

Perhaps the greatest spokesperson for religious toleration in the history of the world was the French Enlightenment philosopher, Voltaire (1694-1778). His most famous work on the subject is *Treatise on Tolerance*, published in 1763. While calling for toleration between Catholics and Protestants, this treatise also repudiates religious fanaticism. The following excerpt consists of Chapter 11 from Voltaire's *Treatise on Tolerance*.

The Implications of Intolerance

(*Voltaire: Treatise on Tolerance*, translated by Brian Masters, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pages 49-53.)

Is each individual citizen, then, to be permitted to believe only in what his reason tells him, to think only what his reason, be it enlightened or misguided, may dictate? Yes, indeed he should, provided always that he threatens no disturbance to public order. For a man is under no obligation to believe or not to believe. His duties are to respect the laws and customs of his country, and if you claim it is a crime not to believe in the prevailing religion, you are pointing the finger of accusation against our ancestors, the first Christians, and you are justifying the actions of those you previously blamed for putting them to death.

You will answer that there is the world of difference, that all the other religions are man-made and only the Roman Apostolic Church is the work of God. But in all conscience, does the fact that our religion is divinely inspired mean that it must rule through hatred, ferocity, banishment, confiscation, imprisonment, torture, murder, and the giving of thanks to God for murder? The more the Christian religion is divine, the less does it belong to man to control it; if God has made it, then God will sustain it without your help. You know that intolerance begets either hypocrites or rebels; what an appalling choice! Finally, would you wish to uphold by the power of the executioner the religion of a God who died at the hands of executioners and who preached only gentleness and patience?

Reflect, I implore you, on the truly dreadful consequences of intolerance sanctioned by law. If a citizen living in a society with a certain latitude and declining to profess the religion of that society could legally be stripped of his worldly goods, thrown into a dungeon, and murdered, what exceptional circumstances would exempt the first in the land from similar punishments? In religion the sovereign and the beggar are equals; it is a fact that more than fifty learned men and monks have affirmed the monstrous doctrine that it is lawful to depose, even to assassinate, monarchs who dare to think differently from the established Church; and the parliaments of this kingdom have repeatedly condemned such abominable decisions taken by abominable theologians.

The blood of Henry le Grand [Henry IV, the French king who signed the Edict of Nantes, guaranteeing religious freedom for Protestants, and who was later assassinated by a fanatical Catholic] was scarcely cold when the Parliament of Paris issued a decree establishing the independence of the Crown as a fundamental law. Cardinal Duperron, who owed his promotion to Henri le Grand, spoke up against this decree in the assembly of 1614 and managed to have it suppressed. All the journals of the day report the words of Duperron in his harangue. 'If a prince were to declare himself Arian [denying that Jesus is equal to God the Father],' he said, 'we should be obliged to depose him.'

No, my Lord Cardinal, we certainly should not. I might grant for a moment your whimsical proposition that one of our kings, having read the history of the synods and of the fathers of the Church, and having been struck by the words *my Father has greater power than I* [John 14:28], and taking them perhaps too literally, might vacillate between the Council of Nicaea and that of Constantinople and finally declare himself in favor of Eusebius of Nicomedia [an Arian]; still, I should not the less be obedient to my King for that, I should not consider myself less bound by my oath of allegiance, and if you dared to rise in rebellion against him, and I were placed in judgment upon you, I would roundly pronounce you to be guilty of High Treason.

I have curtailed an argument that Duperron did indeed pursue further, but this is not the place to examine in depth such revolting fantasies. I shall limit myself to pointing out, along with every decent citizen, that one did not owe allegiance to Henry IV because he received the sacrament at Chartres, but because the incontestable right of birth placed upon his head a crown that he graced with his courage and goodness.

Let it be permitted thereafter to say that, according to the same birthright, every citizen must be heir to the estate of his father and does not deserve to be deprived thereof, nor dragged to the gallows, on the grounds that he agrees... [with one religious thinker or another].

It is well known that our dogmas have not always been properly explained, nor universally received in our Church. As Jesus Christ did not inform us in what manner the Holy Spirit operated, for a long time the Latin Church believed, along with the Greek, that it operated only through God the Father; later, they added that it could also work through God the Son. Let me ask this: if the day after this decision was taken a citizen continued to recite the Creed of the day before, would he merit the death penalty? Are cruelty and injustice less heinous when they inflict punishment today upon a man who thinks as we all used to think yesterday? At the time of Honorius I [a seventh century pope who believed Jesus had a single will instead of one divine and one human], was a man sunk in guilt because he did not believe that Jesus was two wills in one?

It is not so long ago that the dogma of the Immaculate Conception [of the Virgin Mary] was established; the Dominicans [a monastic order] still refuse to believe it. At what point exactly will the Dominicans start deserving death in this world and damnation in the next?

If there is anyone to whom we should turn for guidance in our interminable disputes, it is certainly to the apostles and the evangelists. There was difference between St Peter and St Paul to provoke a violent schism. In his Epistle to the Galatians Paul expressly states that he resisted Peter to his face, because he thought him deserving of reproach. Peter had been guilty with Barnabas of deceit; they had both dined with the Gentiles before the arrival of James, then slunk away furtively, deserting the Gentiles for fear of offending the circumcised. 'When I found,' said Paul, 'that they were not following the true path of the Gospel, I said to Cephas [Peter], in front of them all: Since thou, who art born a Jew, dost follow the Gentile, not the Jewish way of life, by what right dost thou bind the Gentiles to live like Jews?'

There was matter here for an acrimonious quarrel. The question was: should the new Christians observe Jewish ceremonies, or should they not? At this very time, St Paul was wont to go and sacrifice in the temple of Jerusalem. We know that the first fifteen Bishops of Jerusalem were circumcised Jews, who observed the Sabbath and abstained from forbidden meat. Now, if a Spanish or Portuguese bishop were to have himself circumcised and to observe the Jewish Sabbath, he would be burned at the stake. And yet this fundamental point failed to cause the slightest dissension among either the apostles or the first Christians.

Had the evangelists been anything like modern writers, they would have had masses of opportunity to squabble among themselves. St Matthew counts twenty-eight generations from David to Jesus. St Luke counts forty-one. Moreover, Luke's generations are absolutely different from Matthew's. But no argument erupted between the disciples over these apparent contradictions, which were subsequently reconciled by several fathers of the Church. Feelings were not hurt; peace was preserved. There exists no greater example than this, to teach that we should be tolerant with one another in our disagreements and humble when faced with something we do not understand.

In his Epistle to some Jews of Rome who converted to Christianity, St Paul devotes the whole latter part of the third chapter to the proposition that one may attain Glory only through Faith, and that Works count for nothing. St James, on the other hand, in his Epistle to the twelve tribes scattered throughout the world, chapter 2, repeatedly states that one cannot find salvation without good works. And there we have the basis for one of the most severe divisions in our modern Church, over an issue that did not divide the apostles in any way.

If to persecute those with whom we disagree were a pious thing to do, it would follow that the man who managed to kill the greatest number of heretics would be the most holy saint in Paradise. What kind of impression would he make up there, who was merely content to ruin his brother men and throw them into dungeons, next to the fanatic who dispatched hundreds to their deaths on the day of St Bartholomew? The answer is apparently as follows.

The successors of St Peter and his consistory cannot make mistakes. They approved, celebrated, and even consecrated the massacre of St Bartholomew [which occurred in 1572, when thousands of French Protestants were murdered]. Therefore this was a very sacred act. Therefore also, of two murderers equal in piety, the one who disemboweled twenty-four pregnant Protestant women must be promoted to double the amount of beatitude over the one who ripped open only twelve. By the same reckoning, the [Protestant] fanatics of the Cevennes must have calculated that they would be elevated in glory in exact proportion to the number of priests, monks, and Catholic women they were able to slaughter. These are strange claims indeed to eternal glory.