” are one. Morality has swallowed religion.⁸

Although I would continue to quibble with language of secularization, Kantian “autonomy” does represent a line in the sand. It proves that a religious impulse—the Protestant conscience—can create an outlook that is no longer expectantly religious. But the unbounded confidence in human resources that flows from Kant’s pen cannot be taken for the essence of the Enlightenment. To read the movement as a steady ascent toward Kant’s triumphant formula is to modernize it prematurely: turning a living drama between conscience, faith, and religious authority into a sterile procession. It is to mistake a defiant and sharp-edged conclusion for a deeply contested process. It is again to read the cause from the outcome—or the perceived outcome. How many people, of the modern West, came to think like Kant is a matter for debate. Even among the philosophers, his chiseled clarity was rare. Voltaire was not a man who could peel away from a church with total contempt for the “delusionary” endeavor within. While his animosities were often riper than Kant’s so too were his pieties. His appeals to conscience were powerfully informed by what he considered right understandings of God. Natural religion was never very natural for Voltaire. This, I will argue, was a formula closer to the essence of Enlightenment than either Kantian “autonomy” or the reign of unbridled intellectual reason that is persistently mistaken for it.

The awkward fact is that Voltaire was at his most religious or theological during the years of his most aggressive attacks on orthodoxy. Condemned in his own time as a “diabolical” infidel, comparable with “Judas Iscariot” among the “supreme representatives of impenitence and unbelief,”⁹ and scorned by modern philosophy as a phrasemaking

dilettante, Voltaire was in fact a defiantly Christian thinker who embraced the status of philosophical “ignorance” with pride.¹⁰ He hated intellectual pretension and despised any philosophy that privileged ideas over human decency or practical experience. Voltaire’s moral judgments were more than “linguistic survivals from the practices of classical theism,” in the classic indictment of Enlightenment ethics.¹¹ Within an army of destroyers, Voltaire was notable for the virulence of his anticlericalism and the tenacity of his religious belief. The claim of this chapter is that the two were connected. The nineteenth-century historian W. E. H. Lecky classed Voltaire with Luther among a handful of thinkers who had profoundly modified the opinions of humankind.¹² My contention is that the comparison is merited in terms of substance as well as scale. The “natural law” that Voltaire set against the arrogance of orthodoxy was Christian in all but name. And while he initially proposed it as an antidote to theology, he was always conscious of limitations. A parallel, and eventually dominant, stream of his thought is a quest for a theology of mercy to complete a lively but ultimately barren doctrine of conscience. Finding “revelation” in his own cast of spiritual heroes, Voltaire emerges as a powerful critic of natural religion, turning finally from scorn to hushed appreciation of Jesus Christ. Voltaire was not chasing the gods out of human affairs. He was searching for one.

Science and Conscience

The primacy of moral reason, or conscience, in Enlightenment criticism should not be conceived in terms of competition with intellectual reason, or science. The claims of science against inherited systems of thought remained ethical and deeply resonant with the revolt of conscience against creed. Science and conscience can be distinguished, not divided. The “dare” to “think for yourself,” issued by Voltaire long before Kant made it synonymous with “the age of Enlightenment,” remained a demand for courage as well as clarity.¹³ The status of Newton and Locke as giants of natural philosophy implied a sense of heroism and the triumph of light over darkness. One of Newton’s editors characterized his work as the historic illumination of questions merely “named” by others,¹⁴ and it was with his usual blend of mischief and profundity that Voltaire cast his lot with the English master against a beleaguered Descartes, “born to uncover the errors of antiquity [only] to substitute his own.”¹⁵ Knowledge was

emancipation. Locke's researches into the mechanics of intellectual formation exuded a Lutheran contempt for the presumption of tradition and the folly of "taking things upon trust." The vast majority, Locke regretted, "misemploy their power of Assent, by lazily enslaving their Minds to the Dictates and Dominion of others in Doctrines which it is their duty carefully to examine." "The floating of other Mens Opinions in our brains," he famously urged,

makes us not a jot more knowing, though they happen to be true. What in them was Science, is in us but Opinatrety, whilst we give up our assent to reverend Names, and do not, as they did, employ our own Reason to understand those Truths, which gave them reputation. . . . In the Sciences, every one has so much, as he really knows and comprehends: What he believes only, and takes upon trust, are but shreads.

Truth was no respecter of persons. Enlightenment was an attitude, a determination of the soul. "I have not made it my business," Locke piously declared, "either to quit or follow any Authority in the ensuing Discourse: Truth has been my only Aim."¹⁶

Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) became the gospel of the new "empiricism": the principle that ideas have to be discovered, grasped, and known before they can aspire to the status of truth. This has been described as a "sensationalist" theory of knowledge for its reliance on "sense" and "experience," and it is no accident that the Lockean model was appropriated by the evangelists John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards in an analogous quest for religious certainty.¹⁷ Reformation and Enlightenment cannot be separated. The empirical mood was restless and irreverent, backing personal conviction over second-hand authority, every time. When one of Voltaire's characters responded to an enquiry about his religion by placing his hand on his chest and saying, "My law is here," the homage was to both conscience and empiricism.¹⁸ Science was moral, and morality was practical and experimental—though the kinship should not be overstated. It would be hard to exaggerate the status of Newton and Locke as icons of Enlightenment and the bearers of a new kind of intellectual authority but they remained priests rather than prophets. They brought light, not heat, leaving the moral universe much as they found it.

While the Newtonian revolution raised doubts about a certain kind of providence, it strongly supported a theology of creation and divine order.

Science remained “natural philosophy” and, for many, a branch of theology. Newton’s demonstration that the planets do not move on invisible structures but by an awesome poise of gravity and velocity acquired the status of a revelation. It suggested wisdom, power, and unimaginable precision in the making of the cosmos. And, for the time being, it enabled theologians to laugh at the folly of atheism. The weaknesses of “physical theology” would be revealed in the nineteenth century, when conflict and development replaced design in the scientific imagination, but in the meantime, science was on the side of the angels, and Voltaire joined the choir. But as the trauma of the Lisbon earthquake revealed to him, if not others, in 1755: a theology of perfect order rings hollow in the midst of a perfect disaster. And more than silence or inarticulacy, Lisbon demonstrated the dangers of a scientific mentality that could equate physical events with the mind of God. Voltaire was scandalized by efforts to explain away the suffering as a minor and necessary kink in the chain of providence. Providential “optimism” was a bystander’s charter, an anesthetic for the soul. The fatalism of natural philosophy matched the cruelty of scapegoating Inquisitors. Voltaire condemned both.

Voltaire’s reaction marked a turning point in his career, and he would never again write of “natural law” with such confidence, but it also revealed long-brewing tensions between moral and scientific consciousness. The potential for scientific concepts of order and physical necessity to nourish a theology of resignation was a sore point of the early Enlightenment. Voltaire’s rage against Newtonian “optimists” such as Alexander Pope, whose glib assurance that “Whatever is, is right” so infuriated him, placed him within a distinguished tradition of moral dissent. Voltaire’s insistence that science can neither explain nor justify the suffering consequent upon a natural disaster said something about his own, restless conscience and it offered the same comment about the conservatism of natural philosophy that English radicals had made in the seventeenth century. Many had feared the “mechanical philosophy” of Locke and Newton as a new doctrine of control, sanctifying inequality and tethering political privilege to property and education. Indeed some scholars have suggested that the scientific revolution helped to end the political revolution, offering “consoling truths” for a “hierarchical society.”¹⁹ In 1691 Robert Boyle endowed a series of lectures to promote understanding of the interrelationship between Christianity and science. The tenor of the project is suggested by the comment of the Boyle lecturer of 1697 that, if “there is no God nor religion,” then “all men are equal.”²⁰ Voltaire remained an admirer

of Locke and a disciple of Newton but it was from neither that he gleaned the minerals of revolt or his war cry of anticlericalism: “*Écrasez l’Infâme!*” (“Crush the Infamous!”). Voltaire’s criticism was too visceral to be reducible to any secondary authority, but if there was a model and an icon it was the forgotten man of the early Enlightenment: Pierre Bayle.

Bayle and the “Empire of Conscience”

Insofar as the Enlightenment represented an attitude or a “climate of opinion,” rather than a body of teaching or a worldview, Bayle provided the template. As the twentieth-century philosopher Ernst Cassirer argued, “the real philosophy of the Enlightenment is not simply the sum total of what its leading thinkers . . . thought and taught” but a “pulsation of the inner intellectual life,” registering less in the content of “individual doctrines than in the form and manner of intellectual activity in general.”²¹ The mood was aggressive and skeptical, rather than speculative or theoretical, and the taste was for history and fact over logic and detachment. The medicinal chaos of Bayle’s *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, which began appearing in 1696, rather than the austere precision of Spinoza’s *Ethics*, was the order of the day. Bayle cared little for science and even less for philosophical systems, finding his calling in destruction, not construction. His was a ministry of holy confusion unleashed in the name of health and humanity. Bayle personified philosophy as criticism, not certainty, and his animus against the hubris of intellectual reason set the tone of a movement that would be as hostile to rationalism as theology. “Reason,” he declared in a vintage effusion of 1703, “is like a runner who doesn’t know that the race is over.”²² It is blind to its futility. In Bayle, the Enlightenment moved from the purity of speculation to the anarchy of history and a pragmatic, essentially moral quest for tolerance. Perfection was off the agenda.

Bayle’s *Dictionary* has been described as the “arsenal” of the Enlightenment, the prototype of the great Encyclopedias of the 1750s, and his *Philosophical Commentary* (1686) was the boldest appeal for religious toleration of the early modern period, surpassing the radicalism of Locke and Spinoza in its sympathy for the demon of atheism. No other author commanded such an imposing presence in private libraries of the eighteenth century.²³ For Voltaire, he was nothing less than the “immortal Bayle,” the “great and wise,” “the attorney general of philosophers.”²⁴ The

evocative image of David Hume, slipping away to France to write his skeptical masterpiece, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, with eight volumes of Bayle in his luggage, tells its own story.²⁵ “The acute and penetrating Bayle” was a philosopher’s philosopher. He was also a Christian, who defended the burden of criticism as the birthright of “a good Protestant.”²⁶

Bayle was a Calvinist Protestant (Huguenot) driven out of France by the persecutions unleashed by Louis XIV in the 1680s, a wave of belligerence that culminated in the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. The Edict of Nantes, issued by Henry IV in 1598, had granted rights to French Protestants and symbolized the end of the Wars of Religion. The Revocation signaled their return. Bayle’s vast and unstinting output was a direct response to the reopened wound. French Protestants had not enjoyed liberty in the seventeenth century, but lives were now in danger, and as someone who had briefly converted to Catholicism, Bayle’s was in acute jeopardy. In 1681 he joined the estimated 200,000 Huguenots who fled to the Netherlands, where he conducted a literary campaign against intolerance that consumed him for the rest of his life.

His first contribution was a *General Criticism* of a grossly partisan history of Calvinism, which had been written to justify the persecutions.²⁷ This set the tone for a series of piercing counterattacks. In the same year, Bayle published his *Miscellaneous Reflections on the Comet* (1682), which condemned the superstition and spiritual one-upmanship prompted by the passing of a comet in 1680. To believe that God used natural events to reward one people and punish another was idolatry, he asserted. And this, he claimed, was worse than atheism, for it travestied the character of God, who was the Father of the whole of humankind.²⁸ It was here that Bayle aired the subversive thought, couched as innocent historical observation, that theological orthodoxy and moral integrity are not two sides of the same coin. Christians, Bayle reflected with cool understatement, are not always motivated by charity and a pure love of God. Religion is no safeguard of morality. Indeed a society of virtuous atheists is not beyond the realm of imagination. This was not to announce a divorce between theology and morality, but it was a rebuke to a religious tyranny justified as the preservation of moral order. Not only did orthodoxy fail to generate virtue, the extent of the failure pointed an accusing finger at its theology. “Our life,” Bayle lamented, “destroys our doctrine.”²⁹

In 1684 Bayle started to edit a monthly journal, the *News of the Republic of Letters*, which diffused the gently millennial hope that colonies of tolerance and generous piety were finally lifting the fog of superstition and

persecution. It was here that the motif of enlightenment gained fresh currency: an expression of spiritual and mental liberation, the promise of a new era. "We are now in an age," Bayle wrote in April 1684, "which bids fair to become daily more and more enlightened, so much so that all preceding ages when compared with this will seem to be plunged in darkness." Bayle was part of a vigorous culture of dissent: pious, irreverent, sometimes salacious, but united against the criminality of persecution. "Eyes that are enlightened by the light," proclaimed a pamphlet of 1687 "[can see] that France . . . is in the grip of a Catholic fury."³⁰ It was a time of stirring hope but, for Bayle, the darkness returned in November 1685, when news came of his brother's death at the hands of the French authorities, following an arrest of which he was indirectly the cause. Unable to lay their hands on the author of the *General Criticism*, they had arrested his brother, Jacob, a young Huguenot pastor. Kept alive for five months in a squalid cell and visited daily by a Jesuit who offered to release him if he would abjure, Jacob finally died. Bayle never forgave himself for his role in his brother's demise, and he never forgave the theological machine that brought about his death.

Bayle did not lose his faith in God. He clung to an austere belief in a God whose goodness could not be doubted, even if his ways were truly obscure. "I die a Christian philosopher," he wrote to his friend, Pastor Terson, hours before his death in 1706, "convinced of and filled with God's goodness and mercy."³¹ What he never recovered was any confidence in a link between the ways of God and the ways of Christendom. The death of other family members, and the taste of persecution within the exiled Calvinist community, took a heavy toll. The penchant for deflating and debunking religious authority became a career. And Bayle did not go after soft targets. His attack on Augustine, as the fateful originator of the doctrine of persecution, is a stunning example of sustained polemicism and that "pulsation" of the inner life to which Cassirer referred. Bayle's *Philosophical Commentary on These Words of the Gospel, Luke 14.23: "Compel Them to Come in, That My House May Be Full,"* written in the wake of his brother's death, is a breathtaking assault on a figure revered throughout the Christian world, and a seminal document of European Enlightenment.

Bayle managed to produce nearly 800 pages expounding a single verse from the New Testament, a passage from the fourteenth chapter of Luke's gospel, in which a master instructs a servant to invite strangers to a banquet with the words: "Compel them to come in, that my house may be full." The verse had been used by Augustine, in his controversy with a

fifth-century sect, to build a case for coercion, or what Bayle termed, in the Church's extenuating parlance, "the charitable and salutary Violence exercis'd on Hereticks."³² A verse suggestive of God's generosity, Bayle protested, had been turned by Augustine, in his rage against the Donatists, into the proof text of persecution. Every persecutor cited Augustine, Bayle noted, and only recently had the Archbishop of Paris attempted to justify the "calamities of our Brethren of France" with a treatise on *The Conformity of the Conduct of the Church of France for reuniting the Protestants, with that of the Church of Africk for reuniting the Donatists to the Catholick Church*.³³ For Bayle, the tawdry repetition of Augustine's jaundiced sentiments was a picture of what theological reasoning had come to be: an exercise in making God and the Bible serve us, not the other way round. To extract a rationale for "smiting, imprisoning, kidnapping, and putting to death"³⁴ from an invitation to a party was a savage indictment of the theological mind.

It infuriated Bayle that Augustine could use the sacred image of a "Shepherd" to justify measures that could result in the death of one of the sheep. It baffled him that Augustine could cite the "Violence [with which] Saul was forc'd by Jesus Christ to acknowledge and embrace the Truth," as some sort of template for persecution when Saul's conversion was, first, not an act of violence in the ordinary sense and, second, not something that could be tried at home. God looked on the heart, not conformity to an institution, Bayle insisted. To force hearts into unwilling cooperation was a violation of conscience and the voluntary principle of the gospel. Bayle showed how each of Augustine's examples fell apart on these grounds, travestyng the freedom announced in the New Testament. He differentiated the theocratic prerogatives of the Old Testament from the spiritual demands placed upon the Christian. To defend coercion was to plead ignorance of God's character, the nature of faith, and the plain word of the Bible. The dissonance between the savagery of persecution and the "Character of Jesus Christ," whose "reigning Qualitys" were "Humility, Meekness, and Patience" was of the kind that a small child could appreciate. Christ demanded no more than a "voluntary Obedience," he disdained force, he praised "*the Meek, and the Peace-makers, and the Merciful,*" and he blessed his persecutors, going to his death like a "Lamb led to the slaughter."³⁵ But the grown-ups knew better, and the consequences were disastrous.

The "Cruelty" and "tyrannical Insolence" perpetrated in Christ's name cast fresh doubt upon the "Christian Religion," Bayle observed, bringing shame on its "adorable Founder." The link between persecution and

unbelief was undeniable and, Bayle suggested, perhaps necessary. It is no wonder, he noted, that “the Age we live in is full of Free-Thinkers and Deists.” It is no surprise that persecutions, “drenching” the world in “cruelties” have fomented horror, distrust, and contempt for religion, sowing “perhaps some Seeds of Atheism.” “We can’t stop the mouths of Infidels, or hinder their charging Christianity with these things,” Bayle warned, “since they may find ’em in our Historys.” And though “the Church of Rome” held the “whip-hand for so many Ages past,” Protestants were now deep in the mire. Bayle drew a comparison between the rights of “the Sects which have separated” from Rome and the “Reproaches” of “Infidels” against Christianity. We have brought it on ourselves, he concluded, and the future was bleak. To acquit “our Religion at the expence of its Professors,” was an almost impossible task. For Christians and Christianity were inseparable. Bayle speculated that the natives of China or Japan would do better, under God, to resist a Christian religion “stain’d with Blood” than subscribe to a blackened orthodoxy. But it was a point of burning conviction to Bayle that Christ should be spared association with the carnage: “if we can’t save Christianity from this Infamy, at least let us save the Honor of its Founder, and of his Laws; and not say, that all this was the consequence of his express Command to compel the World.”³⁶

Scholars have been quick to infer from Bayle’s sympathy for atheism a veiled expression of his own. It is more likely that his ability to distinguish Christ from the “Professors” of Christianity kept his faith alive. There is no evidence that he abandoned his religion. He continued to attend a Protestant church and his philosophical skepticism crackled with religious ardor. Bayle’s leading biographer affirms the sincerity of his religious convictions, noting his affinities with the “Spiritualist ‘left wing’ of the Reformation,” with its emphasis on moral rigor, intellectual humility, and “the altruism of the Gospel.”³⁷ Bayle was no mystic but his sense of historical corruption led him to an almost mystical reverence for the purity of conscience. He was certain that the case for persecution was a tissue of sophistry but, like Spinoza, he sensed the degree to which the Bible had been disabled as an arbiter of truth. From a vigorous defense of his passage, Bayle moved to a stance of virtual resignation. Argument is futile. Truth may be known but proof is elusive. Bayle could go the distance with Augustine, responding to every sleight of hand with aquiline ferocity, but he tired of the labor. He seemed to rebuke his own erudition with a shift from disputation to moral sense, intellect to conscience. “If limits are to be assigned to speculative truths,” he suggested, “I think there ought to be

none in respect of the ordinary practical principles which have to do with morals." Religious ideas must be referred "to that natural conception of equity *which illumines every man that comes into the world.*"³⁸

This was a direct quotation from the first chapter of the fourth gospel [John 1:9]—the *locus classicus* of the spiritualist doctrine of the inner light. This "distinct and spritely Light," Bayle explained, "enlightens all Men the moment they open the Eyes of their Attention." It was the "irresistible" witness of "God himself." As Bayle continued in language redolent of the German mystics, "we can never be assur'd of the truth of any thing farther than as agreeable to that primitive and universal Light, which God diffuses in the Souls of Men, and which infallibly and irresistibly draws on their Assent the moment they lend their Attention. By this primitive and metaphysical Light we have discover'd the rightful Sense of infinite Passages of Scripture, which taken in the literal and popular Meaning of the Words had led us into the lowest Conceptions imaginable of the Deity." Conscience protected God against theology and the Bible against deathly commentary and invention:

Shou'd a Casuist therefore come and inform us, he finds from the Scriptures, that 'tis a good and a holy Practice to curse our Enemys, and those who persecute the faithful; let's forthwith turn our Eyes on natural Religion, strengthen'd and perfected by the Gospel, and we shall see by the bright shining of this interior Truth, which speaks to our Spirits without the Sound of Words . . . that the pretended Scripture of this Casuist is only a bilious Vapor from his own Temperament and Constitution.³⁹

Interior truth outshone the fading testimony of words. The heart was more reliable than the mind. As Bayle argued elsewhere: "In religious matters, the rule of judgment does not lie in the intellect but in the conscience, which means that we should accept things . . . on the grounds that our conscience tells us that in so doing we shall be doing what is agreeable to God."⁴⁰ Intellectual skepticism was thus married to moral and spiritual conviction, indeed driven by it. Bayle was no relativist.

The tone of the *Historical and Critical Dictionary* was darker than the *Philosophical Commentary*, and the iconoclasm more abrasive, as Bayle conducted a guerrilla campaign against system and all its works. The *Dictionary* has been described as the "graveyard" of intellectual systems, a dismantling of "the mental universe" of the early modern period.⁴¹ Yet

Bayle justified his criticism as an attempt to break the rhythms of reflexive hatred and ritual hostility. The task required persistence and aggression. He aimed to show the “weak side” of every dogmatism with a view to taking it out of service. The article that landed him in the deepest trouble was what many considered his character assassination of the biblical king David. But this was no frivolous exposé. Bayle was scattering his shot under one of the hallowed vehicles of theocratic ambition: a figure claimed on both sides of the confessional divide as a model of godly violence. In puncturing David’s aura of sainthood, Bayle was opposing both Catholics and fellow Huguenots, who appealed to Old Testament wars to justify violence.⁴² He raked over David’s adventures with the solemn insistence that if David was a man after God’s own heart, it must have been for his penitence, not his sins. Yet the charges of heresy rolled in. As Voltaire later commented: Bayle was “reproached with not praising actions which were in themselves unjust, sanguinary, atrocious, contrary to good faith, or grossly offensive to decency.” He was reduced “to poverty” for failing “to eulogize [David’s] cruelties and crimes.” “Did not Bayle perform a service to the human race when he said that God . . . has not consecrated all the crimes recorded in that history?” he wondered. The “mortal war” declared on Bayle for his article was a dismal commentary on its theme, Voltaire reflected, “while the philosopher, oppressed by them all, content[ed] himself with pitying them.”⁴³ Bayle had more than pity for his critics, but Voltaire was right about the motives of his attack on a figure who, “by the testimony of God himself . . . was a man of blood.”⁴⁴

Voltaire sensed a suicidal dignity in the embattled skeptic, reminiscent of Samson destroying the temple of the Philistines before “sink[ing] beneath the ruin he has wrought.”⁴⁵ Yet Bayle spared the New Testament his fury, he cited Paul against the vanity of philosophy and he never wrote of Christ with anything less than profound reverence. Although Hume would delight in his intellectual agility, and the atheists, Diderot and Holbach, would gorge on his anticlericalism, Bayle also provided inspiration for the heart-centered spirituality of German Pietism, becoming a favorite author for one of the movement’s leaders, Count Zinzendorf. Bayle helped to fuel Zinzendorf’s “rejection of rationalism, and supported his effort to base spiritual truth on religious experience rather than philosophy.”⁴⁶ These were not among the ironies of history. As Voltaire will demonstrate, such a dichotomy between a “secular” and a “Christian” appropriation of Bayle is unsustainable. Bayle clung to his twin anchors of the goodness and mercy of God and the clarity of conscience. This was the

essence of natural religion and the foundation of the Enlightenment critique of religious authority. Bayle's repatriation of spiritual authority from creed to conscience was another manifestation of the heart religion of the Reformation. And men of less certain spirituality shared the momentum of the transfer, fueled by the memory and experience of persecution.

In *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (1932), Carl Becker gently mocked the *philosophes* as theologians in denial, "skeptics who eagerly assent to so much." Of the strange dogmatism of natural religion, Becker queried, "How comes it, we ask, that you are so well acquainted with God and his purposes?" The *philosophes* were drawing on the moral capital of a religion they were attempting to destroy. Searching for "intellectual collateral to guarantee their bright promises," they translated faith in God into faith in Nature, ever capitalized in bending reverence.⁴⁷ Becker received short shrift from later authorities, one of whom dismissed his thesis as a work of charming eccentricity, possessing "every virtue save one, the virtue of being right."⁴⁸ But Becker was right about unacknowledged moral sources, and he could have pressed his argument further.

The Heavenly City mostly sidestepped the materialism of Baron d'Holbach, whose *La Systeme de la Nature* (1770) became the manifesto of aggressive atheism, yet here was a remarkable case in point. Holbach condemned superstition for smothering "the great law of nature—which says, 'love thy neighbor as thyself.'" He criticized sacraments for either exonerating or "fettering" the natural rhythms of "conscience." And he evinced a Spinozan contempt for theologies that torture minds with warnings of "the eternity and dreadful nature of their punishments."⁴⁹ Holbach shared the radical Protestant horror of hellfire preaching, publishing a French translation of a work by the English Baptist, Samuel Richardson, *Of the Torments of Hell* (1657). This was an "annihilationist" tract, arguing that lost souls will vanish after death rather than face an eternity of punishment.⁵⁰ In spite of his reductive metaphysics of body and matter, Holbach remained a fierce advocate of conscience.

In another work, Holbach quoted the English moralist, John Trenchard, who excoriated "religious ceremonies" as "disastrous inventions by means of which man substitutes the physical movements of his body for the honest and regulated movements of his heart."⁵¹ Religion was an artificial constraint, violating the goodness of the heart. Salvation was found in nature and nature's law: "Come back, runaway child, come back to Nature," Holbach urged, "She will console you, she will drive from your heart the

fears that confound you, the anxiety that torments you, the passions that unsettle you, the hatred that keeps you from the men you should love.”⁵² Holbach cited “the mild maxims of the Evangelists” against the cruelty of superstition, commending “virtue,” “reason,” and “truth” as nature’s “assisting deities,” capable of banishing “error from our mind,” “wickedness from our hearts,” and causing “goodness to occupy our souls.”⁵³

Unlike Spinoza and Bayle, Holbach really was an atheist, yet the genealogy of dissent is clearly shared. Having coined the term “anthropomorphic” to belittle the instinct to create gods in the human image, Holbach offered a “theomorphic” vision of nature. If a figure like Holbach was still trading in enemy currency, it should be no surprise that Voltaire, a fierce critic of atheist materialism, was drawing on the same resources. Becker was right to identify Voltaire as chief among the reclaimers of “the Christian story”: the “apostle who fought the good fight, tireless to the end, writing seventy volumes to convey the truth that was to make us free.”⁵⁴ But the recovery was more profound than the transferred zeal and prophetic tonality Becker saw in him. Voltaire was more than a fiery advocate of law, conscience, and duty: he was a preacher of grace.

The Prodigal Son: The Making of a Philosopher

François-Marie Arouet was born in 1694 and educated by Jesuits at the prestigious Collège Louis-le-Grand, between 1704 and 1711. Impressing and exasperating his teachers in equal measure, and resisting his father’s disciplines, Voltaire’s early life offered a glimpse of what was to come: an earnest irreverence, an unending dance between freedom and authority, a training in evasion. Voltaire always believed that he was an illegitimate child and the decision to identify himself by his bullish *nom de plume* was symbolic of an irrepressible individuality. The prospect of following his father into the law struck fear into the aspiring poet, and Voltaire duly botched the clerical assignments that stood between him and his inheritance. But it was not long before his knowledge of France’s legal system was more intimate than he would have hoped, as his penchant for provocation earned a series of arrests, exiles, and the lasting suspicion of the royal court. In 1717 he spent eleven months in the Bastille for mocking the regent in verse, returning in 1726 following a humiliating dispute with an aristocrat. Agreeing to leave the country on his release, Voltaire spent a formative exile in England from 1726 to 1729, assembling his first missile

against the French establishment, the *Philosophical Letters* or *Letters on the English* (1733).

If praise for a neighbor was ever going to be interpreted as an insult to the fatherland, it was here. The faux-innocence of the *Philosophical Letters* fooled no one, and Voltaire was once again packing his bags, heading to the Lorraine for a fifteen-year house arrest in the chateau de Cirey with his mistress, Émilie du Châtelet. This was a time of extraordinary productivity for Voltaire. He had been writing plays and poems for years, but he now turned to history, science, and a new genre that he essentially pioneered, the “philosophical tale.” Praise for the new science had flowed in the *Philosophical Letters*, but Émilie deepened Voltaire’s interest and the couple devoted themselves to the study and propagation of Newton’s work. For a brief period, Voltaire looked like he had matured into a more sober intellectual, and his appointment as Royal Historiographer of France (1745) and election to the French Academy (1746) signaled his arrival in an establishment that had rejected him so harshly in 1726.

But Voltaire had lost none of his fight, even if he no longer took fencing lessons to see off his enemies. A time of crisis, following Émilie’s death (1749), a disastrous period serving as philosopher-in-residence to Frederick the Great in Berlin (1750–53), and then the calamity of the Lisbon earthquake (1755), reignited Voltaire’s radicalism. Admission to an establishment did nothing to arrest the rhythms of arbitrary rule, Voltaire discovered, his disappointment with Frederick heightened by the fact that here was a true man of learning, a philosopher King. And the Lisbon disaster raised questions that no grasp of physics could answer. The world was not as it ought to be, and humans had a habit of making it worse. It was here, in contemplation of the cruelty of nature and the corruption of power, that Voltaire turned “hopefully to learned Bayle,” finding in Bayle’s rugged skepticism a working philosophy of action and salutary doubt. “In criticism he was,” wrote a modern admirer, “the direct descendant of Bayle.”⁵⁵

Bayle helped Voltaire to navigate between the old world of tradition and arbitrary authority and the new empire of reason, whose fragility was so brutally exposed by the earthquake. Voltaire’s most famous work, *Candide*, radiated an abhorrence for religious violence and intolerance that had energized him since his schooldays. To this it added a pungent critique of philosophical optimism and intellectual complacency. Voltaire emerged as both the icon of Enlightenment and its leading critic, making good on his challenge that philosophy must be practical or hold its

tongue. It is striking that Voltaire's most dynamic interventions against religious persecution came in the 1760s, in the wake of *Candide's* celebrated conclusion that it is all very well to talk, but real life consists in action. Although *Candide's* sober ambition to "cultivate our garden" has been interpreted in terms of Stoic resignation, or an Epicurean aspiration to enjoy what is near to you and forget the rest,⁵⁶ Voltaire's startling activism, when he finally had a garden of his own at Ferney, near the safety of Geneva, casts doubt on such theories. The final two decades of his life, which produced the *Treatise on Tolerance* (1763), the *Philosophical Dictionary* (1764), and a stream of radioactive pamphlets and short stories, were definitive in terms of Voltaire's influence and status. It was as the "defender of Calas"—the persecuted Protestant family whose rehabilitation Voltaire had undertaken—that Voltaire was feted on the streets of Paris shortly before his death in 1778.⁵⁷ Diderot once said that he envied Voltaire his role in the Calas affair more than any of his literary triumphs. Voltaire was not unique in conceiving philosophy as action but he exemplified the principle, drawing on volatile reserves of moral energy and a passionate, if heterodox, theology of his own.

The standard approach has been to say that Voltaire was a deist, and deists were rationalists, drawing lessons from nature not revelation, and aiming for the most part at destruction. This is to draw a line between "Christianity" and a philosophical rival which was not always visible at the time. Most of the English deists who influenced Voltaire cited Spinoza and Bayle among their sources, and recent work on the seminal figure of John Toland has emphasized his Protestant pedigree, identifying his *Christianity not Mysterious* (1695) as a "reforming Dissenter work."⁵⁸ Toland's attack on "priestcraft" was a Protestant critique of Catholic "idolatry" extended to all ministers. He condemned the clergy not for their Christianity but their lack of it. He maintained that the clergy's pride, ambition, and spirit of "emulation," and not Christianity as such, were the "real source[s] of all those heresies, which make so bulky and black a catalogue in ecclesiastical history."⁵⁹ He defined "priestcraft" as the "design'd abuse and reverse of religion," not the logical outcome of Christian faith.⁶⁰ In *Christianity not Mysterious*, Toland aligned his theology with what he considered real Christianity, criticizing the modern urge to wrap dogma in philosophical jargon, and complaining of "those Gentlemen who love to call Names in Religion," in an attempt to isolate their enemies. He wished to "assure them, that I am neither of Paul, nor of Cephas, nor of Apollos, but of the Lord Jesus Christ alone, who is the Author and Finisher of my

Faith.” “The only religious Title therefore that I shall ever own,” he fiercely maintained, “is that most glorious one of being a Christian.”⁶¹ If deism was heresy, it was Christian heresy.

Another deist, Thomas Chubb, produced works such as, *The Glory of Christ, The True Gospel of Jesus Christ asserted*, and *A Vindication of God’s Moral Character*. Matthew Tindal quoted Jesus against an “Old Testament” psychology of persecution, noting that Christ had “rebuked” his disciples for wanting to call down fire on the ungodly.⁶² Deism extended the fault line of moral criticism that runs from Castellio to Arminianism and the spiritual dissent of the seventeenth century, drawing on the biblical criticism of the Quaker, Samuel Fisher, and the “immanentist” metaphysics of the bolder English “enthusiasts.”⁶³ The God of vengeance was judged by the God who was known in the heart and could be gleaned from Nature’s revolving feast. There was grandeur in criticism: a sense of possession. There were anti-Christian writers among the deists, such as Peter Annet, but even in hostility, debts to Christian sources were constantly apparent. Voltaire drew on the anticlericalism, biblical criticism, and rhetorical aggression of the English deists, which often amounted to Bayle at one remove. And he shared the deist impulse to situate revelation in creation rather than a disputed text—an instinct that again places him within, not outside, the Christian culture.

Voltaire did not coin the “watchmaker” analogy later associated with the Anglican theologian, William Paley, but he made it his own in the struggle against the new “imposter” of atheism. “I shall always be convinced that a watch proves the existence of a watchmaker and that the universe proves the existence of a God,” he wrote in his *Elements of Newton’s Philosophy* (1745).⁶⁴ In 1768 he was as confident as ever that “you can be a very good philosopher and believe in God. The atheists have never answered the argument that a clock proves the existence of a clock-maker.”⁶⁵ Voltaire maintained deep admiration for liberal Anglicans, such as Archbishop Tillotson, Christian philosophers such as Samuel Clarke, and above all, the Quakers. He shared the zeal of orthodox theologians for natural theology, and he had equally respectable French sources for his two guiding principles of conscience and mercy.

Long before Voltaire encountered Bayle or the deists, he completed his own apprenticeship in the dialectics of sectarianism at school and in the family home. As René Pomeau, a leading French authority on Voltaire, demonstrated, his deism was above all an “anti-Jansenism.”⁶⁶ It was a protest against a hyper-Augustinian branch of Catholicism that

mirrored the Arminian struggle against Calvinism in the Netherlands. Voltaire's brother, Armand, was a fierce Jansenist, and at the Collège Louis-le-Grand he was in a nursery of reaction to the vigorous sect. Some of Voltaire's teachers, such as René-Joseph Tournemine, were major theologians in their own right, forging influential responses to the austerity of Jansenism, and flouting the cultural shibboleths of the movement. The Jesuits encouraged the young Arouet in drama and poetry, and arranged for some of his work to be published.

Voltaire was in touch with some of his teachers twenty years after he left the school, approaching Tournemine when he was in need of philosophical allies on his return from England. Relations soured over divergent considerations of Newton but Pomeau insists that Voltaire, "brilliant student of the Jesuits," drew vital nutrients from his liberal Catholic education. The religious culture of the school, including the official catechism in use, manifested certain "deistic tendencies," including an impulse to reduce the gap between human and divine wisdom, felt to have been overplayed by Augustinian rivals. Pomeau writes of a certain heterodoxy germinating "within the breast of orthodoxy," even a tendency "to transform Christianity into a natural religion."⁶⁷ Heterodox or not, the Jesuit catechism emphasized mercy over judgment, free will against predestination, and the positive credentials of conscience—all central Voltairian concerns.⁶⁸

The bravest offering on the anti-Jansenist menu was the banned work of Archbishop Fénelon—a pastoral theologian of the late seventeenth century whose mystical affinities had incurred the official censure of Rome. Fénelon's *Maximes des saints* (1697) had popularized the spirituality of Madame Guyon, who exalted inner experience over clerical authority, inviting comparisons with the Quakers. Condemned, as Voltaire later remarked, for preaching the "fatal heresy" of "pure and perfect love," Madame Guyon was imprisoned as "a person dangerous to the state"—fulfilling her own prophecy, as Voltaire dryly added, that, "All hell shall rise up to stop the progress of the inward spirit and the formation of Christ Jesus in souls."⁶⁹ Voltaire considered her an egotist and a fanatic, but his sympathy for her "Quietist" heresy over her orthodox persecutors was clear, and in Fénelon's urbane and sanitized translations, he was imbibing at least some of the Quietist spirit.

Fénelon's *Maximes* preached the priority of love over dogma, and a quality of disinterestedness imperiled by a proud and possessive orthodoxy. Love, as Voltaire later summarized Fénelon's stance, must be "neither

debased by fear, nor exalted by the hope of reward." Fénelon extolled the conscience as "the voice of God" in the soul and he placed a daring emphasis on Jesus as an ordinary human distinguished by extraordinary love.⁷⁰ And perhaps most significantly for Voltaire, Fénelon insisted that God is not a "powerful judge" so much as a "tender" and compassionate "Father."⁷¹ Voltaire struck a note of discovery when he returned to Fénelon's works in the 1760s, writing to a friend that Fénelon's doctrine of "pure love" "could render even Paris happy."⁷² The "virtuous and tender Fénelon" became a much-cited "sage" in his later works. But echoes of the heretic prelate and the mystical conscience are visible throughout his career. Voltaire was the kind of student who was always learning more than he let on.

A "Spark of Heavenly Fire": Voltaire's Accusing Conscience

One thing that scholars have agreed upon is that Voltaire was a destroyer: in philosophy a skeptic; in theology an enemy of every dogma. Even Pomeau, who has done more than anyone to expose his theological debts, portrayed Voltaire's religion as an icy affair, "a de-christianized Christianity," which pleads the divine principle of tolerance but expects little in return from a cool and distant deity.⁷³ Voltaire can be read this way, especially in his more somber reflections following the Lisbon earthquake. But my suggestion is that there is more vigor, definition, and purpose in Voltaire's criticism than such interpretations allow. Voltaire often appears torn between a clean, de-theologized natural religion—which would end scholastic "squabbles" once and for all—and a more generous, affirmative theology, which would supply the weaknesses of conscience with gentle dogmas of its own. The two concerns run side by side, and Voltaire may be as elusive of chronological classification as Luther, but my claim is that a more positive theology of forgiveness ultimately dominates Voltaire's leaner assertions of natural law. And even when Voltaire is at his most anti-theological, or seems to be, the vigor of his religious convictions is palpable. Scholars have been too quick to equate philosophical and theological skepticism with outright unbelief. Like Bayle and Spinoza before him, Voltaire launched his volleys with the elemental poise of someone who knew that some truths are eternal.

One way to interpret this tension between natural law and positive religion is to see the first as Voltaire's doctrine of creation and the

second as his doctrine of redemption—with superstition serving for him, as for Spinoza, as sin. This would account for some of the ambivalence of Voltaire's writing about conscience, combining enthusiasm and disappointment. Clearly, Lisbon was a turning point, and it is notable that Voltaire's most fulsome expression came in the *Poem on Natural Law* (1756), written shortly before the disaster. Here, Voltaire defended the divine origins of the heavenly chaperone against those who would reduce it to a social skill. As he challenged: "Did men create the sense of guilt or shame? Their soul and faculties did mortals frame?" Voltaire placed himself within a spiritualist cast of thought as he defended the divinity of conscience as a "seed of virtue" sown in "every heart" by the God to whom every person "owes" their life. The mystical pedigree was clear as Voltaire commended this "bright ethereal spark of heavenly fire," this "generous flame," as an active principle, which "makes the obstinate repent." Voltaire defined superstition as the occlusion of this sacred instinct. Why, he wondered, had this mighty principle failed to arrest "so many years" of "religious wars" and "pious rage"? The answer was theology—of a kind that invites souls to "withdraw" from "nature's law," tempting them to believe that their passions reflected God's will, and empowering them to reject ordinary morality under the princely fiction that "the Pagan virtues were but crimes at best."⁷⁴ This was a clear allusion to Augustine and signaled a central target of Voltaire's criticism.

Such theology, daring to "to damn mankind" on the authority of a capricious deity, was capable of corrupting the soul. It could turn out the lights. This was the essence of "fanaticism," the soured fruit of superstition, defined in the *Philosophical Dictionary* as "the effect of a false conscience, which makes religion subservient to the caprices of the imagination, and the excesses of the passions."⁷⁵ Voltaire's portrait of "Mahomet" as a cold-blooded killer was prefaced with the explanation that this was a man in whom "superstition had totally extinguished . . . the light of nature,"⁷⁶ a diagnosis extended to Calvin, who had "brilliant mind" and an "atrocious soul"—the two somehow linked.⁷⁷ Even when Voltaire spoke through the voice of "Nature," as in the *Treatise on Tolerance*, he retained a spiritual sense of a created good requiring protection from the perversions of theology, the passions, or any combination of the two. "I have placed in each of your hearts a seed of compassion with which to help one another through life," spoke Voltaire's Nature. "Do not smother this seed; nor must you corrupt it; for it is divine. And do not substitute the pathetic squabbles of academic dispute for the voice of nature."⁷⁸ It was in

a similar spirit that Voltaire could condemn the doctrine of "Original Sin" as Christianity's "original sin."⁷⁹ The goodness of conscience reflected the goodness of creation.

The trademarks of Voltaire's heroes were openness, candor, and guileless good nature. Candide combined "true judgment with simplicity of spirit," a humble soul endowed "with the most gentle of manners." "His countenance was a true picture of his soul."⁸⁰ *Le Huron ou L'Ingenu* ("The Huron or the Ingenuous") was another adventure built around the clarifying innocence of an honest hero, a Native American whose rough candor cut through the embroidered deceptions of the old world. Superstition and theology were the corsets of virtue and the prisons of conscience. Voltaire often contrasted the purity of untutored peoples with the cynicism of what passed for Christian morality. The "savage beauty" of Alzire's heart, in Voltaire's South American drama, could be read from her countenance. Her face never "belie[d] her heart." "Dissimulation and disguise" were "European arts." "Shame," a "European phantom, Which fools mistake for virtue."⁸¹

When non-Christian religions exchanged conscience for social honor, however, Voltaire could be equally harsh. In *Zadig*, he set another of his "ingenuous" heroes in conversation with a widow preparing to throw herself on her husband's "funeral pile." Discovering, to his horror, that the woman actually wanted to die on her husband's ashes, Zadig slowly brought her to the admission that her real concern was for "reputation." "Zadig having forced her ingenuously to confess, that she parted with her Life more out of Regard to what the World would say of her, and out of Pride and Ostentation, than any real Love for the deceased," she changed her mind.⁸² A life was preserved and the adventure continued. This was purest Voltaire.

Even in his darkest broodings on the cruelty of the universe and the inscrutability of the creator, Voltaire clung to the sacredness of human life. When the weary and disillusioned Martin described the shadows of hanged men as "horrible blots" on the world, Candide cautioned against resignation: "'They are men who make the blots,' said Candide, 'and they cannot be dispensed with.'" ⁸³ When Martin "concluded that man was born to live either in a state of distracting inquietude or of lethargic disgust," the rebuke was again gentle but firm: "Candide did not quite agree."⁸⁴ Life went on. The philosophical skepticism that Voltaire aired in the Lisbon poem, in *Candide*, and in such idiosyncratic gems as *The Ignorant Philosopher* (1766), was sustained by an enduring humanism of

sympathy and moral purpose. "I always reduce, so far as I can, my metaphysics to morality," Voltaire told Frederick, dismissing metaphysics in another letter as: "Fine names that nobody can explain, for what nobody can understand."⁸⁵ Contrary to the stereotype of an Enlightenment drunk on reason and intellectual presumption, the mood of the period was enduringly skeptical, taking down the "enchanted castles" of the seventeenth-century "romanciers," and dragging philosophy before the bar of conscience quite as often as theology. Conscience and skepticism were forces in concert.

Voltaire's wicked portrait of Pangloss, that unfeeling professor of "metaphysico-theologico-cosmolo-nigology," who could talk but never act, was a monument to what one scholar has termed the Enlightenment's "anti-intellectualism"—a beefy impatience with theory and intellectual pretension that could provoke Samuel Johnson to "refute" the idealist metaphysics of Bishop Berkley by kicking the nearest "stone,"⁸⁶ or enable the Bayle-like Martin to explain his "hard[ness] of belief" in three simple words: "I have lived."⁸⁷ Reality was in. Speculation was out—leading the same scholar to conclude that "the Enlightenment was not an Age of Reason but a Revolt against Rationalism."⁸⁸ Hume's contention that reason does not get out of bed until nudged by one of the passions was an example of a wider revolt against a bookish, unblooded intellectualism. Passions could be moral as well as physical. Voltaire's were both.

When *Candide* and Martin managed to discuss philosophy for "fifteen successive days," they found that "on the last of those fifteen days, they were as far advanced as on the first." And "they consoled each other."⁸⁹ Not so Pangloss ("All Tongue"), whose intellectual rigidity stiffened in the breeze of events: "I am still of my first opinion . . . for I am a philosopher and I cannot retract." Voltaire satirized his facile intellectualism with the same vigor with which he cursed the crashing bromides of optimism in the Lisbon poem—where the "Dreams of the bloodless thinker" were implicated in the loss of human life; where silence was preferred to "grim speculat[ion] on the woes of men"; where the urge to explain was condemned as another species of cruelty.

As the exhausted travelers in *Candide* arrived at their destination in Turkey, Pangloss picked out a friendly local, hoping to engage him "a little about causes and effects, about the best of all possible worlds, the origin of evil, the nature of the soul, and the pre-established harmony." "At these words, the Dervish shut the door in their faces." The reanimating

decision of Martin and Candide to “work . . . without disputing” was also Voltaire’s: a bruised humanism crawling out of a tunnel of hollow reasoning.⁹⁰ It was a recovery of nerve that symbolized a transfer of responsibility from mind to heart, discourse to action. This is why much of the period’s criticism exudes an earthy, almost unscholarly quality.

This was especially true of Voltaire’s attitude to the Bible. Like Bayle, Voltaire was more troubled by the thought of why God would choose to harden Pharaoh’s heart than whether he was capable of doing so.⁹¹ Bayle had made conscience preeminent over scripture, and morality the measure of metaphysics. “Should a thousand times as many Miracles as those of Moses and the Apostles be wrought in confirmation of a Doctrine repugnant to these universal Principles of common Sense,” Bayle urged, “Man, as his Facultys are made, could not believe a tittle on it.”⁹² Voltaire applied the same principle, reducing questions of historicity to ethics and dismissing the divine deliverances of holy warfare as the conceit of a tribal imagination. As one scholar writes, “Voltaire’s most indignant criticisms of Old Testament miracles concern their alleged immorality, as for example with Joshua 10:12–14, where God lengthens the day to give the Israelites more time to kill the Amorites.”⁹³ There was venom in Voltaire’s writing, there can be no doubt. But the ethical criterion was constantly evident, enabling him to hold fire when the Bible enjoined justice and mercy, or when love extended beyond the clan, as in the book of Ruth.

Voltaire often praised the naivety of the biblical style, and he frequently quoted from the book of Ecclesiastes (also a favorite of Spinoza’s).⁹⁴ It would be hard to deny similarities between the Genesis account of Joseph and the adventures of Zadig—an open-hearted man, enslaved, accused of plotting an affair with his master’s wife, and redeemed by an ability to interpret dreams, administer debt, and forgive his enemies. Voltaire’s commentary on “Joseph” in the *Philosophical Dictionary* reveals a tension between an urge to historicize the Old Testament as a collection of folk tales and a desire to extract a lost message of forgiveness. Voltaire wanted to argue that the story was not unique to the Jews at the same time as distinguishing it from a sea of Arabic and classical folklore. “It is more affecting than the ‘Odyssey,’” he insisted, “for a hero who pardons is more touching than one who avenges.” “Almost all in it is wonderful,” he continued, “and the termination exacts tears of tenderness.” Joseph’s capacity to “receive,” “pardon,” and “enrich” the brothers who sold him into slavery was a jewel within the dust of ancient fables. The Arabs had their

“ingenious fictions,” Voltaire granted, “but I see among them no adventures comparable to those of Joseph.”⁹⁵

Voltaire’s wrath was as agile as his wit, his fury consistently uneven. His ability to praise a Joseph while excoriating a “monster” such as Joshua reflected clear priorities, and his constant search for heroes and exemplars suggested a desire to rewrite, rather than destroy, the Christian narrative. By seeking to stimulate and challenge the conscience of his readers, Voltaire was admitting the need for sources beyond the self. His affinity for a more explicit theology of redemption was not, therefore, the awkward U-turn some have held it to be. It was the acceleration of impulses always surging behind the cool visage of natural religion. The more closely Voltaire’s polemicism is examined, the clearer it becomes that he was not attacking religion in the abstract but a very particular kind of superstition. Indeed to know Voltaire’s enemy is in a sense to know his God. The clarity and articulacy with which he assailed Augustine, and Augustinian strains of theology, suggests that the real battle of the Enlightenment was not between natural religion and Christianity: it was between two Christianities. One reason Voltaire’s de-theologized model of natural religion did not travel far without seeking theological sustenance was because there was little “natural” about it in the first place. It was another Christian protest against a flesh-cutting theology of exclusion.

Against the Tyrant God: Unmasking Superstition

Critics of Voltaire’s early works quickly identified assaults on arbitrary divinity in plays such as *Oedipe* and *Mahomet* as veiled attacks on Jansenism. Voltaire’s Oedipus committed crimes through no fault of his own, crying out in the final act of the drama: “Merciless gods, my crimes are your crimes.” It was, as one scholar suggests, a theological statement, in which, “The Jesuit vision of a just God [was] implicitly championed in contrast to the Jansenist God of wrath and obligatory sinfulness.” Voltaire set a “Jesuit morality of conscience and intention” against the fatalism of “Jansenist morality.”⁹⁶ By the time he wrote the *Philosophical Dictionary*, some four decades later, subtlety was no longer the condition of dissent. Voltaire’s contribution to a debate on which Christian heresy Islam most clearly resembles consisted of the blunt aspersion that “Mahomet” was neither Arian, Manichean, nor Donatist: “he was rather a Jansenist,

for the foundation of his doctrine is the absolute degree of gratuitous predestination.”⁹⁷

Voltaire was gleefully enraged by the cruel and unvalorous psychology of predestination—and psychology was what he came to consider it. In a historical discussion of the sectarian hostilities that had divided France since the mid-seventeenth century, he placed full responsibility with the Jansenists, adding that their dispute with the Jesuits was based on “exactly the ground of the quarrel between the [Calvinist] Gomarists and Arminians” in the Netherlands. The malaise was all the more depressing given that Dutch “eyes” had now opened to the “atrocious” consequences of such fanaticism. And Voltaire, rarely pedantic of citation, was surgical in locating the seed of destruction: “We . . . read on page 165 [of Jansen’s book *Augustinus*], ‘That according to St. Augustine, Jesus Christ did not die for all men.’”⁹⁸ Jansenism was the joy of damning your brother on God’s irrevocable authority. Pascal was the past master, squandering his talents on a mean and vindictive campaign against the Jesuits. It was thanks to Pascal, Voltaire claimed, that Jansenists struggled to think of Jesuits as human beings, let alone Christians.

For someone who gained a reputation for crude and indiscriminate mockery, Voltaire was remarkably precise of aim. He rarely missed an opportunity to identify the toxin of superstition with either Jansenism or Augustine himself: “A little Jansenist stands by,” ran one of his poems, “St. Austin’s works and saintly pride, Both equally his heart divide.”⁹⁹ When the generous Huron came face-to-face with religious bigotry in a prison cell, it was inevitably the contortions of Jansenism that he had to unravel. When he finally taught Gordon, the repentant Jansenist, how to forgive a woman who had sinned, the narrator added that “the aged Gordon would have condemned her at the time he was only a Jansenist; but having attained wisdom, he esteemed her, and wept.”¹⁰⁰

As a young man Voltaire reflected that it would be better not to be born at all than to be predestined to hell, and the injustice of such theology never ceased to agitate him.¹⁰¹ What kind of God creates in order to destroy? Such was the concern of his most virulent criticism. The *Épître à Uranie* (“Letter to Urania”) (1722) was a poem written to a lover who had been unnerved by Voltaire’s angry impieties. Casting himself as a “new Lucretius” tearing away the “blindfold” of superstition, Voltaire sought to convince her of the seriousness of his intent and the goodness of his God. The letter circulated in manuscript after

Voltaire carelessly showed it to the poet Jean-Baptiste Rousseau, who released it in retribution for a typically Voltairean insult. (Rousseau had written an “Ode to Posterity”; Voltaire said he did not think it would reach its destination.)

Voltaire had every reason to worry about where his own poem would end up. In the presumed safety of clandestine verse, he declared war on a punitive Christian orthodoxy. The God of superstition, found in the “sanctuary” of religion was, he declared, a “tyrant, whom we must hate.” Voltaire sought a “father,” whom he could “love,” but the God of superstition was simply unlovable: a cruel master who made humans in his image, only to watch them decay; a God who invented guilt, only to invite punishment; a God who made us love pleasure, only to torment us with pain. Voltaire likened him to a craftsman despising the labor of his hands: a heartless operator, prepared to “lose us all.”¹⁰²

But, whispered the voice of tradition, what about the cross? Hadn’t God relented of his fury, offering a way out of despair? No, thundered Voltaire. The cross changed nothing. The poem reaches its sharpest intensity as Voltaire condemns Christ’s death as “useless!”—“*inutile!*”—for, even now, not all would be saved. The callous God of orthodoxy proposed to “plunge us back into the eternal abyss.” Voltaire’s fury coils around the crime of applying words like “clemency” to a theology of terror. But the tone softens as he introduces the reader to the true God, who is nothing like the God of Christianity. This reasonable deity, Voltaire urged, takes more pleasure in a “modest” Buddhist or a “charitable dervish” than a “ruthless Jansenist” or an “ambitious Pontiff.” Indeed, he could be addressed directly. From talking of the tyrant God, Voltaire now prayed to the God of justice and peace, “imploring” him to “hear” his “meek and sincere voice.” “My unbelief should not displease you; My heart is open to your eyes.” “The unfeeling blaspheme you,” Voltaire continued, but, “I, I revere you.” “I am not a Christian, but it is to love you more.”¹⁰³

The final verses were addressed to the reader, assuring her that the true God is one who “consoles” and “enlightens”; a God who has “engraved” a true law of righteousness in every heart; a God to whom the heart of the just is “precious”; a God who will not visit his “undying hatred” on a soul as “naïve” and “candid” as hers. Such a God could be trusted to value justice and charity above “honors” and “homage”:

*If we can offend him, it is by our injustices,
He judges us by our virtues, And not by our sacrifices.*¹⁰⁴

This was Voltaire under the defiant banner of “natural law,” boldly declaring that he is not a Christian and casting the choice between the God of orthodoxy and the God of Nature as a terrible either/or. Yet this was a knowing doubt and a deeply certain defiance. The true God desires justice, not sacrifice, and will one day reward it. Voltaire did a better impression of an Old Testament prophet, announcing God’s will and promising relief from his “anger,” than a modern-day Lucretius, denying his existence. His fury against a “pitiless” Jansenism and a power-corrupted papacy was palpably biblical, his final verses redolent of the words attributed to Jesus in the New Testament: “Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’”¹⁰⁵ The Christianity skewered on Voltaire’s sword of justice was a theology of wrath and limited salvation. The maneuver was dashing and defiant; the weapon, another form of Christianity.

Voltaire’s Christian pedigree was rarely more palpable than in the *Philosophical Letters* (1733), where he appended a blistering attack on Pascal to his gentle praise of English tolerance. Life, Voltaire protested against a figure he regarded as the supreme misanthrope, is more than a death sentence, and religion more than a set of crushing paradoxes. Humans are neither as “evil” nor as “unhappy” as Pascal contended. Voltaire accused him of turning his sectarian quarrels into a scurrilous indictment of humanity: “He writes against human nature more or less as he wrote against the Jesuits. He attributes to the essence of our nature what applies only to certain men.” In setting human and divine nature so far apart, Voltaire accused Pascal of claiming “to know more about [religion] than Jesus Christ and the Apostles.” Voltaire offered a double critique of Pascal’s asceticism and his doctrine of salvation. The first was a protest on behalf of creation, redeeming nature from the status of a cosmic blunder; the second was a protest on behalf of God’s character, relieving him from charge of tyranny. To present God as a dice-rolling tyrant, tormenting his progeny with deliberately opaque prophecies, was to praise in him what could never be praised in a person. He who had poured such righteous scorn on the God of the philosophers was guilty of a grosser travesty: he had turned God into a theologian, delighting in “obscurities of erudition”; a Lord of paradox, not love.¹⁰⁶

“How can you,” Voltaire barked at Pascal through the mist of mortal separation, “without blushing, admit in God, those very things for which mankind are adjudged infamous and are punished?” “If, in your system, God only came for so few people, if the small number of the elect is so

terrifying, if I can do nothing at all by my own efforts, tell me, please, what interest I have in believing you?" Indeed:

Have I not an obvious interest in being persuaded to the contrary? How can you have the effrontery to show me an infinite happiness to which hardly one in a million has the right to aspire? If you want to convince me, set about it in some other way, and don't sometimes talk to me about games of chance, wagers and heads or tails, and sometimes frighten me by the thorns you scatter on the path I want to follow and must follow. Your reasoning would only serve to make atheists were it not that the voice of the whole of nature cries out that there is a God with a strength as great as the weakness of those subtleties.¹⁰⁷

The rocks were crying out. So was the Bible. Voltaire's article on "Original Sin" in the *Philosophical Dictionary* simmered with the same molten eloquence. If the "strange notion" of original sin were a true account of the human condition, Voltaire contended, marriage would be a crime and the New Testament a lie. Christ said nothing about the eternal agonies of unbaptized infants. The doctrine was the invention of Augustine, a man at once "debauched and penitent, Manichean and Christian, tolerant and persecuting—who passed his life in perpetual self-contradiction." Augustine had burdened the race with his own perversities, slandering God as a remorseful creator, and creating a religion of fear—rarely more offensive than in pitiless speculation on the eternal destiny of children. Of such, Voltaire complained, "men have now attained such a degree of superstition that I can scarcely relate it without trembling." Voltaire allowed the Jansenist theologian, Pierre Nicole, to explain in ponderous technicalities how children revealed tendencies "to concupiscence" even before the "act" of sin, and how evil resided in the "will" rather than the deed, thus provoking divine wrath. He then cut in on behalf of the putatively depraved infant: "Well said, Nicole; bravo! But, in the meantime, why am I to be damned?"¹⁰⁸

For Voltaire, these were no academic disputes. This was the theology that was dividing a nation, arresting the cause of toleration, and sharpening barbarous statutes against heresy and impiety. The link between theological "misanthropy" and religious violence was clear. "The superstition that we must drive from the earth," he wrote in 1767, "is that which, making a tyrant of God, invites men to become tyrants."¹⁰⁹ The *Treatise*

on *Tolerance* was similarly revealing of his basic animus: "But, in truth," he addressed the advocates of coercion, "do we know all the ways of God and the full extent of His mercy? Is it not permitted we should hope in Him as much as fear Him? Is it not sufficient to be faithful servants of the Church? Must each one of us presume to take upon himself the authority of God and decide, in His place, upon the eternal fate of our fellow men?"¹¹⁰ Or as he urged more simply in a "sermon" of 1767: "I see the mercy of God where you would see only his power."¹¹¹

One scholar has interpreted the preoccupation with mercy in Voltaire's later works as a decisive transition from firebrand to peacemaker. "Can we," she wonders, with a play on his adopted theme, "forgive Voltaire for having ceased to be Voltaire?"¹¹² Noting a similar transition, Pomeau emphasized the pressure of atheism from the 1760s and an almost scrambled theology of counterattack. Yet the concern for forgiveness was long-standing. What changed was Voltaire's willingness to cite figures like Fénelon and Jesus Christ as his exemplars. Like the spiritualist Christians of the seventeenth century, Voltaire developed a model of "enlightenment" that centered on religious qualities of illumination and conferred mercy. This central beam of Voltaire's project has been nervously excised from his literary estate. For a man who did not like theology, Voltaire did rather a lot of it.

The Frail Conscience and the Father God: Voltaire's Religion

I do not confound superstition and religion, my dear philosopher. . . . Superstition has always produced trouble and discord: religion maintains brotherhood, learning, and peace.

—VOLTAIRE TO M. BERTRAND, January 1764

Superstition is to religion what astrology is to astronomy, that is the very foolish daughter of a wise and intelligent mother.

—VOLTAIRE, *Treatise on Tolerance*, 1763

A stupid priest excites contempt; a bad priest inspires horror; a good priest, mild, pious, without superstition, charitable, tolerant, is one who ought to be cherished and revered.

—VOLTAIRE, *Philosophical Dictionary*, 1764

Voltaire's search for a "father" rather than a "tyrant" was more than the rhetorical flourish of the *Letter to Urania*. The idea dominated his theological writing. Voltaire's burden was not to demystify so much as to correct. His guiding authorities were the Christian "heresies" of Pelagianism, Socinianism, and Quakerism, as well as Fénelon's mysticism. "Pelagius," Voltaire contended against Augustine, denied that children could "possibly be guilty before they can even think" and he "considered God, not merely as an absolute master, *but as a parent*, who left His children at perfect liberty, and rewarded them beyond their merits, and punished them less than their faults deserved."¹¹³

There was esteem for conscience among Voltaire's Christian allies, but there was also a recognition of limits. And it was from such recognition that Voltaire gradually increased the theological quotient of his philosophy. Voltaire's critique of conscience preceded his falling out with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, but there can be no doubt that an insufferable rival bragging about being "intoxicated with virtue" hastened his suspicions. Voltaire admired Rousseau's *Émile* (1762), where a "profession of faith" by a "Savoyard Vicar" asserted the primacy of conscience over dogma with unsurpassed eloquence. But Rousseau the man was another matter. Voltaire sensed delusion in a sublime appeal to conscience that left a man free to behave as he wished. It was with more than personal spite that Voltaire let it be known that the author of a soaring, saintly treatise on education had surrendered all five of his own children to a Paris orphanage, never to see them again.¹¹⁴ The eight-page pamphlet of 1762, entitled *Sentiment des citoyens* ("How Citizens Feel") reflected Voltaire's growing awareness of the infirmity of conscience—even, or especially, when the scaffolding of doctrine had been removed. The point was made with elegant economy in the *Philosophical Dictionary*: "There is a natural law; but it is still more natural to many people to forget it."¹¹⁵

In *Candide*, James, the gentle Anabaptist, rebuked Pangloss for denying the reality of sin. After one of Pangloss's sermons on the perfection of the natural order, James politely responded: " 'It is more likely,' said he, 'mankind have a little corrupted nature, for they were not born wolves, and they have become wolves; God has given them neither cannon of four-and-twenty pounders, nor bayonets; and yet they have made cannon and bayonets to destroy one another.' "¹¹⁶ This was to resist the twin extremes of philosophic optimism and Augustinian pessimism—a balance that increasingly characterized Voltaire's own stance. Depravity was not natural or total, but it was real enough. The *Dictionary* entry

for “Conscience” suggested Voltaire’s ability to balance the proto-Kantian verities of the *Poem on Natural Law* with the Lockean wisdom that consciences are made, not given. Voltaire took the provocative example of David in the Old Testament, “who sometimes possessed a conscience tender and enlightened, at others hardened and dark,” to suggest the fallibility of this rock of virtue. He admitted that history was littered with persecutors, assassins, and arrant debauchees who lived and died “without the slightest feeling of remorse.” The problem could be demonstrated at both ends of the social scale, and Voltaire defined the task of regeneration in unapologetically religious terms: “it is judicious,” he announced with homiletic grandeur, “to endeavor to awaken conscience both in mantua-makers and in monarchs.” Indeed, “it is necessary to preach better than modern preachers usually do, who seldom talk effectively to either.”¹¹⁷

It is true that Voltaire’s pieties deepened with age and the rising threat of atheism, but even in the supposedly deistic phase, the message was strangely evangelical. Even before Voltaire developed this explicit critique of conscience, his tolerationist writings offered an implicit one. Voltaire’s epic poem about Henry IV, the clement king who ended France’s Wars of Religion, was one of his proudest achievements. He spent much of his time in England trying to find a publisher for it, and he even wrote an “Essay upon the civil wars in France” to highlight the cause and the work. Poring with lurid fascination over the St. Bartholomew Day Massacre, and raising its peacemaking hero to god-like status, *La Henriade*, first published in 1723 as *La Ligue, ou Henri le Grand* (“The League, or Henry the Great”), distilled Voltaire’s religious concerns. The poem pleads for the Christian virtue of mercy over nature’s highest offer of justice. Voltaire interrupts a fast-paced narrative to reveal the spiritual education of his hero.

Henry is described as seeking a “greater boon” than a “crown,” namely, “enlightening grace.” His animating conviction that “God created us, he wills all sav’d,” follows a lengthy dialogue with an angel, who assures him that God’s mercy is greater than his anger, and a similar conversation with a “sage” on the island of Jersey. “God,” the angel informs him, can “subject” his people “without tyrannizing” them. He “is a sire who schools his sons,” not the “tyrant” described “on earth.” He “is always stable.” Although there is a place called “hell” where the truly vicious are punished, “mankind’s creator” takes no pleasure in the suffering of “the creatures of his hands.” “If infinite he, it is in his rewards,” the angel affirms. “Free in his gifts, to vengeance he sets bounds.”¹¹⁸

When the conquering king puts the divine vision into practice, pardoning and even feeding his enemies, Voltaire describes it as the offer of “grace” to “these rebels.” The defeated soldiers are “rendered to life” by Henry’s “kind commands,” honoring their conqueror as “the brilliant image of our God.” If this was to employ New Testament language of incarnation, the description of Henry delivering food on the tips of “those lances, which had ever carried death,” recalls prophetic images of “swords” turning into “plowshares” and “spears” to “pruning hooks.” Voltaire turns Henry into a savior, melting the hearts of his enemies. Natural law would have justified Henry in delivering judgment, not mercy; it would not have brought peace. Throughout the poem, the concept of “enlightenment” implied spiritual illumination and gathering wisdom, sometimes incorporated into a prayer: “Enlighten, Lord, his heart, thee born to know: A master give to France, the church a son.”¹¹⁹ Voltaire’s epic was an essay on the character of God and the preeminence of mercy over justice. With hardly a word about Jesus himself, Voltaire presented Henry as a Christ-like deliverer, the “image” of God, marshaling his people with a radiant scepter of mercy.

Alzire offered a comparable drama of terror, justice, and mercy. *Alzire ou les Américains* (“Alzire or the Americans”) was written during Voltaire’s house arrest at Cirey and first performed at the Comédie-Française in Paris in 1736. It was well received and it remained one of Voltaire’s favorite works. It was staged many times at Ferney, and it was performed in Paris during his triumphal, and ultimately fatal, return to the city in 1778. *Alzire* has been classed alongside *Zaire*, *Mahomet*, and *Merope* as “one of his four dramatic masterpieces.”¹²⁰ Set in Lima at the time of the Spanish conquest, the play sustains a three-way tension between a religion of fear and vengeance, an ancestral piety of natural law and just deserts, and a true religion of mercy and forgiveness. Voltaire’s fiercest censures are clearly aimed at the first, the religion of vengeance represented by the implacable figure of Guzman, but his critique of a natural religion that would swing the sword of justice on its conquerors is powerful. Voltaire praises the candor and integrity of the Native Americans Alzire and her lover, Zamor. He acknowledges the superiority of their religion of reciprocity to the mendacity of a conquering Catholicism—a lust for gold disguised as faith in God. But he ultimately exposes the poverty of a religion that would either kill or die to defend its honor. Prefaced with Alexander Pope’s phrase, “To err is human, to forgive divine,” *Alzire* concludes with a laying down of arms and a moving scene of reconciliation.

The action starts with the aging governor of the colony, Alvarez, offering advice to his son, Guzman, as he hands over power. As if to repent of his part in the conquest, Alvarez admits that he had for “too long” “neglected” the God in whose name the American land had been taken. He now understood the superiority of clemency to arbitrary power, and he wished his son to continue accordingly. Having been spared death by a magnanimous native, Alvarez had learnt the wisdom of restraint and the necessity of generosity. Guzman was to do likewise. Guzman, however, rejects his father’s advice. He warns his father that “power” is “lost by mildness.” Only “severity” ensures “obedience.” The natives must be made to “tremble” at their conquerors, forced to “embrace our faith” and to submit to the “one God.” Alvarez is dismayed by his son’s arrogance and his dullness to the consequences of these “tyrant maxims.” A religion that brings nothing of “heaven but its thunder,” which serves “a God of peace with war and slaughter,” can only foment hatred and rebellion. Alvarez reminds Guzman that he owes his life to these “wild barbarians,” whose virtues exceeded their own:

*In short, I blush to own it, we alone
Are the barbarians here: the simple savage,
Though fierce by nature, is in courage equal,
In goodness our superior. O my Guzman,
Had he, like us, been prodigal of blood,
Had he not felt the throbs of tender pity,
Alvarez had not lived to speak his virtues*

Hearts that are “oppressed,” Alvarez reasons, are “never conquered.” And God is not honored by force. The “true God, my son, The God of Christians is a God of mercy.”¹²¹

Alvarez’s reign of mercy had mollified some of the natives, whose leader, Montezuma, gave his daughter, Alzire, to marry Guzman. Alzire, however, was in love with the leader of the resistance to the Spanish conquerors, the wild-hearted Zamor. Presuming Zamor to be dead after a long absence, however, Alzire reluctantly consented to the marriage, before suffering the shock of Zamor’s return. Zamor was a noble character, and it was he who had spared Alvarez’s life many years before. But he now had renewed cause to avenge the blood of his people with that of the “proud Guzman.” Following a series of threats, Zamor mortally wounded Guzman, before handing himself over to Alvarez to be killed, having completed his work of revenge.

In the face of death, however, Guzman experienced a change of heart. Before the attack, he had refused his father's request to pardon Zamor for his insults. With similar pride, Zamor had disdained a tactical conversion to Christianity that would have saved his life at that point. But with Guzman dying, and Zamor facing death for the attack, the folly of vengeance and the wisdom of mercy slowly dawned. In the hour of death, the "mask" of Guzman's bloodstained piety came off. With fading power of body, he finally summoned the courage to "imitate Alvarez," whose love had been unswerving throughout. The Christian conqueror finally converted to the faith he had hitherto sullied:

*O my father,
The mask is off, death has at last unveiled
The hideous scene, and showed me to myself;
New light breaks in on my astonished soul:
O I have been a proud, ungrateful being,
And trampled on my fellow-creatures: heaven
Averages earth: my life can never atone
For half the blood I've shed: prosperity
Had blinded Guzman, death's benignant hand
Restores my sight; I thank the instrument
Employed by heaven to make me what I am.*

Guzman's speech did not end with his conversion, however. As "light" broke in on his "astonished soul," he found the power to forgive his adversary and to pardon his crime:

*A penitent: I yet am master here;
And yet can pardon: Zamor, I forgive thee,
Live and be free; but O remember how
A Christian acted, how a Christian died.¹²²*

Zamor, whose refusal to "worship deities . . . bathed in our own blood" had hitherto sealed his loathing of the Christian God, was overwhelmed by his enemy's change of heart. As Guzman not only pardoned him, but entrusted Alzire to his care, with the words, "live and hate me not," Zamor—"Amazed, confounded"—fell at his feet and announced his own conversion to Christianity.

*By heaven; the Christian's law must be divine:
Friendship, and faith, and constancy I knew
Already; but this soars above them all:
I must indeed admire and love thee, Guzman.*¹²³

Earlier, when a pragmatic conversion would have saved him, Alzire had directed Zamor to “hear the voice of conscience; act as she alone directs thee.” Under such a dispensation, Zamor had proudly refused to convert—conscience and honor uniting against the humiliation of bowing to a foreign god. You “scorn our proffered mercy,” Alvarez lamented, as Zamor elected to “die with honor.” When it finally occurred, Zamor’s conversion was presented as liberation from pride and honor, triggered by Guzman’s act of mercy. Guzman also pardoned his estranged wife, Alzire, who had never loved him: “I cannot see thee weep and not forgive thee.” Hearts are not conquered by force, Alvarez had said all along, though it took the sacrificial death of Guzman to prove it. The play concludes with Alvarez turning to Alzire’s father, Montezuma, with a somber reflection on the costs of mercy:

*I see the hand of God in all our woes,
And humbly bend myself before that power
Who wounds to heal, and strikes but to forgive.*¹²⁴

“We may smile,” writes one biographer, at Voltaire’s “guileful, politic attempt to present himself as the truest of Christians.” But as the same scholar acknowledges, Voltaire attached unusual importance to the play, endorsing its message in a “heartfelt, sincere, and uncharacteristically personal” preface.¹²⁵ Voltaire claimed that *Alzire* was written “with a view of showing how far superior the spirit of true religion is to the light of nature.”¹²⁶ And audiences took it seriously. Rousseau was reduced to tears when he saw the play in Grenoble in 1737. If it was written for the censors, it assumed a strange method of appeasement, accusing the Catholic Church of tyranny, cruelty, and avarice under the pretense of civilizing the New World. Voltaire did not pull his punches. He may not have realized how closely he was reconstructing the central event of Christianity with his drama of a dying son forgiving his enemies, or how theological the characterization of Alvarez felt—described by Montezuma as “a god, Sent down from heaven to soften this rude world, And bless mankind.”¹²⁷ But the

Christian vigor of the play was unmistakable. It was again the condition of “enlightenment.” Having made peace with Alvarez, Montezuma praised him as the revealer of the “will of heaven,” whose “gentle manners” had

*Enlightened our dark minds; what mighty Spain
Unconquered left, thy virtue has subdued:
Thy cruel countrymen’s remorseless rage
Had rendered even thy God detestable,
But that in thee His great perfections shine,
His goodness, and His mercy; in thy heart
We trace his image . . .*

This was the essence of Voltaire’s religion: the God of mercy defeating the idolatry of power and conquest. Alzire’s grievance against a European God who stood as “the partial parent of one world, And tyrant o’er another,” was assuaged, and by action not words. Alvarez prayed that God would “enlighten and preserve” “this new world” and he exposed the fragility of natural religion—a Eurocentric formula, no doubt, yet a potentially Christian one.¹²⁸ The deist was behaving like an evangelist.

Voltaire’s preference for the more affirmative term of “theism” was partly a response to the “poison” of atheism, which was apparently spreading in the 1740s and 1750s. It also enabled Voltaire to situate his philosophy within what he considered the warmer strains of Christian faith. Contact with English Quakers and a number of Socinian ministers in Geneva supplied more than rhetoric. Ideas flowed in both directions. Scholars often dismiss Voltaire’s theism with the assurance that “we are no longer really speaking of the Christian God,”¹²⁹ but Voltaire refused the distinction, castigating fanaticism as corruption and sacrilege rather than the worship of another deity. When Zamor protested that the God of Alvarez could not also be the God of the “cruel tyrants,” Alvarez responded in terms that crystallize Voltaire’s stance: “It is the same, my son, But they offend him, they disgrace his name.”¹³⁰ Voltaire refused to put clear water between fanaticism and true religion by identifying them with different Gods. His war cry of “*Écrasez l’Infâme!*” (“Crush the Infamous!”), was aimed at a persecuting orthodoxy not Christianity per se. He continued to portray enlightenment in terms of conversion, a change of heart. Criticism was repair and recovery—almost a religious act in itself.

This was even true of his critique of miracles. Against elaborate theories of multiple providences, proposed by figures such as Nicolas

Malebranche, Voltaire offered the Spinozan retort that God can be nothing but fair. If a wolf happens to find a lamb for his supper, "while another is dying with hunger," this was not because "God has given the first wolf a particular grace." In the *Dictionary* article on "Grace," Voltaire accused orthodox theologians of succumbing to a paganism of insecurity and cringing fear. He likened them to "the combatants in Homer, who believed that the gods were sometimes armed for and sometimes against them." "Reverend fathers," he playfully admonished, "you are terrible genii; we foolishly thought that the Eternal Being never conducted Himself by particular laws like vile human beings, but by general laws, eternal like Himself. No one among us ever imagined that God was like a senseless master, who gives an estate to one slave and refuses food to another; who orders one with a broken arm to knead a loaf, and a cripple to be his courier." "The universal theologian, that is to say, the true philosopher," he continued, "sees that it is contradictory for nature to act on particular or single views."¹³¹ This was not naturalism. It was theology.

It was in such a spirit that Voltaire could claim "the great philosophers, Penn and Locke" as stout and worthy allies, despite some obvious and substantial differences.¹³² And perhaps most strikingly, he was prepared to change his mind about some of the seventeenth-century "romanciers," roundly mocked in his earlier work, including the long-maligned Spinoza. Voltaire concluded that Bayle had been wrong to infer atheism from Spinoza's brave philosophy of immanence. Spinoza, he now suggested, was a saintly antidote to the hollow cult of atheism. In the *Dictionary* entry for "God," Voltaire repented of his prejudices and condemned the "multitude of those who cry out against Spinoza, without ever having read him." He quoted Spinoza's "profession of faith" with excited approval. A true love of God, "received, not by the relation or intervention of other men, but immediately from Him," was no menace to the state, Spinoza had insisted, though it put an end to superstitious ceremonies designed to buttress clerical power. This "love of God," Spinoza had written, "banishes fear, uneasiness, distrust, and all the effects of a vulgar or interested love. It informs me that this is a good which I cannot lose, and which I possess the more fully, as I know and love it." "Are these the words of the virtuous and tender Fénelon," Voltaire finally interjected, "or those of Spinoza?"¹³³ The Christian mystic and the Moses of freethinkers were kindred spirits. And it is notable that both had affinities with those admirable "Primitives called Quakers."¹³⁴

Voltaire devoted the first four of the *Philosophical Letters* to the Quakers, more than all of the other sects put together. He was charmed by the rugged candor of the “Friends,” cringing, by comparison, at his own habits of bowing and spluttering “feeble compliments” to new acquaintances. The Quakers will look you in the eye, tell you the truth, and never raise their hats in courtly deference. They were eccentric of creed and spirituality, but they possessed the priceless gift of liberation from the worship of human grandeur. They practiced what they preached, refusing to bear grudges even in sustained persecution. The Quakers “say *thou* to kings and cobblers alike, never bow to anybody, [and have] nothing but charity towards men and respect for the laws.” Finding their faith in deed not word, they stood apart from the vanity of religion, especially those ritual desecrations of a gospel of peace that marked the nation’s military victories. As one of the Quakers explained, “we groan in silence over the murders that cause this public rejoicing.”¹³⁵

Voltaire’s commentary on the “miracles” that followed George Fox’s arrest was suitably skeptical, as was his account of the “trembling” from which the sect acquired its name, but it was indicative of his priorities that Quaker virtues eclipsed the oddities of their piety. Among the Christian settlers in America, the Quakers were distinguished by the charity and tolerance extended to native peoples, gaining respect to the degree that “the other Christian conquerors and destroyers of America” inspired “hatred.” The “illustrious William Penn” was, for Voltaire, an unambiguously great man, whose government of Pennsylvania presented “a really novel spectacle: a ruler whom everyone addressed as *thou*, to whom they spoke wearing their hats, a government without priests, a people without weapons, citizens all equal . . . and neighbors without jealousy.” These “peaceful Quakers” were, Voltaire claimed, “loved” by the natives of the country.¹³⁶

These were Voltaire’s reflections of the 1720s and 1730s. In the *Dictionary* article on “Church,” written nearly forty years later, Voltaire juxtaposed hoary indictments of a power-corrupted priesthood with stirring praise for the Quakers as a remnant of Christianity’s original virtue: “Jesus Christ had baptized none. The associates of Penn declined baptism.” “Charity was in high esteem with the disciples of the Saviour; those of Penn formed a common purse for assisting the poor.” Whatever their errors, these “imitators” of the “first Christians” represented “an astonishing model of order and morals to every other society of Christians,” Voltaire urged. He also wrote of an American sect that had

broken off from the Quakers, a society that “rejects the doctrine of original sin as impious, and that of the eternity of punishment as barbarous”; a society not without foibles of biblical interpretation but, in spite of such errors, “the most just and most inimitable of men.”¹³⁷

“I will tell you,” he once wrote to a friend, “that I love the Quakers.” He claimed in the same letter that, if he could have endured the seasickness, he would have settled in Pennsylvania for “the rest of my career.”¹³⁸ The Quakers were more than a foil for Voltaire’s anticlericalism, and when the new “imposter” of atheism was at its most threatening, it was to the enlightened spirituality of the Friends that Voltaire turned for the definitive expression of his theology of peace and mercy.

The hero of *La Histoire de Jenni, ou Le Sage et l’Athée* (1775) (“The History of Johnny, or the Sage and the Atheist”) was a man of boundless energy, patience, and charity, introduced with inspired subtlety as “Freind.” Confusingly cast as an Anglican clergyman and a member of the British Parliament, Freind was also described as a Quaker and the grandson of William Penn in Voltaire’s improbable, didactic romp. Voltaire again presented a philosophy of tolerance and a theology of forgiveness as two sides of the same coin, with a polemical alignment of Augustinian misanthropy and Holbachian atheism as mutually sustaining follies. A savage orthodoxy, Voltaire had long argued, is an invitation to atheism. But atheism is no refuge. Voltaire’s tract is an attempt to reclaim the Enlightenment for the right kind of religion. An early scene sees “our worthy philosopher Freind . . . enlightening the priests of Barcelona,” having rushed over to Spain to rescue his son, Johnny, from a perilous encounter with the Inquisition.¹³⁹ Enlightenment is once again spiritual—only this time a double rescue from the errant relations of superstition and atheism. Voltaire may have written one of the finest pieces of religious apologetics of the eighteenth century.

If *Zadig* invited comparisons with Joseph, the adventures of the dissolute young Johnny bring a New Testament parallel to mind. A son travels to Spain, racks up enormous debts, assaults his creditor, fumbles through a series of unsuitable liaisons and finally flees to America in the company of an adulterous woman (“Mrs. Clive-Hart”) and an atheist friend (“Birton”). Freind, Johnny’s long-suffering father, goes in pursuit of his son, releasing him from the Spanish Inquisition, paying off his debts, and finally boarding a boat to America with the aim to “Restore my only son . . . or bury myself with him.” When Johnny is finally brought to a tearful repentance and a moving reconciliation with his father, he chooses

to marry the demure love of his youth, and the story ends with a joyous wedding. Even Birton, now a humbled believer, joined the festivities: "The worthy Freind was as a father to all."¹⁴⁰

Although interviews with Spanish bachelors of theology and journeys under vaulted skies afford ample scope for Voltairian homiletics, Johnny's restoration is effected primarily by his father's example. Freind constantly resists the temptation to lecture, cajole, or threaten his son, believing this would drive him further into his transgressions. If the policy of tireless affirmation has an air of unreality, Freind's sacrifices give the narrative substance. His kindness is unceasing, yet shown to be anything but cheap. Johnny's repentance springs from an awareness of the depth of his father's love. The poverty of conscience without the stimulus of forgiveness and exemplary action is suggested throughout the narrative, especially during the American leg of the adventure.

Freind's entrée to the New World was eased by his status as Penn's grandson, enabling him to engage in spirited conversation with a Native Indian, whose daughter Johnny had led astray. This gave Voltaire an opportunity to preach a familiar sermon on the wickedness of the European invaders (minus the Quakers), and to praise the natural religion of the natives, as far as it went. Quizzed by Freind about his piety, the Native American gave perhaps the neatest summary of natural religion ever expressed: "'My God is there,' and he pointed to heaven. 'My law is here,' and he put his hand on his breast."¹⁴¹ Freind admired the statement but a discussion of the justice of killing Mrs. Clive-Hart, who died in the scramble to recover the chief's daughter, revealed important tensions. Clive-Hart had shot at one of the natives while his back was turned, so they killed her. Why, asked Freind's companion? "Because we are just," replied the chief. "Every one should be treated according to his desert." Freind was moved to disagree, urging that such licensed retribution, and the custom of "burning captives," was "execrable" and "inspired a ferocity destructive to the human race." It served Freind's cause that the atheist Birton chipped in with some extenuating thoughts on cannibalism, defending the custom of "boiling and roasting a neighbor" on impeccable materialist grounds. No one listened. Freind finally convinced the Native Americans to desist from capital punishment: "They all swore by their great Manitou, that they would not burn men and women again." The narrator described it as a victory greater than all the "miracles" performed by the Jesuits in the New World.¹⁴²

The degree to which Voltaire made Christianity speak to the book's assembled errors of persecutory Catholicism, bacchanalian hedonism, Holbachian atheism, and deistic natural religion, was constantly evident—in the plundering of the biblical account of the “Prodigal Son” and in Freind's explicit affirmations. In the hilarious “dialogue of the ‘Buts,’” in which every statement by Freind was met with a belligerent “but” from the Spanish Bachelor of Theology, Voltaire took up a series of Lutheran objections to a philosophy-intoxicated and flesh-denying Catholicism. When the Bachelor sniffs heresy in Freind's aversion to eternal punishment, Freind responds: “It does not become me to limit the compassion or the justice of God.” “I believe with Jesus Christ that we ought to love God and our neighbor, forgive our enemies, and do good for evil. These are the maxims of Jesus.” Freind's ability to “keep his temper” throughout the goading dispute was central to the apologetic, winning the praise of observers. When his companion explained that he was from a tolerant and undogmatic sect known as the Quakers, it seemed to the astonished Spaniard “like another universe.” “And,” Voltaire added, “he was right.”¹⁴³

Voltaire saved his loftiest thoughts for Freind's donnish exchange with Birton on the journey back to England. Birton, reproved by the narrator for “having the turn of mind that mistakes probabilities for demonstrations,” was treated with more patience by Freind, who winsomely commended the argument for design as the party sailed under “spangled” skies. The meat of Birton's dissent revolved around the problem of evil, however, and Freind did not shrink from the challenge. The tone intensified as Freind staged a bold defense of a providential universe. The world does contain suffering, but not without limit, and most of humanity's ills are “brought on ourselves.” For “men are perverse, and make a detestable use of the liberty that God has given and ought to have given,—that is, the power of exercising their wills, without which they would be simple machines.” Epidemics that depopulated North America were unleashed by European settlers. When Birton quoted Augustine on the ubiquity of earthquakes and other torments, Voltaire used Freind to settle some familiar scores with the “African rhetorician” who was so “prodigal of exaggerations.” Natural disasters are not the natural order of the world. There are blessings as well as curses within the short span of life. Augustine “wrote of earthquakes as he did of the efficacy of grace, and the damnation of children dying without baptism,” Freind warned: with gross error and excess.¹⁴⁴

Suffering could not be ignored, but it could not be treated as the normal human condition, Freind maintained. Taken as a whole, nature's bounties pointed to a generous God: "a compassionate father," not a heartless "tyrant." And human history, checkered apprenticeship though it might be, offered glimmers of light. "If there be crime in the world," Freind pleaded, "there is virtue as well." If there have been episodes of shame, from the "the abominations of Christians in Mexico and Peru" to the St. Bartholomew Massacre in France, had there not been "people who have always held in abhorrence the shedding of blood?" If history has been a sequence of wars, have there not been people such as those "whom they attempt in vain to ridicule by the name of Quakers . . . who have always hated war?" Are there not places, such as "the Carolinas, where the great Locke dictated laws," where "all citizens are equal; all consciences are free; all religions good; provided they worship God"? God should not be on trial for human crimes. For, "He lets the sun shine on the evil and the good." Voltaire was quoting from the Sermon on the Mount.

Although the scales of terrestrial justice were ever fallible, Freind continued, there was a higher court of appeal. All "just spirits," he insisted, "will be happy one day; if they are not so now." "Happy! How? When? Who told you so?" spluttered the young materialist. Freind's reply was cool and brief: "His justice." The principle of equity that stirs in every human heart was planted by God. The "voice of conscience" was a signal of God's existence. Belief was as natural as breathing. Freshly apprised of his own transgressions, Birton finally agreed. When he apologized to Freind for "speaking lightly of virtue," the homage was gently parried: "Rather apologize to the Supreme Being, who can reward and punish eternally," urged the humble sage.¹⁴⁵ Yet all was forgiven.

Freind's willingness to quote figures like Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, and Cicero alongside Jesus raises the question of competing influences. Some have interpreted Voltaire's moralism as Stoicism with a sprinkling of Christian terminology, or even a mixture of Stoicism and Epicureanism: a cool resignation to the world as it is.¹⁴⁶ A famous study of the Enlightenment summarized the movement as "a volatile mixture of classicism, impiety, and science; the *philosophes*, in a phrase, were modern pagans." Chief among them was Voltaire. "While there might have been some doubt about the purity of Montesquieu's paganism," assured the author, "there could be none about Voltaire's."¹⁴⁷ A leading biographer and influential editor of Voltaire's works offered the summary "conclusion that Voltaire was at most an agnostic." And, he added, "were any tough-minded

philosopher to maintain that this type of agnosticism is indistinguishable from atheism, I would not be prepared to contradict him.”¹⁴⁸ Yet there must be doubts about Voltaire’s “paganism,” and suspicion toward any attempt to reinvent him as an atheist. Such verdicts reveal little more than the power of modern thought to remake the past in its own image. “History,” Voltaire once quipped, “is after all only a pack of tricks we play on the dead.”¹⁴⁹ His “atheism” is a case in point. Voltaire’s moralism was too dynamic to be reducible to science, classicism, or impiety. Johnny, Birton, Guzman, Zamor, the Jansenist Gordon in *The Huron*—to take a handful of examples—were all souls in need of transformation. This was achieved through a fresh apprehension of God, revealed in the goodness of true believers. Conscience was not enough.

Voltaire’s heroes, including Henry, Alvarez, and Freind, were active spirits some way from the Stoic virtue of “apatheia” (the freedom from all passions) or the Epicurean quality of “ataraxia” (tranquility). In the *Letter to Urania*, Voltaire cast himself as a “new Lucretius,” tearing off the blindfold of superstition, but this was as far as the parallel went. In *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius characterized happiness as a person’s ability to observe a storm-tossed ship or a fierce battle from a distant “fortress of indifference.”¹⁵⁰ Voltaire’s problem was that he was incapable of indifference. John Morley, a nineteenth-century agnostic and an admirer of Voltaire, suggested that he bowdlerized his classical sources, turning figures like Cicero into exemplary monotheists when they were anything but uncomplicated forerunners.¹⁵¹

Voltaire’s humanism was too mindful of the single life to be at one with a Stoicism that could commend the spectacle of gladiatorial violence as a lesson in how to treat death with “contempt,” to take an example from Cicero.¹⁵² Ludwig Feuerbach identified a profound cleavage in Western thought between a Christian culture that valued the individual as bearing the image of God and a “heathen philosophy” that “subordinated the part to the whole.” He quoted a letter from the Roman orator Sulpicius to Cicero, chiding him for grieving over the loss of his daughter: “Great, renowned cities and empires have passed away, and thou behavest thus at the death of an *homunculus*, a little human being! Where is thy philosophy?”¹⁵³ The letter shows that Cicero was not immune to grief or compassion, at least for a family member, but it also suggests the gulf that separated classical antiquity from a Christian world that Voltaire invariably attacked for failing to honor its principles, not for the principles themselves. If Feuerbach was right about a fundamental difference between

classical and Christian “anthropologies” (theories of the human person), Voltaire was on the Christian side of the fence. Voltaire was an eclectic thinker who drew on many sources, but in works like *Le Henriade*, *Alzire*, and *Jenni*, it is a liberalized Christianity of compassion and mercy that wins out. Hannah Arendt suggested that Christianity all but invented the concept of forgiveness in western thought. “The Discoverer of the role of forgiveness in the realm of human affairs,” she wrote in the shadow of twentieth-century totalitarianism, “was Jesus of Nazareth.”¹⁵⁴ Even before Voltaire rediscovered Fénelon, his writing suggested the same insight. Voltaire dramatized the sterile reciprocities of natural law: the incapacity of even enlightened philosophies of justice to break cycles of violence and recrimination. Voltaire did not believe that the forces of good and evil could be left to reach their own “equilibrium.” He was an unconvincing Stoic.

What is even clearer is that Voltaire was no Epicurean, reducing life to soulless matter and committing himself to a path of studied insensibility. In the *Poem on the Lisbon Disaster*, he raged against the Epicurean conception of human nature as a “temporary blend of blood and dust,” “put together only to dissolve.” When Voltaire turned “hopefully to learned Bayle” as an example of faith without certainty, hope without optimism, it was because the Epicurean alternative to a glib and heartless providentialism horrified him. He felt the tug of a brutal and honest demystification, calling the world as it is, but he could not give up on providence, or the sanctity of human life:

*Tormented atoms in a bed of mud,
Devoured by death, a mockery of fate.
But thinking atoms, whose far-seeing eyes,
Guided by thought, have measured the faint stars,
Our being mingles with the infinite . . .*¹⁵⁵

The squinting mystic rose up from the dungeon of despair. The temptation of atheism was held at bay. In *Jenni*, superstition, atheism, and hedonism were exposed as kindred contagions. Theologies of cruelty, persecution, and blind fate will foment unbelief, and unbelief will decimate virtue. Augustine and Holbach are cousins. But William Penn, the hope of the new world, sailed between the errors of both. As Voltaire wrote to a friend, having completed his crowning apologetic: “I have always regarded atheists as impudent sophists; I have said it, I have printed it. The author of *Jenni* cannot be suspected of

thinking as Epicurus.”¹⁵⁶ It can be no surprise that he came to a new evaluation of a man kept in the shadows of his earlier works: Jesus Christ.

The Man of Peace: Voltaire's Christ

Voltaire's attitude toward Jesus is one of the enigmas of his life and work. In the *Letter to Urania*, he wrote of the “insult” of the incarnation and the futility of the cross. In the *Philosophical Letters*, he made unflattering analogies between George Fox's ability to conjure a new religion from the spurious vapor of miracle and Christ's. And in the “Sermon of the Fifty” (1752), another clandestine document, he ridiculed the idea of a God dying “on a gibbet,” adding that “Josephus [was] too serious an historian to mention such a man” as Jesus.¹⁵⁷ On other occasions, he wrote with warmth, blaming the paradoxes of orthodox Christology on a Platonic ambush of early Christendom. Gradually, however, affirmation and praise eclipsed criticism and ridicule. By the late 1760s, Voltaire was extolling Christ as the purest theist: he worshipped God, forgave his enemies, served the poor and unmasked the sins of priesthood with unrivalled penetration. Voltaire had always needed models, and like Spinoza, he started to argue that the special status of Christ was consistent with a belief in divine equity. As he wrote in a sermon “On Superstition” in 1767: “It does not offend our good sense that he has chosen to link one man more closely to himself than others; that he has made him a model of reason or virtue. No one can deny that it is possible for God to shower his finest gifts on one of his works.” God had given Jesus “more light, and more talents than any other.” Jesus was no deity, Voltaire maintained, but he possessed rare and perhaps unique “light.”¹⁵⁸

Such statements started to flow from Voltaire's pen. The first time he wrote of Jesus with real enthusiasm seems to have been the *Dialogue du douteur et de l'adorateur*, (1763) (“Dialogue of a Doubter and an Adorer”), where he praised the “beautiful maxims” of the Sermon on the Mount, especially the phrase, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” He lamented the “corruption” of the “simple and natural religion of Jesus,” which was a law of love: “This is,” he insisted, “the eternal law of all men, and it is mine: this is how I am a friend of Jesus; this is how I am a Christian. If someone has been an adorer of God, an enemy of false priests, persecuted by scoundrels, I unite myself to him, I am his brother.”¹⁵⁹ Voltaire expressed irritation with the sort of trivializing critiques in which he had

formerly indulged. An English deist had ridiculed the story of Jesus healing the ear of the soldier in the garden of Gethsemane. At least, Voltaire responded, the story showed Jesus to be a man of peace.¹⁶⁰

In *Dieu et les hommes* (1769) (“God and Man”), a sweeping critique of revealed religion, Voltaire went out of his way to defend the character of Christ: “The greatest enemies of Jesus must admit that he possessed very rare qualities to attract disciples,” he volunteered. Jesus had an “energy,” a “force,” and a “tenderness” that defied classification.¹⁶¹ Voltaire often combined criticism of the gospel narratives with stirring defense of Christ’s moral teaching and personal bearing.¹⁶² He always admired the story of the Good Samaritan, where the orthodox “priests” are shown to be perfect barbarians, while the charitable “heretic” and layman emerges as the true “man of God.” “Voilà la doctrine, voilà la morale de Jesus, voilà sa religion,” Voltaire concluded.¹⁶³

While he was campaigning on behalf of two Protestant families, both of whom had suffered cruel miscarriages of justice, someone criticized Voltaire for stirring up controversy, urging him to “let the dead bury their dead.” Voltaire’s response was swift and indignant: “I found an Israelite in the desert—an Israelite covered in blood; suffer me to pour a little wine and oil into his wounds. You are the Levite, leave me to play the Samaritan.”¹⁶⁴ Such allusions abounded, as Voltaire appeared to repent of insults past. In the *Profession de foi des théistes* (1768), (“The Theists’ Profession of Faith”) he extolled Christ as a moral icon: “We never talk about Jesus, whom we call the Christ, with derision, with contempt,” he insisted. “On the contrary, we regard him as a man distinguished among men for his zeal, his virtue, for his love of brotherly equality.” His exhortations were occasionally “rash,” but he was a true “reformer” who fell “victim to fanatical persecutors.”¹⁶⁵

Voltaire followed Bayle in structuring his case for toleration around the words and example of Jesus, offering a mercifully briefer commentary on those much abused words of Luke’s gospel: “compel them to enter.” Voltaire offered a damning contrast between an Augustine who, “having once preached charity and benevolence, then turned to advocate persecution,” and a sublimely consistent Christ.¹⁶⁶ Christ was one who “forgives the sinners,” who offers no fiercer censure to the woman taken in adultery than the command that “she be faithful in future.” He was a kind and genial spirit who “even indulges harmless enjoyment.” Voltaire cited his favorite New Testament passages to affirm that Christ was a man of “patience, gentleness and forgiveness.” When Jesus spoke about God

it was in terms that no healthy mind could disdain: “Witness the father who welcomes back the prodigal son; the laborer who arrives at the last moment but is paid the same as the others; the good Samaritan.” Jesus, Voltaire continued, commanded Peter to put away his sword in the garden, and he reprimanded the sons of Zebedee for wishing to call down fire on men who had done nothing more than insult them.¹⁶⁷ He was a defuser of mistaken zeal and a revealer of self-serving fanaticism, though it cost him dearly. For exposing the Pharisees as “blind guides, which strain at a gnat and swallow a camel” and “clean the outside of the cup,” Jesus paid with his life.¹⁶⁸ But even in death, he “asked his Father to forgive his enemies.”¹⁶⁹

As Jacques Derrida noted in a late essay, Voltaire did not commend tolerance as common sense or ordinary knowledge but as a distinctly Christian prerogative. Voltaire’s “lesson of tolerance” was “an exemplary lesson that the Christian deemed himself alone capable of giving to the world, even if he often had to learn it himself.” “When Voltaire accuses the Christian religion and the Church,” Derrida observed, “he invokes the lesson of originary Christianity, ‘the times of the first Christians,’ Jesus and the Apostles, betrayed by ‘the Catholic, Apostolic and Roman religion.’ The latter is ‘in all its ceremonies and in all its dogmas, the opposite of the religion of Jesus.’” Early Christianity was more than an ornamental feature of Voltaire’s philosophy. “In short, a little in the manner of Kant, believe it or not, Voltaire seems to think that Christianity is the sole ‘moral’ religion,” averred Derrida, without obvious approbation. “In this respect,” he concluded, “the French Enlightenment, *les Lumières*, was no less essentially Christian than the [German] *Aufklärung*.”¹⁷⁰

The jewel among the eulogies was the “meditation” that Voltaire added to the section on “Religion” in the *Philosophical Dictionary*. It is an astonishing symbol of Voltaire’s transition from critic to admirer, assuming pride of place in his flagship of dissent. The account began with a description of the philosopher meditating on the immensity of nature and the harmony of the “infinite globes,” wondering whether a child born under Sirius’s rays would “love and care as we.” An angel interrupted the reverie and took him up into the heavens. It was a chilling vision. The “aerial creature” guided the philosopher to a desert, a place of “desolation,” where the bones of slaughtered men and women lay in mournful silence. This was not hell. It was not a place of judgment. It was a sphere of pity, where the sages of antiquity grieved over the sufferings of humanity. In one grove lay the scattered bodies of the “Jews who danced before a calf,”

in another, the remains of “Christians slaughtered by each other for metaphysical disputes”—so numerous that they could “have mounted right to the sky.” Finally, he surveyed bones of “twelve million Americans killed in their fatherland” by religious conquerors.¹⁷¹

The philosopher’s tears were the signal that he could enter the groves of the sages, the curators of this museum of suffering, whose reward for a life of virtue was to live, though never forget. Passing from virtuous Roman kings and lofty Pythagoreans to Socrates, who spoke generously of his accusers, the philosopher was taken to a higher place, “situated above the thickets where all the sages of antiquity seemed to be tasting sweet repose.” The angel had promised that understanding would follow a display of compassion. The final stage of the journey was an interview with one who lived apart from the other sages and grieved more than any:

I saw a man of gentle, simple countenance, who seemed to me to be about thirty-five years old. From afar he cast compassionate glances on these piles of whitened bones, across which I had had to pass to reach the sages’ abode. I was astonished to find his feet swollen and bleeding, his hands likewise, his side pierced, and his ribs flayed with whip cuts. “Good Heavens!” I said to him, “is it possible for a just man, a sage, to be in this state? I have just seen one who was treated in a very hateful way, but there is no comparison between his torture and yours. Wicked priests and wicked judges poisoned him; is it by priests and judges that you have been so cruelly assassinated?”

“Yes,” answered the man, before submitting “with much courtesy” to a series of breathless queries. Had he come to found a new religion? Did he sanction violence when he spoke of bringing not “peace, but a sword”? Were his followers supposed to covet power? Was the sacrament of confession necessary for a life of virtue? Answering “no” to each of these questions, and declaring his abhorrence of the “murders” performed in his name, Voltaire’s celestial Christ explained twice that his only command was to “Love God with all your heart and your fellow-creature as yourself.” Why, then, had the priests put him to death? “They saw that I knew them.” A sobering awe descended on the importunate philosopher as Jesus affirmed his equal concern for “the Jew and the Samaritan.” A meditation that started with misty reflections on the immensity of nature concluded with a clarifying focus and a pledge of allegiance: “Well, if that is so,

I take you for my only master.' Then he made me a sign with his head which filled me with consolation. The vision disappeared, and a clear conscience stayed with me."¹⁷²

Orthodox or otherwise, there is no question that Voltaire could write of Jesus with emotional force. Privately, he bristled at aspersions cast on Christ's character in Holbach's *Christianity Unmasked* (1767), protesting in the margins of his own copy that "the morality of Jesus was not perverse," and reproaching Holbach for "exaggerating the evils of Christianity."¹⁷³ Scholars have scratched their heads over this change of direction but Voltaire may have been moved to identify the Christian provenance of his philosophy for the simple reason that it was true.

The Burdens of Philosophy

*When you get down to it, I am a decent fellow, and my
priests, my vassals and my neighbors all approve of me.*

—VOLTAIRE TO MME DU DEFFAND,
APRIL 1760

It is good that there should be people like me in this world.

—VOLTAIRE TO MME FONTAINE,
OCTOBER 1760

. . . j'écris pour agir.

—VOLTAIRE TO A. M. VERNES,
APRIL 1767

Dissenters from the notion of a religious Voltaire may cite a personality and a lifestyle more in keeping with the fast-living Johnny than the saintly Freind. Ever the anti-Manichean, Voltaire would respond, first, that there was method in his madness, and second, that he grew up. Voltaire was never a libertine, and his ridicule was always more than mockery. His ability to command an international audience was testimony to a mind engaging profound and pressing realities. Although he held grudges and pursued his detractors with fretful alacrity, he was also a man of considerable generosity who took his responsibilities at Ferney seriously. Reaping a windfall from some rather dubious investments, Voltaire dispensed his wealth with proud benevolence, bailing friends out of debts, and pouring his money into commercial ventures to provide employment for his tenants. The chancer who had left England under a cloud of financial suspicion

became a genial grandee, moving to solve an economic crisis by setting up a watch-making enterprise in his chateau. Voltaire converted his beloved theater into a workshop, touting his wares among princes and tsars—including Catherine the Great, who gamely placed a large order, having initially thought she was being offered a gift. Nothing in half measures.

“Oh how I love this philosophy of action and goodwill,” he wrote to a friend, outlining, to another, an almost pastoral vision of the philosophical life:

The real philosopher clears uncultivated ground, adds to the number of ploughs and, so, to the number of inhabitants: employs and enriches the poor: encourages marriages and finds a home for the orphan: does not grumble at necessary taxes, and puts the agriculturist in a condition to pay them promptly. He expects nothing from others, and does them all the good he can. He has a horror of hypocrisy, but he pities the superstitious: and, finally, he knows how to be a friend.¹⁷⁴

While the Keynesian bounties were falling on Ferney, Voltaire was fighting a series of darker battles against persecution and injustice, from the celebrated cases of Calas, Sirven, and La Barre, to miscarriages of justice in the military. He also spearheaded a campaign against slavery in French territories, an issue raised in *Candide* and other works. He was one of the first European intellectuals to condemn a trade that “enriches” nations by “destroying” human beings, and he did something about it. Voltaire found energy in his philanthropies and relief from the depression to which he was often reduced. The anniversary of the St. Bartholomew Day Massacre was an annual trauma for Voltaire, the day on which “the pen trembles in my hand,”¹⁷⁵ and it was the revived specter of persecution in the 1760s that prompted his most dramatic interventions in public life.

When news reached him of the torture and execution of Jean Calas, a Protestant falsely accused of killing his son for converting to Catholicism, Voltaire wrote in horror to one of his clerical admirers, Cardinal Bernis: “This adventure grips my heart; it casts sadness over my pleasures and corrupts them.”¹⁷⁶ He looked into the case, met the family, and fought a three-year battle for Calas’s exoneration. He also commissioned an engraving of the Calases hearing news of the acquittal, copies of which were sold to support the family. A portrait of Voltaire in his bedchamber by Jean Huber shows the Calas engraving hanging proudly by his bed,

and there is no doubt that Voltaire counted his involvement in the case among his greatest achievements. "This is no longer a time for jesting," he wrote to a friend as he threw himself into the case, "witty things do not go well with massacres."¹⁷⁷ It was in direct response to the Calas affair that he launched his tolerationist missile of 1763, which opened with a tremulous introduction: "The murder of Calas, sanctioned by the sword of justice on 9 March 1762, in the city of Toulouse, is one of the most extraordinary events to claim the attention both of our own age and of posterity."¹⁷⁸

Voltaire took up a number of similar cases, including the scandal of a 19-year-old aristocrat, The Chevalier de la Barre, who was sentenced to a brutal and humiliating death in 1766 for some high-spirited impieties committed with a group of friends. The poignancy of the case was heightened by the discovery of a copy of the *Philosophical Dictionary* among the boy's possessions, a fact that may have increased the severity of the sentence. This horrified Voltaire, who wrote a piercing account of the episode and fought for several years to have the guilty verdict lifted from the one remaining member of the group, who had escaped to Prussia. He was 80 when he wrote *Le Cri du sang innocent* ("The Cry of Innocent Blood"), which led at last to the boy's exoneration. Voltaire was famously solicitous for his own safety, rarely putting pen to paper without at least two escape-routes in place. But his sympathy for those who did fall between the blades of a cruel regime was unfeigned, and part of his contempt for Rousseau centered on the younger philosopher's refusal to involve himself in similar cases of persecution, even when directly canvassed. The French system, Voltaire wrote to the lawyer representing the Calas family, "sets too little store by the life of men."¹⁷⁹ Like Spinoza, Voltaire was maddened that his writing continued to invite the charge of atheism. "I've been persecuted ever since I wrote *La Henriade*," he complained to Frederick. "Would you believe how often people have reproached me for depicting the Saint Bartholomew Massacre in such an odious light? I have been called an atheist because I said that men weren't born to destroy each other."¹⁸⁰

Voltaire's religion certainly contained a streak of pragmatism and patriarchal decorum, tangible in the infamous adage that "if God did not exist, we would have to invent him." His appearances at the parish church at Ferney did not always exude spiritual intensity. When he rose to preach a sermon in 1766, he dazzled the faithful with his thoughts on the subject of "theft." Taking communion on Easter Sunday in 1766 served the dual purpose of impressing the workers and infuriating the bishop, who was duly incensed and demanded a personal confession of faith. This signaled

a game of cat and mouse that continued, with a revolving cast of clergy, until Voltaire's death. The most Voltaire was willing to do was to say that he was a loyal member of the established Church. On one occasion, he feigned life-threatening illness so that he could receive absolution—before emerging to take a walk with one of his servants in the garden.

Beneath the fun and games, however, was a serious desire to avoid the disgrace of excommunication. Voltaire remained a man of real, if idiosyncratic, piety. While he was winding up his bishop with meretricious devotions, he was also quietly attending Mass in the chateau. Mass was celebrated by Father Adam, a dissident Jesuit priest and a long-time resident at Ferney, who became one of Voltaire's closest confidants. When a Jesuit condemned Voltaire as a turncoat and traitor, Voltaire had to restrain himself from announcing that he had a Jesuit living under his roof. As well as saying Mass, Father Adam's duties involved playing chess with the patriarch, both of which occurred frequently enough to incur the displeasure of Voltaire's mistress, who complained in 1769 that he had no "relaxation other than going to Mass and no recreation apart from Father Adam."¹⁸¹ When the bishop placed a ban on Father Adam's services, Voltaire sought an immediate replacement, engaging a community of Franciscan monks. It is hard to find a biographer who regards this as anything more than provocation, but there was, as ever, substance beneath the theater. Voltaire wanted to attend Mass and go to Confession, and he took a genuine interest in the monks who performed the deed. When he discovered the extent of the Franciscans' poverty, he negotiated with a government minister to arrange an official pension. He received a letter of thanks from the head of the order in Rome, conferring on him the title of "Spiritual Child, Benefactor and Temporal Father of the order of Saint Francis."¹⁸² Voltaire was delighted, immediately taking to signing his letters, "Friar François, unworthy Capuchin."

Among the more remarkable aspects of Ferney's monastic makeover was Voltaire's decision to improve mealtimes with edifying readings from august texts—a practical response to the graying philosopher's verdict that "very few people have in themselves a fund of useful conversation." Voltaire proudly enforced the practice when a delegation from the Dijon *Parlement* was entertained to dinner. Rather than enjoying the company of Europe's most celebrated wit, the bemused officials ate their meals in silence while a sermon was read from a lectern. This was clearly a prank, but it is significant that the regimen was in place at all. The menu of learning included the sermons of the "Racine of the pulpit," Jean-Baptiste

Massillon. Voltaire referred to the arrangement in a letter complaining of his clerical persecutors: "I am a better Christian than they are," he wrote to a friend. "By taking communion I edify all the inhabitants of my estates and all my neighbours. Not only do I do my own duty, but I also send my Catholic servants regularly to church, and my Protestant servants regularly to the temple, and I employ a schoolmaster to teach the children their catechism. I even have public readings at mealtimes from the history of the Church and the sermons of Massillon."¹⁸³ Voltaire wrote more anxiously to another friend of his dependence on Father Adam and his fears of being deprived of a legitimate confessor: "I have with me, as I think you know, a Jesuit who was deprived of his right to perform religious services, as soon as they found out he was living in my profane hovel. His bishop has been badly advised, for he risks making me die without confession, a misfortune for which I shall never be consoled."¹⁸⁴

Interrogated by the probing and bumptious Boswell, Voltaire refused to be pinned down as any sort of orthodox Christian. He did not believe in the incarnation, or the resurrection. It is unlikely that he uttered blasphemous insults on his deathbed, and Pomeau is surely right to discount the scabrous mythologies that arose on both sides of the clerical fence. Voltaire faced death with neither the terrors of dawning judgment nor the defiance of an unbeliever. He was neither the returning prodigal nor the untroubled pagan. Although his death in Paris rendered the plan obsolete, Voltaire's arrangement for his tomb at Ferney offers a tantalizing commentary on a career of ambivalent fury. The tomb was to be constructed in a very particular fashion, half inside the church and half outside. It was a strange, though not unrevealing, arrangement. He would be neither in nor out. In the elegant summary of an English historian: "He often did things in jest, but seldom in jest only."¹⁸⁵

Voltaire now rests in the Panthéon in Paris, where he and Rousseau continue their quarrel in stoniest silence—two giants of philosophy and fathers of the revolution united only in death. Jean-Jacques was the darling of the Jacobins but Voltaire, achieving a kind of apotheosis in his frail final years, was the icon of Enlightenment. Adorned with images of "Philosophy" overwhelming the monsters of "Superstition," and the "Spirit of Genius" leading Voltaire and Rousseau to the temple of "Glory and Immortality," the Pantheon was conceived as a symbol of reason's triumph over Christianity: an imperious church converted into a towering sanctuary of secular sainthood. But three times, in the coming century, the Pantheon was converted back into a church; and three

times it was stripped of its altars and religious imagery, and restored to secular honor. All that remains is a giant stone cross, "a great monument of French classical art, killed icy and naked by the troubles of French history."¹⁸⁶

Like Voltaire, Rousseau, and the revolution itself, the embattled edifice raises eloquent doubts about simplistic, one-way visions of secularization. Yet it would be a mistake to understate the scale of Christianity's crisis in a culture where a single beleaguered Church represented a whole religious tradition. The fate of Christianity and the status of its ministers may not be synonymous. But they are linked. Anticlericalism took its toll. The *philosophes* did not create the malaise of a persecuting orthodoxy and they cannot be blamed for the Church's crisis, but in exposing the problem they also deepened it. There was a school of nineteenth-century thought that saw Voltaire as a prophetic witness to a slumbering Church, and Voltaire was not above personal comparisons with Luther and Calvin. Lytton Strachey considered him one of the most misunderstood thinkers of the modern age, known "by his name . . . and not by his works."¹⁸⁷ Yet there are reasons for his status as the icon of French secularism.

The attempt to extract conscience from the fires of confessional warfare and to build a religion of love around the dimming jewel was a brave and difficult endeavor. Voltaire perceived the fragility of natural religion very early, thrusting his fictional heroes into the role of an improvised revelation. He plundered the Bible and finally claimed Jesus for the cause, molding a philosophy of criticism and mercy around the original subverter of religious authority. If the motives were still Christian, however, the outcome was not, as poetic liberties flowed into the rage of revolution. Voltaire believed in a God of justice and mercy. He truly believed that Fénelon's doctrine of "pure love" could have made Paris happy. But the ratio of fury to forgiveness remained an unhappy one, and that is how Paris remained.