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## Voltaire's Radicalism

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## VOLTAIRE'S RADICALISM

– Zbigniew Drozdowicz –

**Abstract.** This article reminds the reader of the views of Voltaire, one of the most prominent and influential philosophers of the Age of Enlightenment. Voltaire's radicalism manifested itself mainly in anticlericalism which was consistent, uncompromising and voiced without mincing words. A general aim of this article is to demonstrate to his contemporary imitators, who can be found in different countries including Poland, that they are in fact more or less accurate copies of him and they are not always aware of whom they imitate and what value this imitation has. Perhaps this article can make them, if not more restrained in their statements and practical actions, at least more self-critical and taking into account what is expressed in public discourse.

**Keywords:** anticlericalism, deism, radicalism, Voltairianism.

### 1. Introductory remarks

No significant cultural epoch has ever lacked radicals. Naturally, their radicalism would develop under different conditions and find diverse forms of expression.<sup>1</sup> If the Enlightenment stands out in this respect, it is due to the actual abundance of radicals as well as the diversity that this group exhibited. This necessitates their localised appreciation within the context of those particular countries that proved to be most influential when it came to the formation of enlightened standards of thought, life and mutual co-existence. I have considered these problems at length in my monograph *Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (in Polish),<sup>2</sup> and in the present context I want to remind us that France seems

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<sup>1</sup> Radicalism is typically associated with principled firmness and an uncompromising stance in thought and action. In social life it has been frequently connected with advertising and implementing revolutionary changes. In religious life it has been associated with a strict juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane accompanied by an exclusive emphasis on the former. When it comes to the Enlightenment philosophy, radicalism was often but not always combined with such thinking that denied the existence of any authentic sanctity and claimed that all received sanctities are in fact false – in contrast to the truth created by the enlightened reasoning of the contemporary philosophers. These truths were then supposedly passed as a gift to all those hitherto not-enlightened or whose enlightenment proved somewhat deficient. This kind of radicalism can be observed in the case of many of the Enlightenment deists, including Voltaire, D. Diderot and D. Hume.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Drozdowicz [2006].

indisputably to have been such a country in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Its cultural contribution proved so significant that even to this day it is widely believed that without the French Enlightenment Europe would not have been enlightened at all, or at least not in such a way that was postulated by the French philosophers, literary figures, economists, lawyers, etc. They were admired and emulated in many countries, and the French language would often be learned so as to allow for the reading of original works as well as for the purpose of showing off, i.e., demonstrating not only the knowledge of what the works tell but also familiarity with the way they speak. In short, that century featured the emergence of an intellectual fashion focused on the French developments, and one would have to be acquainted with them in order to pass as a member of the circles aspiring to constitute or develop elites – both intellectual and social. This has always brought about the temptation to associate all that relates to Enlightenment with the French.

Such temptations were already present in the enlightenment period, which can be demonstrated on the basis of the example of the Prussian monarch Frederic the Great, who spoke exclusively French and hosted many of the French Enlightenment figures in his court. Also in the contemporary literature one can find the tendencies to bring that period to such a common denominator that makes national differences seem insignificant. An example of such treatment can be found in Jonathan Israel's monograph *Radical Enlightenment*, whose author not only proceeds from the assumption that Enlightenment was a unitary phenomenon (without the differentiation into the French, English, German, Italian, Dutch or Jewish enlightenments), but also emphasises a supposedly highly significant role played by Spinoza.<sup>3</sup> My perception and representation of that period and whatever constituted its radicalism remains different from that of J. Israel. It is, however, at least to some extent convergent with the position that can be found in Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self*, in that I do also count the Enlightenment deists among the radicals.<sup>4</sup>

My considerations are not aimed at demonstrating the various controversies in which the legacy of the Enlightenment is entangled; neither have

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Israel [2001]. I consider Israel's position to be entirely mistaken both with respect to the problem of Spinoza's role (who was at his time a rather marginal figure arousing contempt rather than admiration) and when it comes to the differentiation of the entire period. For a broader treatment of the attitudes to Spinoza among the Enlightenment philosophers (and not only philosophers), see Weischedel [1973] p. 132ff.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Taylor [1989]. Part IV contains point 19 entitled "Radical Enlightenment"; it presents the Enlightenment deists, among whom an important role is ascribed to Voltaire.

I pursued a sketch of the broad spectrum of its radicalism. My aim was, however, to remind us of one of the most important and influential philosophers of that period, i.e., Voltaire (François Marie Arouet, 1694–1778), whose radicalism found its expression mostly in anti-clericalism which was consistent, uncompromising and voiced without mincing words. I do not seem to be particularly original in presenting such an understanding of Voltaire's philosophy and voltairianism in general, I do in fact follow the advice of such experts on this philosophy as René Pomeau. It is not originality, however, that I am concerned with in this article, but rather an attempt to demonstrate to the contemporary imitators of Voltaire that they are in fact merely better or worse copies of him and that at the same time they are not always aware whom they imitate and what value their copy presents. The deepening of their knowledge of Voltaire and his philosophy may perhaps induce them to greater moderation in their statements and practical actions, or at least to greater self-criticism and taking into account what is expressed in public discourse.

Voltaire was a chief figure among those who played a principal role in bringing about that fashion. He is an author of many treatises as well as smaller literary forms (his collected works span over fifty volumes); he is also a source of multiple expressions and slogans, which became a fixed element of public discourse – to use but one example, one could refer to the motto: "*Ecrasons l'infâme*" (Let's crush the infamous!). Where the "infamous" comprised not only the ecclesiastic establishment, but also related to Christian fanaticism, intolerance, backwardness as well as a number of other "original sins" of that religion. Furthermore, one has to bear in mind that the philosopher making such demands not only received Catholic education (he graduated from Louis-le-Grand, a Jesuit college in Paris) but was also actually living in a country whose inhabitants were for the most part strongly aligned with the Catholic Church. In the present-day France, such Catholic attachments prove by far much less frequent, and especially few French citizens want to participate in Catholic rituals or to follow the lead of Catholic authority figures.<sup>5</sup> One obviously cannot claim that this change was brought about only by such philosophers as Voltaire. On the other hand, his exclusion from the range of principal figures responsible for this societal divorce from religion would contradict basic facts.

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<sup>5</sup> The defenders of this and other Christian churches would even speak of "dechristianisation of Western Europe," and count France among the most highly dechristianised countries. Cf. Banaszak [1992] p. 394ff.

## 2. Biographical sketch

From the point of view of Voltaire's Enlightenment acolytes, his life may not have seemed like one to be universally followed, yet they would not find anything truly upsetting or disturbing in it. In their view, however, some of his achievements made him a towering, monument-worthy figure – not only in a figurative, but also in a literal sense (as many of Voltaire statues can attest). Multiple panegyrics were composed and hagiographic accounts written to serve as a demonstration of his greatness for the benefit of future generations. Antoine N. Condorcet authored one such publication, and, of course, he was a notable philosopher in his own right (the author of *Outlines of an historical view of the progress of the human mind*) as well as a politician (the first speaker of the National Assembly elected in 1789). Within his sketch *Vie de Voltaire*, the protagonist assumes the status of a fearless and fierce partisan of the right and only the right causes – the bane of tyrants and defender of the exploited, a philosopher fully enlightened and capable of enlightening others, a judge proceeding boldly to put various crimes against humanity before the tribunal of reason and passing such forceful judgements that allowed for no further appeal, etc. Even in such parts of this intellectual portrait, where Voltaire emerges as irritated (e.g. by the views of J.J. Rousseau) or subservient to the powerful (e.g. to Catherine the Great), it turns out that in general all his actions and utterances were wise. Thus, in Condorcet's view, he deserved the title of the “minister of reason.”<sup>6</sup>

It goes without saying that there has never been a shortage of critics pointing to various cracks in this towering figure. R. Pomeau mentions for instance anonymous incriminations received by the police after the arrest of the philosopher in 1726, whose author claimed that Voltaire was supposed to have called the *Old Testament* a “collection of tales and fables,” referred to the apostles as “naive, trusting idiots” and to the Fathers of the Church as “charlatans and cheats” – it was also alleged that he had a reputation of a libertine.<sup>7</sup> Within that context, it was no compliment to be called a libertine, and what is more, such a label could bring about serious personal troubles in that period. And indeed, this is what happened to Voltaire. Wilhelm Weischedel opined that his sharp pen brought about his doom; it was accompanied by convoluted love-stories involving marquises, actors, bourgeois daughters, women of the criminal underworld, and even his own niece. In the light of the picture sketched by Weischedel, Voltaire's main problem as a philosopher amounts to a deep and unabashed aversion to

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Condorcet [1859].

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Pomeau [1956] p. 80ff.

Christianity accompanied by continued sparing with the representatives of the Heaven on Earth.<sup>8</sup>

Voltaire was obviously not the only Enlightenment figure holding a grudge against Christianity and pursuing intellectual campaigns against the representatives of the Heaven. In France, the leading figures in this struggle included Denis Diderot (the author of such entries in the Great Encyclopaedia as *fanaticism* or *intolerance*) or Paul H. T. d'Holbach (the author of the theory that religion is an invention of clever clergymen who imposed it on unaware and terrified masses). Still, in other countries there were plenty of those who vied for primacy in this competition. In many ways it seems, however, that such pre-eminence does rightfully belong to Voltaire. His aversion to religion was both primary and paramount. Gertrude Himmelfarb reminds us in her book devoted to the Enlightenment that "Diderot said that he spoke for most *philosophes* when he paid tribute to Voltaire as the sublime, honourable and dear Anti-Christ." He seemed to earn this label not only due to his near-obsessive aversion to Christianity, but also by his more than obsessive dislike of the older religion, i.e., Judaism.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. Voltaire's style

Voltaire's style was a frequent target of censorship and derision on the part of his opponents – to use an example, one could refer to the priest Jean Fréron, whose satirical novel *History of Cacouacs* compares his style to a venomous tongue.<sup>10</sup> Those "Cacouacs" comprise not only Voltaire but the entire tribe of Enlightenment philosophers. Yet, Voltaire can be seen as their chief or high priest, or even as an "evil spirit" that is only capable of doing and advocating evil. He would assume similar roles in the comedy *Philosophers* written by Charles Palissot, in whose light "philosopher is a reasoner, who discusses and weighs the rights of great powers, expands upon virtues and misdemeanours, yet remains too

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<sup>8</sup> "His works have been called so bold in the extreme, irreligious, scandalous; he was charged with malice and frivolity; warnings were voiced against him as if he were poisonous. One professor of theology even grumbled about the fact that Providence allowed such a man to be born to this world." Weischedel [1973] p. 152 (translation – Z.D.)

<sup>9</sup> "The Old Testament for him was nothing else than a chronicle of cruelty, barbarism, and superstition. (...) Many of the entries in the *Philosophical Dictionary* were on modern as well as ancient Jews, vilifying them in the classical mode of anti-Semitism, as materialistic, greedy, barbarous, uncivilised, and again and again, usurious." Himmelfarb [2004] p. 155ff.

<sup>10</sup> This venom is supposed to spread with each and every word that these Cacouacs utter. They refuse to respect any authority and claim everything to be relative, while constantly repeating the word "Truth." Cf. Hazard [1972] p. 81.

cowardly to be able to listen."<sup>11</sup> It seems also worth noting that even Dennis Diderot expressed some reservations when it came to Voltaire's style. In one of his letters, he referred to Voltaire's enunciations on the Bible, Christ and apostles, as "shallow and tedious verbiage" as well as a stack of "dirt" and "crudity." Unlike the previous critics, however, he would make these points not in order to defend Christianity, but rather because of his belief that they may in fact lead to boosting the social standing of this religion, which would run counter to the wishes of the enlightened philosophers.<sup>12</sup>

These critical opinions were not shared by many of Voltaire's followers and sympathisers, including J.J. Rousseau (who claimed in his *Letter to Voltaire* to have adored him as his master) or the aforementioned Condorcet. While many shortcomings of the Voltairian style would be pointed out later on, his position as an exceptional literary figure would nevertheless grow, and his consummate style was praised for "clarity, purity, vitality and artfulness."<sup>13</sup> R. Pomeau offered a more balanced opinion on the matter of Voltaire's style. In the first place, he would mention the great diversity of Voltaire's literary output, as well as the fact that it spanned across many narrative styles. For instance, looking only at the period of his residence at Chateau de Cirey (1734–1739), we encounter him

[...] working feverishly on greatly varied works: apart from statements on metaphysical issues and those of natural science he creates poems and small verse, historical novels and polemics. To this one should add rich correspondence with the members of household [...], literary figures, actors and actresses playing his works on stage, scholars and Jesuits, with whom he does not want to break all relationships, finally also with the prince of Prussia [who would later become Frederic the Great - Z.D.].<sup>14</sup>

Such prolific writing was a feature of his life until the very end and, consequently, he felt more at ease with shorter literary forms, and especially with those where – in accordance with his lack of respect for tradition – he would be able to question

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<sup>11</sup> "Those disenchanted with the words 'fatherland', 'honour' and 'duty', used to dissecting them and analysing their relationships, cannot know their power and sweetness." Ibidem, p. 82 (translation – Z.D.)

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Diderot [1962] p. 217ff.

<sup>13</sup> "Classicism acquires lightness and simplicity in his works, Latinisms disappear and the sublime effect does not only depend on the elegance of the form of expression. Voltaire does not stop at detailed and subtle noting of thoughts, he is an artist and his art is perfect." Cf. Lanson and Tuffrau [1971] p. 339 (translation – Z.D.).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Pomeau [1974] p. 607ff. (translation – Z.D.)

the received patterns. Specifically, he would achieve mastery of two such forms: letters and philosophical novellas.

#### 4. Voltaire's letters

*Letters on the English, or Philosophical Letters* [also known in English as *Philosophical Letters: Letters Concerning the English Nation*] (*Lettres anglaises ou philosophiques*) occupy an especially prominent position within the French philosophical and literary tradition. It is already the title that gives a foretaste of the mixture of the concrete and the generalising. While reading the letters it becomes blatantly clear that Voltaire proves both willing and adept at using various forms of irony and such witticisms which can drive their targets to the edge of despair. On the other hand, those laughing at their expense might be often led to doubts concerning what they are actually laughing at, and perhaps to a thought that they might really be poking fun at themselves. These might lead everyone to outrage, as no one is likely to enjoy being deceived, ridiculed or misguided, even under pretences of impartiality, objectivity and politeness. The *Letters* did indeed cause such outrage – R. Pomaeu claims that after their publication (1734), which Voltaire rather implausibly claimed not to have endorsed, “the righteous opinion was agitated, as every page of this book was irritating the softest points of its underbelly”<sup>15</sup>.

The first sentences of the first letter (*The Religion of the Quakers*) appear to express praise for the Quakers. Voltaire simply informs us that there is in England “so extraordinary a sect as the Quakers were very well deserving the curiosity of every thinking man.”<sup>16</sup> What is more, some of its most prominent representatives (this role is played by one “a hale, ruddy-complexioned old man, who had never suffered from sickness, because he had always been a stranger to passions and intemperance”). Furthermore, they prove to be polite and nice hosts (the role of the guest is played by Voltaire himself). The situation becomes a little tense only after the guest starts inquiring about things so seemingly obvious for a Christian as baptism. It emerges that neither the host nor his coreligionists are baptised, and in spite of that consider themselves good Christians. It turns out as well that while Quakers do not condemn the ceremony of baptism as such, still, they consider it a Jewish ceremony “and so truly Jewish, that many Jews use the baptism of John

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<sup>15</sup> “Blows against the religious sects on the other side of the Channel were creating some collateral damage to the French Catholicism. That Voltaire preferred Locke and Newton to Descartes, and that he praised Shakespeare – resulted in an uproar, as all these great men were seen as sons of a heretical nation and thus enemies of France.” Ibidem, p. 605 (translation – Z.D.)

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Voltaire [1901], vol. 19, p. 192ff.

to this day" (this refers to John the Baptist, who provided baptism to Jesus of Nazareth – my remark). It does not seem to require an explanation what this means for those who think that whoever is not baptised cannot be redeemed, nor do they have the right to consider themselves Christians. Neither does it seem to require a further explanation what this means for all those who did and still do blame the Jews for all sorts of crimes, including the crucifixion of Christ. To say that all this puts their way of thinking in a precarious position would only capture one part of the truth. It also and perhaps primarily constitutes an act of doubt concerning their consciences as well as the consciences of those who, in perfectly good faith, were exerting the punishments of historical justice on the heretics and infidels, including the followers of Judaism.

Does Voltaire's approach allow conceiving of Quakers as reasonable and just persons? Not necessarily. The depiction of Quaker's beliefs and practices in the subsequent three letters induces surprise, disgust, and amusement at best, rather than the acceptance of the Quakers as reasonable persons – reasonable that is in accordance with the Voltairian standard. What difference does it make after all that a perfect and exemplary Quaker does not swear, or that "to secure ourselves against this shameful traffic of lies and flattery, that we 'thee' and 'thou' a king, with the same freedom as we do his meanest servant; and salute no person," never introduces legal challenges in his own name, and answers only "yes" or "no" when made to stand in court in someone else's case – what difference does it all make that his preaching in his chapel is conveyed "half-mouthing, half snuffling," and the sermon itself comprises "a heap of unaccountable stuff–taken, as he thought, from the Gospel–which neither himself nor any of his auditors understood." In *Letter III*, it is also the depiction of the founder of the sect – George Fox – that makes their reasonableness disputable; he is presented as a man who "thought himself inspired, and was therefore of [the] opinion, that he must speak in a manner different from the rest of mankind: upon which he began to writhe his body, to screw up the muscles of his face, to hold in his breath, and to exhale it again in a forcible manner," while his disciples "copied their master closely in his grimaces and contortions, and shook from head to foot at the instant of inspiration; and hence they got the name of Quakers."

The representation of all the other sects on the British Isles can be found in the subsequent *Letters*. Thus, *Letter V (On the Anglican Church)* lets us know that "England is truly the country of sectaries," and that "an Englishman, in virtue of his liberty, goes to heaven his own way." It is only at the first glance that this can be taken as a compliment, as already a few sentences later the claim is advanced that one of these congregations is "the sect of Episcopalians, called the Church of

England, or simply 'the Church', by way of eminence. No one can possess an employment, either in England or Ireland, unless he be ranked among the orthodox, or a member of the Church of England, as by law established," while "the English clergy have retained a great number of the ceremonies of the Church of Rome; and, in particular, that of receiving, with a most scrupulous exactness, their tithes." *Letter VI (On the Presbyterians)*, in turn, lets us know that

Presbyterianism being the established religion in Scotland. This Presbyterianism is exactly the same as Calvinism [...], as the priests of this sect receive but very inconsiderable stipends from their churches, and consequently cannot live in the same luxurious manner with bishops, they very naturally exclaim against honours to which they cannot attain.

However, the Scottish Presbyterians model themselves after the "pride of Diogenes" (the philosopher who saw asceticism as the way towards perfection, which he practised by living in a barrel – my remark) and "are not very unlike that proud and beggarly reasoner." Going further, *Letter VII (On the Socinians or Arians or Antitrinitarians)* persuades us that "there is a little sect here, composed of clergymen, and a few of the most learned of the laity, who neither assume the name of Arians or Socinians, and yet are directly opposite in union to St. Athanasius with regard to the Trinity; not scrupling to declare frankly that the Father is greater than the Son." What difference does this denial make when the greatest among them – Dr Clarke "is rigidly virtuous and of a mild disposition; is more fond of his tenets than desirous of propagating them; and so totally absorbed in problems and calculations that he is a mere reasoning machine"?<sup>17</sup>

In his *Letters*, Voltaire also devoted a lot of attention to the famous people that England gave to the world, such as F. Bacon, J. Locke and I. Newton. When it comes to the first of them, he opined that he was "a great philosopher, a good historian, and an elegant writer." At the same time, he would add that "he lived in an age where the art of writing was totally unknown, and where sound philosophy was still less so," which obviously serves as no compliment to England and the English. Further on, he also informs the reader that while "his life of Henry VII passed for a masterpiece; [...] how is it possible some people should

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, p. 219ff. Samuel Clarke (1675–1729) was a vital figure in the philosophy and science of the day – from the historical point of view his most notable argument was with Leibniz on the nature of time and space.

have been idle enough to compare so small a work with the history of our illustrious M. de Thou?"<sup>18</sup>. With respect to Locke, he wrote:

There surely never was a more solid and more methodical understanding, nor a more acute and accurate logician, than Locke, though he was far from being an excellent mathematician. He never could bring himself to undergo the drudgery of calculation, nor the dryness of mathematical truths;

all this did not, however, preclude him from setting himself free from such Cartesian mirages as the "innate ideas" and to write a short, but reliable history of human soul ("Mr Locke has laid open to man the anatomy of his own soul, just as some learned anatomist would have done that of the body"). There are multiple such ambiguities and doubts when it comes to judging and presenting the achievements of "great men" in the *Letters*. It was even in the case of Descartes, the philosopher that Voltaire would judge most harshly, that he would be able to find some commendable features.<sup>19</sup>

## 5. Philosophical novellas

Voltaire engaged in the writing of philosophical novellas for almost 30 years (since 1739), and wrote a dozen of them. Some manuscripts have nevertheless been lost, and of those that were published only some gained the status of classical works. These include *Zadig: the Mystery of Fate* (1747), as well as *Candide, or the optimist* (1759). It is already in this case that the titles combine the concrete – as expressed by the proper names of the protagonists – with some generalisation – such as "fate" or "optimism." But let us take one step at a time.

In the first place, we would focus on *Zadig*. The protagonist of this novella is "a young man of a good natural disposition, strengthened and improved by education. Though rich and young, he had learned to moderate his passions. He had nothing stiff or affected in his behaviour. He did not pretend to examine every

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<sup>18</sup> "I think our sage de Thou seldom gives in to this gallimaufry, which used formerly to pass for the sublime, but which at present is known by its proper title, 'bombast'." Cf. *ibidem*, p. 27ff. Jacques Auguste de Thou (1553–1617) was the author of the history of France under Henry III and IV, published in the years 1604–1608.

<sup>19</sup> In *Letter XIV (On Descartes and Isaac Newton)* he wrote, among other things, that Descartes "pushed his metaphysical errors so far, as to declare that two and two make four for no other reason but because God would have it so. However, it will not be making him too great a compliment if we affirm that he was valuable even in his mistakes. He deceived himself, but then it was at least in a methodical way. He destroyed all the absurd chimeras with which [the] youth had been infatuated for two thousand years. He taught his contemporaries how to reason, and enabled them to employ his own weapons against himself. If Descartes did not pay in good money, he however did great service in crying down that of a base alloy." *Ibidem*, p. 111.

action by the strict rules of reason, but was always ready to make proper allowances for the weakness of mankind."<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, he does not enjoy happiness, and his fate proves far from free from various irritants. Thus, he first becomes falsely accused of stealing a royal horse and a dog (the court "condemned him to the knout, and to spend the rest of his days in Siberia," but fortunately the animals were soon found thus exonerating him), later he had to fight the envious man, who wanted to destroy him because of his happiness, going further he barely escaped from a jealous king. All this constitutes but a beginning of a long list of setbacks he had to endure.

All this leaves Zadig in a somewhat puzzled and exasperated condition - leading to doubts concerning the divine providence as well as bringing about transgressive thoughts that "the world was governed by a cruel destiny, which oppressed the good" and allowed evil, stupidity as well as various human passions to thrive. Fortunately (?!), he encounters on his path a sage ("white and venerable beard hung down to his girdle"), to whom he can pose the question whether it is indeed necessary that crimes and misfortunes befall on virtuous men. Before he was even able to state this question, however, he spotted that this "venerable" sage first robbed one of the hospitable hosts who offered them lodgings, and later on burned down the house of another one, only to throw a child into a river so that it would plunge under water. This caused Zadig to be greatly upset, and thus, he exclaimed: "O monster! O thou most wicked of mankind!" To this challenge the hermit responded: "Know, that under the ruins of that house which Providence hath set on fire, the master hath found an immense treasure; know, that this young man, whose life Providence hath shortened, would have assassinated his aunt in the space of a year, and thee in that of two." Instead of addressing Zadig's challenge: "Who told thee so, barbarian?" the hermit transformed himself into the angel Jesrad, and everything became so clear to Zadig that he dared speak no more. Jesrad then proceeded to expound upon his theory of the good ("there is no evil that is not productive of some good"), on the Supreme Being and its creative acts ("The Deity hath created millions of worlds, among which there is not one that resembles another"), and on the human life (everything in it constitutes "either a trial, or a punishment, or a reward, or a foresight."). In the face of all this "Zadig on his knees adored Providence, and submitted." And that was all for the best, as Providence did indeed turn out to bend in his favour: "The envious man died of rage and shame. The empire enjoyed peace, glory and plenty. This was the happiest age of the

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Voltaire [1901], vol. 2, p. 5ff.

earth. It was governed by love and justice. The people blessed Zadig, and Zadig blessed heaven."

While it is not impossible to say which parts of the story are meant as a joke, and which are to be taken seriously, yet, such an answer can be neither simple nor straightforward. In this novella, just as in others, Voltaire touches upon a variety of themes, beliefs, convictions and ideas, held to be true by both the simple folk, as well as the social elites, such as kings, philosophers, etc. While discussing these views, Voltaire often casts doubt not only on the social status of people holding them, but also has misgivings about their convictions, beliefs and morality. He does not squeeze all into one category – sometimes it turns out that those are better off who count mostly on themselves (their own reason, cunning, or just their own practical instincts), on other occasions the lucky ones are those who glare into the sky and place their trust mostly in the divine providence. Voltaire makes jokes at the expense of the former as well as the latter; yet, his manner of irony is so antithetical that it requires that proper distance be maintained with respect to both those who make the jokes, and those about whom the jokes are made. Common sense does often provide the right measure of this required distance. The problem is, however, that it proves not always to be in ample supply, especially when it is most needed, and even when it comes into play it proves insufficient to counter the forces of human stupidity, malice and the accidents of fate. This is, among other things, exactly what Voltaire wants to say to those who are convinced that they have their own reason, however petty it might actually be, and that by virtue of this fact they need not be bothered by others. When it comes to the question whether some enlightened philosophers should not be perhaps counted among them, they would have to find their own answers, which they would seek, and come sometimes on the side of the joking, and sometimes on the side of those being joked about.

Candide has a no less ironic underlying intellectual and narrative structure. The protagonist is a young man, "whom nature had endowed with a most sweet disposition. His face was the true index of his mind. He had a solid judgment joined to the most unaffected simplicity." Most importantly, however, he was endowed with an innate and inexhaustible optimism, which made him stick to the belief that he was living in the best of all possible worlds, in spite of all the harsh lessons he had to endure throughout his life. Initially, he is forced to endure banishment from the paradise on earth in the form of the estate of baron Thunder-ten-Trockh, and then is conscripted to the Bulgarian army – all for his spontaneous, and yet, apparently improper love for their daughter Cunegund. After a successful escape to Holland – "the inhabitants of that country were all

rich and Christians" – he encounters his former master of philosophy, doctor Pangloss ("a beggar all covered with scabs"), who told him about the fate of his beloved Cunegund ("her body was ripped open by the Bulgarian soldiers, after they had subjected her to as much cruelty as a damsel could survive"), and of the fate of the baron and the baroness ("they knocked the baron, her father, on the head for attempting to defend her; my lady, her mother, was"). Pangloss also explains what circumstances brought him to such a wretched state. Addressing the question concerning the reasons and conditions which brought about such a string of misadventures, Pangloss firmly states that it all happened due to love ("it was love; love, the comfort of the human species; love, the preserver of the universe; the soul of all sensible beings; love! tender love!").

Candide, however, remains mistrustful as he has had an even harder life than Zadig, and thus he would at least want to know "how could this beautiful cause produce in you so hideous an effect?" The explanation turns out to be surprisingly simple - Pangloss was looking for the sweetness of paradise in the arms of Pacquette, the maid of the baroness, who gave him a venereal disease;

[...] she received this present from a learned Cordelier, who derived it from the fountain head; he was indebted for it to an old countess, who had it of a captain of horse, who had it of a marchioness, who had it of a page, the page had it of a Jesuit, who, during his novitiate, had it in a direct line from one of the fellow-adventurers of Christopher Columbus [...] 'O sage Pangloss' cried Candide, 'what a strange genealogy is this! Is not the devil the root of it?', 'Not at all,' replied the great man, 'it was a thing unavoidable, a necessary ingredient in the best of worlds'.<sup>21</sup>

The events that follow cast further doubt on the Christian belief that we live in the best of all the possible worlds. In the first place, this belief does not meet the challenge posed by the Lisbon earthquake, which leaves many of the inhabitants dead while those who survive: "defying death in the pursuit of plunder, rushed into the midst of the ruin, where he found some money, with which he got drunk, and, after he had slept himself sober he purchased the favours of the first good-natured wench that came in his way, amidst the ruins of demolished houses and the groans of half-buried and expiring persons." This drives the childishly simple-minded Candide to despair. Nevertheless, Pangloss persuades him that

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Voltaire [1901], vol. 1, pp. 71-74.

this earthquake and the following human strife is nothing new, and his arguments are so strong that

[...] the next day, in searching among the ruins, they found some eatables with which they repaired their exhausted strength. After this they assisted the inhabitants in relieving the distressed and wounded. Some, whom they had humanely assisted, gave them good dinner [...]. The repast, indeed, was mournful, and the company moistened their bread with their tears; but Pangloss endeavoured to comfort them under this affliction by affirming that things could not be otherwise than they were.

Events play out in a similar way in this part-drama, part-comedy that constitutes the life of Candide and his companions, i.e., what usually comes first are such circumstances that strongly challenge the faith that the world that exists is the best possible one – these are then followed by the conscience-soothing explanations of master Pangloss. At some point, another master of explanation and consolation appears on Candide's path – an old and poor scholar, Martin.<sup>22</sup> It is all for the best that Candide stumbles upon Martin, as through him he can experience, observe, or even inadvertently bring about such misfortunes which not even Pangloss could possibly hope to explain away. Furthermore, Candide begins to seriously doubt that he might perhaps not be living in the best of possible worlds, and to consider the contrary thought that this world might not in fact be reasonable or at least not as reasonable as it could be. Can it really be seen as reasonable, for instance, that some critic would earn his living by bad-mouthing every work and every book or that Italian authors tend to write not what they think but what they do not think? - and these are not the most extreme examples challenging the rationality of the world.

The *Conclusion* of this novella includes events that appear simply stunning to common sense. It turns out that Candide, against logic and in spite of the fact that he "had, in truth, no great inclination to marry Miss Cunegund" did actually tie the knot with the once beautiful Miss Cunegund. After her eventful life, she was growing ever more ugly, her very sight became repulsive to him:

It was altogether natural to imagine, that after undergoing so many disasters, Candide, married to his mistress [...] would lead the most agreeable life in the

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<sup>22</sup> "This scholar, who was in fact a very honest man, had been robbed by his wife, beaten by his son, and forsaken by his daughter, who had run away with a Portuguese. He had been likewise deprived of a small employment on which he subsisted..." Ibidem, p. 145.

world. But he had been so robbed by the Jews, that he had nothing left but his little farm; his wife, every day growing more and more ugly, became headstrong and insupportable...

While nothing would seem to support *Candide's* optimism, an optimist he would remain. What is more, he believes firmly that all that happened to him is interconnected in the best of all possible worlds. The difference between the inexperienced *Candide*, i.e., before he was thrown out of the baron's castle for his love of Miss Cunegund, and the experienced *Candide* boils down to the fact that the latter knows how to take care of his own "small farm."

The well-known and often quoted Voltairian exposition was not apparently aimed at discrediting reasoning or philosophy in general. It is specifically meant to target the philosophy of Leibniz; yet, it indirectly attacks all forms of speculative philosophy. When attempting to answer the question what kind of philosophy Voltaire proposes in opposition to the speculative brand, it seems valid to say that it is a philosophy of life or – what amounts to much the same thing – a philosophy that gains wisdom not from learned books or university studies, but rather from personal experience of whatever life brings along and observing the experiences of others. This kind of wisdom is not universal, but Voltaire did not aspire for his truths to attain the status of universal wisdom. It does even seem that he doubted whether anyone could really reach such truths at all. What he had no doubts about was that some wise men are, and others are not, capable of giving such advice that might and should prove useful. I would nevertheless not make an all-in bet on the proposition that this is exactly what Voltaire had in mind.

## **6. Closing remarks**

Both Voltaire's acolytes and his detractors would generally agree that he was indeed a radical. The former group supports this opinion by cultivating the ways of thinking, speaking and behaving in the society that seems reminiscent of this philosopher. The latter admit it by way of opposition to what they would typically call Voltairianism, which they associate with such negative influences as the lack of any respect for religion in general, and for Christianity in particular, upsetting public opinion by advancing claims which attack persons regarded otherwise as figures of authority, or deriding things that in their view should not be subject to any derision. Nevertheless, I do not think that these selected components of Voltaire's legacy are really representative of its truly distinctive features.

Voltairianism used as a proper name, i.e., as something that was created by Voltaire and would not be disowned by him, comprises much more than the

aforementioned elements. It also includes: 1) the true mastery of words and the ability to target the most sensitive and contested aspects of human existence and social cooperation; 2) the breaking of any taboos and entering such domains that would previously be restricted to the very few who might perhaps not be saints themselves but would see themselves as guardians of sanctity, 3) the propensity to perplex not only the priests of the old faith, but also of the new-born cult of human reason and reasonability, or perhaps of the reason and reasonability of the scholars and philosophers, who – as Descartes or Leibniz – considered it possible to reach the truth without looking for the guidance of the Heavens or heavenly representatives on the Earth. There is nothing extraordinary in the capacity to use such words and forms that might prove shocking due to their bluntness. Neither is there anything special about entering the proverbial china shop and moving about in such a way that leaves nothing precious behind. I remain nevertheless convinced that engaging in such antics is not a charge that Voltaire should face. These remarks I would like to direct to those who criticise him as well as those who nowadays strive – in a more or less awkward manner – to imitate him.

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