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VOLTAIRE
Treatise on Tolerance

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VOLTAIRE

Treatise on Tolerance

TRANSLATED BY
BRIAN MASTERS

The Story of Elisabeth Canning and the Calas Family
An Address to the Public concerning the Parricides imputed to the Calas and Sirven Families
An Account of the Death of the Chevalier de La Barre
The Cry of Innocent Blood

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK www.cup.cam.ac.uk
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011–4211, USA www.cup.org
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain

First published 2000

Typeset in Ehrhardt 10/12 pt [VN]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 521 64017 2 hardback
ISBN 0 521 64969 2 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2004

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Introduction

It might well be thought that Voltaire needs little introduction. He has been the subject of an enormous output of research over the years. If there is a single eighteenth-century thinker the public is generally aware of, then it is surely Voltaire. Indeed one could say that he has come to epitomise the Enlightenment in Europe. But for that very reason his work has tended to be taken for granted, even overlooked by a majority of modern readers: a giant in his own day, he has come to be regarded as *le dernier des philosophes heureux*, in Roland Barthes's memorable phrase, an outdated representative of the Age of Optimism.

Voltaire's life can be divided into several distinct periods. The formative one culminated in his visit to England in the late 1720s and in the publication of the *Lettres philosophiques* [Letters on England] in 1734. One should also mention his *Traité de métaphysique* [Treatise on metaphysics], which, while not intended for publication, was composed in 1734 and was very much influenced by English thinking. The second period of his life was marked by a long stay in the chateau of his friend Madame du Châtelet at Cirey. To this period belong the *Eléments de la philosophie de Newton* [Elements of Newton's philosophy] (the English influence is still important) and the first of his contes, *Micromégas*. Both of these works reflect Voltaire's strong interest in science at this juncture. In the mid 1740s he came out of his retreat of Cirey, but this period, although one of greater public engagement, was also a period of gradual disillusionment ('*la crise pessimiste*', as critics are fond of calling it). He experienced disappointment, first at the French court of Versailles, then at the court of Frederick the Great in Berlin, and finally in Geneva, where he received the news of the Lisbon earthquake disaster. He had also been much affected by the death of Madame du Châtelet in 1749. To this period of his life belong many of Voltaire's best-known contes: *Babouc* (1746), *Zadig* (1747), *Memnon* (1752) and ultimately the most celebrated of them all, *Candide* (1759). There was a fourth and final period to

Voltaire's life, of greatest concern to us in the volume, when he had settled at Ferney outside Geneva. The works which are associated with these highly productive years include not only the *Treatise on Tolerance* itself, but also the *Philosophical Dictionary,* the *Philosophe ignorant* [The ignorant philosopher] and *L'Ingénu* [The ingenuous one], all of which deal to some extent with the theme of intolerance.

By this stage of his life Voltaire had become one of the most famous men in Europe, his greatness acknowledged by admirers and enemies alike. But it was not only his writings and his reputation that the eighteenth-century public was acquainted with: the actual figure of him was equally familiar. It was the figure of an oldish man, rather small and gaunt, holding himself very erect with a walking stick in one hand. And the face was extraordinary too, with its hollow cheeks and mocking, cynical grin. This picture was reproduced in countless contemporary prints and circulated throughout Europe: this was 'the wise man of Ferney', as he was called. Together with this went a certain image of Voltaire, the image of a defender of the innocent. Although it was a flattering image that he took some care to promote, it was partly founded on truth. In the 1760s Voltaire had taken up many causes, the most renowned being his defence of the Protestant families of Calas and Sirven, accused of crimes they almost certainly had not committed. In the case of Calas, Voltaire arrived on the scene too late to save his life, although his innocence was subsequently established. Sirven was declared to be innocent as a direct result of Voltaire's campaign.

These activities, and others of an equally philanthropic nature (such as his efforts on behalf of La Barre and d'Etallonde), took place in the years spent at Ferney. On the Franco-Swiss border, it was, strategically speaking, a brilliant choice of residence: firstly because Voltaire could literally hop across the frontier if ever the French authorities came after him – which was a real possibility as censorship grew tighter towards the end of the Ancien Régime in France – and secondly because Ferney was no out-of-the-way retreat but a point directly on the main route between Paris and Geneva. Once he had established himself there, he turned it into a sort of clearing-house for the politically subversive ideas of the age. In fact he was so successful in making Ferney a kind of European intellectual centre that at times he became heartily sick of it and occasionally complained of being 'the innkeeper of Europe'. Ferney was hardly ever empty: a stream of distinguished visitors passed through and paid their respects to the master of the house. In this way Voltaire was able to keep in touch with all the major developments of the times. The unique importance of Ferney was that it allowed Voltaire to keep his finger on the pulse of European civilisation at a particularly crucial stage in its history.

Voltaire as philosophe

The traffic in ideas was very much a two-way affair. While books and visitors poured in, Ferney itself was a hive of activity. Voltaire had a prodigious appetite for work and he sent out a very great quantity of his own writing. Even at the age of seventy, he kept to a strict routine of ten hours of work each day, so that a vast number of pamphlets, letters and other works issued forth from Ferney for almost twenty years. In this respect Ferney gives us a clue to Voltaire's particular genius. Throughout his life he sought to absorb as many of the ideas of his age as he could, and then to make himself their vehicle. Every possible form of expression was used for the purpose: the poem, the play, the short story, the epigram, the dialogue – all form part of Voltaire's repertoire. For this reason he came to be regarded as the outstanding literary figure of the period. In fact he was merely using every resource at his disposal to carry out the job of the philosopher as he saw it, namely that of dissemination. As in the case of many other so-called philosophes in eighteenth-century France, philosophy has a special meaning for him. The philosophe did not consider himself to be an ivory-tower individual dealing with abstract or abstruse questions. Although philosophy did involve thinking about intellectual matters, the task of a philosophe was to exert an influence on people who were not intellectuals. Voltaire's aim was to transform the often difficult treatises written by the more intellectually austere writers of the period into an effective weapon of propaganda (his expositions of Locke and Newton are classic examples of this). His own vigorous and witty style of writing, the very opposite of dry and dusty, was eminently suited to this enterprise.

Voltaire was certainly not unaware of serious philosophical problems, but he was also very much more aware of the inadequacy of the world he lived in. It is this which makes him a philosophe rather than a purely speculative thinker. To Voltaire the world around him appeared to display such a lack of reason and common sense that it was more important to transform it than to discuss anything more abstract: to adapt a phrase from Karl Marx, the important thing was to change the world and not merely to interpret it. Voltaire himself was basically a man of action who constantly complained that some of his fellow-philosophes – such as Diderot and, on occasion, d'Alembert – were spending too much time on the pursuit of their own pet lines of thought instead of being engaged in the work of agitation. Unlike contemporary thinkers such as Leibniz and Hume, he was rarely interested in purely speculative questions: nor did he concern himself with ideal solutions. This was what he thought Rousseau was doing, and consequently he despised him for it. However, his refusal to have any part in purely theoretical enquiries is not just a question of priorities, of the need for urgent and practical action: it stems fundamentally from a very deep-seated

sceptical attitude. This basic scepticism is to be found everywhere in Voltaire's general approach. One of the principal tenets of his thought is that there are very few things that we can know for certain, particularly in matters which concern the ultimate meaning of things. Two consequences seemed to Voltaire to flow from this: firstly we should do all we can to reform the obvious wrongs that surround us; secondly, since we cannot be sure about absolute truths, we should not seek to impose our answers to imponderable questions on fellow human beings who may not agree with us. The only civilised stance therefore is one of tolerance, opposed to all forms of dogmatism. It is in terms of this outlook that the writings concerned with the Calas affair should be considered.

Religious controversy and persecution

Early on in his career Voltaire's reading of history had led him to conclude that the differences between religions constituted the single most important cause of strife in the world. While he welcomed the Reformation in sixteenth-century Europe because it challenged an authority based on revelation, he was equally opposed to the tendency of the reformed churches to replace this with the authority of the Bible, which seemed to him to be just as unacceptable (he was fond of retelling biblical stories so as to underline their flagrant disregard for the basic principles of morality). Furthermore, Protestants were quite as capable of barbarous fanaticism as their Catholic counterparts, even if the inhumanity shown to Candide by an intolerant Dutch minister does not match the horrors done to him by the Inquisition, and if the frequently mentioned execution of Servetus ordered by Calvin is hardly equivalent to the Massacre of St Bartholomew's Day in 1572. Voltaire was acutely aware of all the various acts of injustice and cruelty committed in the name of religion over the centuries from whatever quarter they emanated. His hatred of persecution, allied to an overall philosophy of scepticism, moved him inevitably towards a general hostility to most forms of organised religion. Such a view sets him apart from previous writers on the subject of tolerance, such as Bayle and Locke, whose firmly held Christian beliefs have little in common with Voltaire's own brand of religion – a deism that scorns ceremonies, rituals and particular articles of faith but makes a humanistic statement based on a belief in a providential order guided by a Supreme Being. Indeed the very multiplicity of the new spiritual denominations in Europe, let alone the existence of far older religious systems elsewhere, was for Voltaire sure proof that not one of them had the right to lay any claim to exclusive truth.

But Voltaire's arguments in favour of tolerance find their justification in events more recent than the Reformation. The whole climate of religious quarrels and persecution was one familiar to him from the declining years of the

reign of Louis XIV in which he grew up. French prisons were full of Jansenists, victims of their devotion to a theology of divine grace that had been condemned by a papal bull (*Unigenitus*) secured from Rome by Louis XIV in 1713. Although the advent of the Regency in France heralded a relaxation of the pressure to eliminate the followers of Arnauld and Quesnel, the Jansenist party continued to be hounded well into the eighteenth century, and throughout the *Treatise on Tolerance* there are echoes of the prolonged struggle between the power of the state and this influential, deeply rooted religious sect. One example of the conflict may be seen in the reference to disturbances at Saint-Médard, a poor quarter of Paris, which led to the closure of its cemetery by the authorities in 1732 (ch. 5). Some years later tensions broke out on new ground: chapter 16 of the *Treatise* alludes to the decision by the archbishop of Paris to deny the last sacraments to those who could offer no proof that their confessor accepted the conditions of *Unigenitus.* They would be refused a Christian burial and thus would risk eternal damnation. The Paris parlement, with its strong Jansenist sympathies, took up the cause, which forced Louis XV into a protracted battle with the parliamentary faction on this issue. It was not until 1790, the second year of the French revolution, that the clergy were eventually granted civil rights in respect of worship.

Still more scandalous for Voltaire was the treatment meted out to French Protestants. The failure of the policy laid down by the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, signed by Louis XIV in 1685, had become all too obvious in the eighteenth century. Despite reports of Calvinists flocking to the one true religion, the reality was very different. Conversions were either bought at an exorbitant price (Pellisson's activities on this front are graphically described by Voltaire in chapter 24), or they were extorted by brute force, the custom known as dragooning. A very great number of Huguenots fled the country: those unable to emigrate often formed pockets of unwelcome resistance, like the Camisards in the Cévennes whose rebellion (mentioned in chapters 10 and 12) had to be crushed at a time when France was hard pressed in defending its borders against foreign invasion. But lessons from the unfortunate consequences of this oppression were not drawn, for in 1724 the duc de Bourbon, Louis XV's prime minister, launched a new campaign against heresy. The old decrees were put into force once again: the death penalty for active Protestant ministers, and harsh sentences for their followers caught practising the cult. While the women were imprisoned for life, the menfolk were sent to the galleys. According to Antoine Court, whose book *Le Patriote français* confronts the question of Protestant loyalty, two hundred were condemned in this fashion in 1745 and 1746 alone, serving their time in the ports of Marseille and Toulon. And, on Voltaire's reckoning, eight ministers were hanged between 1745 and 1762.

Even if such spectacular punishment affected relatively few Protestants, all of them were subject to painful discriminatory measures. Their situation varied in different regions (Voltaire specifically mentions the more enlightened province of Alsace in chapter 4 of the *Treatise*), but in many parts of the country a Protestant had no official administrative existence, the legal fiction being that everyone was a Roman Catholic. Protestant marriages were not recognised, nor was the legitimacy of Protestant children unless their parents had been baptised by a Catholic priest. Burial was clandestine. Of course such conditions caused serious problems in matters of inheritance. It is interesting to note here that Jean Calas had been baptised and had married in a Catholic church (though not in Toulouse), had had his six children baptised as Catholics and had sent his four sons to a Jesuit school: yet the family, with the exception of one son, remained clearly Huguenot. Protestants were also excluded from a number of professions: the eldest Calas son had been prevented from becoming a barrister because he lacked the necessary certificate of catholicity.

Public worship, as has already been mentioned, was out of the question. In Paris it was possible for Protestants to attend services in the chapels of ambassadors of certain foreign powers (Holland, for example), though official spies noted down the names of those who took part. In the South, where in 1751 the bishop of Agen had publicly praised the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes and astonishingly denounced the 'loose morals' of the Calvinists, they met secretly in out-of-the-way places (the so-called churches of 'the desert'). This is the background to the horrifying case of Rochette, who was arrested at Caussade in September 1761 for carrying out his pastoral duties within the Huguenot assemblies. A French Protestant from Montauban named Ribotte wrote both to Voltaire and to Rousseau, begging them to intervene. Rousseau found himself in an awkward position: to defend Rochette would entail a plea based on universal freedom of conscience, which was quite unthinkable for anyone concerned – as Rousseau was – to uphold the cause of Calvinism in Geneva. Nevertheless he undertook to consider some form of action, and asked Ribotte to supply him with documentary evidence. In direct contrast Voltaire responded most perfunctorily. While Rousseau wanted to do something to help those he called 'our unfortunate brothers', Voltaire refers to them in a letter to the duc de Richelieu as 'wretched Huguenots', remarking cynically that Richelieu would become their idol if only he could manage to arrange Rochette's pardon. In February 1762 Rochette was hanged, and three brothers named Grenier, who had attempted to rescue him at the time of his arrest, were also executed (as noblemen they had the privilege of having their heads chopped off; given the alternative methods on offer at the time, this was indeed a privilege). Voltaire's biting comment was that they had been condemned for singing psalms because the Toulouse parlement disliked bad verse.

The Calas affair and the *Treatise on Tolerance*

Volatire's apparent flippancy about Rochette, on the very eve of the Calas case, is not simply attributable to his mischievous wit or a tendency to hide his sensibility behind a mask of irony. His reputation as someone who cared passionately about freedom of conscience was already well established, and for evidence of this we need look no further than Rousseau's letter on Optimism of 18 August 1756, which quite sincerely hails Voltaire as a fellow champion of tolerance. However, in the late 1750s Voltaire had, on various counts, become increasingly embroiled with the Genevan pastors, to such an extent that his relations with the city of Calvin were extremely strained. In eighteenth-century Geneva there was very little religious tolerance: as Voltaire had discovered personally (and this is mentioned specifically in his writing on the Sirven case), it was with great difficulty that Catholics could obtain permission to reside there; nor could they own any property. So his mood of irritation with the bastion of Protestantism helps to explain his rather hostile reaction to the appeal on behalf of Rochette.

Thus, on the level of practical politics, there could be a distinct coolness in Voltaire's approach to causes he might normally have been expected to defend. And a similar detachment is discernible in the initial stages of the Calas affair. It was barely four weeks after Rochette's execution that news reached Ferney of the fate of Jean Calas. He had been sentenced to death by the Toulouse parlement on 9 March and executed on the following day. The tone of Voltaire's first reaction is shockingly offhand: in a letter to Le Bault he compares Calas unfavourably to Abraham, with the conclusion that 'these Huguenots are worse than us, and furthermore they are against comedy'. Nevertheless a certain unease about the situation soon becomes evident. Whether Calas was guilty or not of killing his son, religious intolerance was involved, either on the part of bigoted Catholic judges or that of a fanatical Protestant father. Towards the end of March Voltaire wrote to a number of friends and acquaintances (Bernis, Fyot de la Marche, d'Argental, Chazel and d'Alembert) asking them to supply him with further information on the case, which is 'of vital interest to the human race'. Although he made repeated efforts to ascertain all the facts of the matter (including an interview with one of the Calas sons at Ferney), it did not take him long to make up his mind and be convinced of the innocence of Jean Calas. The beginning of what was to be a three-year campaign was announced in a letter to Damilaville on 4 April, in which Voltaire equates the affair with the horror of the St Bartholomew Massacre and signs off with the celebrated 'Cry it abroad and make others cry it too!' In the following months his correspondence bears all the marks of a steadily increasing obsession with the Calas family, which continued to preoccupy him until their final rehabilitation in March 1765.

In the summer of 1762 Voltaire composed a series of letters and memoranda, ostensibly from members of the family (the widow and the two sons Donat and Pierre), which were then published under the title *Pièces originales concernant la mort des sieurs Calas et le Jugement rendu à Toulouse*. The text on Elisabeth Canning belongs to the same period. Preparations for the *Treatise on Tolerance* itself seem to have begun in the late autumn of 1762, but some passages of the final version (notably the section on Germany in chapter 5) may have been drafted earlier, since they were originally intended for the tale *Pot-Pourri* and probably dictated in the spring of that year. The first mention of the *Treatise* occurs in a letter to Damilaville of 6 December, and its unfinished state is cited a few days later. A rough draft was ready by 2 January 1763, when Voltaire sent a copy of it to the pastor Moultou, asking him for his opinion of the work. Shortly afterwards he wrote again to Moultou, this time requesting a copy of Bayle's *Commentaire philosophique* and the bishop of Agen's letter against the Huguenots. Within a fortnight he appears to have reread Bayle's work, because he compares it with his own: 'his is long and abstruse. Mine is short and accessible to everyone.' After extensive revisions to the text, the second draft of the *Treatise* was completed by the end of January and sent to the printer Gabriel Cramer at the beginning of February with detailed instructions about the footnotes.

Although the *Treatise* was not finally printed until April, Voltaire was already making preparations for its circulation. He told Moultou that copies would be sent to Madame de Pompadour (the king's mistress), to some ministers of the privy council, and to a few chosen friends. It was also intended that the king of Prussia should receive a copy, along with other German princes who had taken an interest in the Calas affair. All remaining copies, however, were to be kept under lock and key until the right moment arrived for its general publication. These carefully laid plans about the book's destination, as well as the character of the work itself, reveal a great deal about the pragmatist in Voltaire. As in most matters, he was largely determined by what was likely to prove effective. Therefore a work of propaganda such as the *Treatise* would have to be witty and relatively brief, and it needed to be aimed, in the first instance, at persons in positions of influence, who were far more useful converts than the general public. Furthermore his fears about its premature release were not unfounded: when it was widely distributed after October 1763, court and government began to be alarmed, with the result that the book was officially banned. Voltaire was depressed by the prevailing lack of enlightenment in high places, looking forward to a time when 'the seed that has been sown will be able to germinate'.

A similar tactical sense is apparent in his handling of the Sirven case, which has many parallels with the Calas affair. Elizabeth Sirven, a convert to Catholicism, had been found dead in a well (not far from Toulouse) in January

1762. Her Huguenot family were accused of having murdered her, and a warrant was issued for their arrest. The father, mother and two daughters fled to Switzerland: in their absence the local judges sentenced all but one of them to death. Voltaire first mentions the Sirvens in a letter of 14 March 1763, expressing his fear that any action in their direction might harm the cause of Calas. From the start Voltaire knew that this case would be more difficult, because, as he put it ironically, 'unfortunately no one was broken on the wheel'. It was not until after the rehabilitation of Calas, two years later, that he judged it opportune to intervene, and the *Avis au public sur les parricides* [Address to the public concerning the Parricides imputed to the Calas and Sirven families], which links the two affairs, was finally printed in 1766. The campaign was a protracted one, Voltaire succeeding in obtaining an acquittal in 1771 and complete rehabilitation in 1775.

Far more sensational was the La Barre case, in which we see further evidence of the strength of the opposition and of the need to proceed with caution in France regarding matters of tolerance. By a strange coincidence Voltaire had just finished reading Beccaria's work on crime and punishment (on which he was to produce his own commentary in 1766) when he was offered a glaring example of brutal injustice. On the night of 6 August 1765 a wooden crucifix on the bridge at Abbeville was found mutilated, and two youths of eighteen, La Barre and d'Etallonde, were incriminated. D'Etallonde managed to escape, leaving La Barre to face the charges on his own. In February 1766, he was sentenced to have his right hand cut off and his tongue torn out, and to be burned alive. With minor modifications this was duly carried out on 1 July. Almost immediately Voltaire poured out all his indignation at the horrifying event in the *Relation de la mort du chevalier de La Barre* [An account of the death of the chevalier de La Barre], a work he was very cautious about circulating, awaiting a more favourable moment for its general distribution. In the trial the prosecution sought to prove that La Barre had been in possession of a number of impious and dangerous books, one of which was Voltaire's own *Philosophical Dictionary* (first published in 1764). Afraid for his own safety, Voltaire fled to Switzerland for a few weeks during the summer, conceding bitterly that 'there are times when you have to know how to keep silent'. This amounts to a reluctant admission of the limits of possible protest, given the prevailing political situation: 'I know only too well', he later remarked, 'that there are monsters you cannot tame. Those who steeped their hands in the blood of the chevalier de La Barre are people I would only wish to meddle with if I had ten thousand armed men behind me.'

While the La Barre case has nothing to do with the Protestant cause, it became firmly joined in Voltaire's mind to the other two affairs. He constantly referred to all three in the same breath, and we can view his most important

writings of these years, in which he returns again and again to the issue of tolerance, as belonging to what he considered to be the same struggle against Christian persecution and superstition.

In the article 'Tolerance', which appeared in the first edition of the *Philosophical Dictionary* in 1764, Voltaire brings together several loosely connected strands of argument against Christian intolerance. Firstly he emphasises the theme of human weakness and the tendency to err, and claims that these should inspire us to humility and forbearance towards one another. The article shares this theme with the *Treatise* and with a work which deals with much wider philosophical issues, *The Ignorant Philosopher* of 1766. Secondly, the article suggests that the transactions of the stock exchange, although ostensibly merely utilitarian, in fact generate feelings of goodwill among those who participate in them, whatever religion they may belong to, comparing this unfavourably with the savage behaviour of Christians towards one another (Voltaire had touched on this line of argument earlier on in his career, in chapter 6 of the *Philosophical Letters* of 1734). Warming to its theme, the article then launches further attacks on Christian behaviour, concluding with the example of the massacre of St Bartholomew's Day. The *Treatise* had similarly detailed the oppressiveness of Christianity right down to the eighteenth century, contrasting this with the right-mindedness of Greeks, Romans and Hebrews (here Voltaire exonerates Moses, whereas in the *Dictionary* the same prophet is found guilty of the worst possible crimes!). Ever the practical thinker rather than the speculator, Voltaire draws freely on a variety of methods and arguments in support of his thesis – even a short story of the period, *L'Ingénu* of 1767, is partly adapted to the same campaign, with its picture of the incarceration of Jansenists and Huguenots. Fuelled by the cases of Calas, Sirven and La Barre, these works are all part of a war against bigotry and the miscarriage of justice. '*Ecrasez l'Infâme*' becomes Voltaire's war cry, and is to be found throughout his correspondence of the 1760s.

Natural religion, tolerance and society

Although Voltaire thinks that all organised religions are intolerant because they have stifled the voice of nature, he holds this to be especially true of the different branches of Christianity. In his poem 'On Natural Law' of 1752, he invokes for admiration the Prussia of Frederick the Great, which permitted all its inhabitants complete freedom in matters of cult and ceremony. Voltaire characterises this as 'indifference' and considers it to be one of the main reasons why people in Prussia can live in peace with one another. This idea enraged one critic of the poem, in whose orthodox opinion Voltaire was 'preaching the most scandalous tolerance and indifference to religion'. 'Indifference' is a key concept for Voltaire

in this period and appears frequently in the letters relating to the composition of the *Treatise*, as he explicitly stresses a direct relationship between the progress of tolerance and the growing indifference to dogma – a theory which was, of course, bound to infuriate committed Catholics and Protestants alike. Voltaire's even-handedness extended to a warning, in this case to Protestants, that people can expect to be tolerated only if they are tolerant themselves (in his pamphlet *Remonstrances to the Pastors of Gévaudan*, 1768). For all this, Voltaire himself was not an atheist; his ideal citizen is the theist of the *Philosophical Dictionary* who scoffs at the idea of going on pilgrimages to Mecca or Notre-Dame de Lorette but who 'helps the needy and defends the oppressed'. Given that Voltaire is more interested in the conditions necessary for civil peace than in religious dogma, it is not surprising that his views diverge from those of his two main predecessors on the question of tolerance, John Locke and Pierre Bayle. Voltaire alludes to Locke in a short note at the start of chapter 11 of his *Treatise* when he claims that no citizen should be required to believe anything more than what his reason tells him. This point actually has more in common with Bayle's ideas than with Locke's.

Locke's main work on tolerance is the *Epistola de tolerantia*, which was published in 1689 but almost certainly drafted earlier. It was immediately translated from Latin into English, and later (1710) into French. By the mid eighteenth century it had been reprinted many times and had become something of a classic. Locke's letter was a very sober, scholarly piece, by no means directed at the wide audience which Voltaire intended to reach – with all his wit and emotion – in his campaign to mobilise public opinion. The political circumstances in which the two works were composed were very dissimilar. Locke was writing in exile in Holland, and addressing the situation in England under the Stuarts, just prior to the revolution of 1688 which drove out the Catholic James II – a monarch who was personally intolerant, and who, it was feared, would implement intolerant policies if he was allowed to continue in power.

One of Locke's central themes is the separation of religion from politics, of the Church from the State: 'I esteem it above all things necessary to distinguish exactly the business of Civil Government from that of Religion, and to settle the just bounds that lie between the one and the other.' The *Treatise on Tolerance* offers very little evidence of any thought along these lines. On the contrary, Voltaire, not unlike his contemporary Montesquieu, seems to view religion as an important means of cementing the social order and inspiring civic virtue. Provided that it is not fanatical, it can have a serious secular role to play. The opening paragraphs of chapter 20 are insistent on this: 'Mankind has always been in need of restraining influence . . . Wherever society is established, religion is essential.' The Church, Voltaire thinks, should be subordinated to the needs of the State, in such a way as to ensure a tolerant state of affairs. To Voltaire's

way of thinking, the French Protestants' moderation of their more extreme demands (in particular he has in mind the holding of large outdoor assemblies) would be a fair price to pay for a more secure position within what was officially a Catholic country. In their turn, the more bigoted Catholics would be held firmly in check by the power of government or, more precisely in France, by royal authority. Thus in strictly political terms Voltaire's position is quite distinct from Locke's separation of powers, in that he was favouring a solution that included a state religion, whereby an established church would have the confidence to allow, to a limited extent, non-conformist tendencies; this would have the effect of defusing sectarian hatreds.

What is noteworthy about the *Treatise* is the moderation of the position it takes. The petition which Voltaire makes in chapter 5 is an extremely limited one: peace-loving Protestants should be allowed to live undisturbed lives to the extent that the 'validity of their marriages should be acknowledged', while 'their children should enjoy security and the right to inherit from their fathers'. In other words, the civil rights denied to them by the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes would be restored. Significantly there is no mention here of freedom of worship – quite the contrary, since there are to be 'no public temples'. The implicit analogy is with the position of Catholics in England, which Voltaire had witnessed in the 1720s; like the English Catholics, French Protestants would not have access to public offices or honours. Voltaire's hopes, on a purely practical level, appear to have been that a dissident minority could be accommodated in the same way that the Anglican Church ('the faith in which one prospers', as he sarcastically remarked in the fifth Philosophical Letter) permitted a plurality of sects – the existence alongside it of Quakers, Presbyterians and Socinians.

Voltaire's extreme theoretical moderation was equalled by the political prudence with which he conducted his dealings with the king's minister Choiseul during the 1760s, in an attempt to bring about a policy of toleration. Even these very limited demands for reform, however, were not met in the years immediately following 1763. Certainly in the wake of the Calas affair a far less harsh attitude towards Huguenots prevailed, but there were no changes to the law itself. Only in 1787 did Louis XVI promulgate an edict of tolerance that restored civil rights to Protestants, despite having appointed Necker, a committed Calvinist, as his First Minister ten years earlier.

At first sight the similarity between Bayle's thought and Voltaire's is very striking. Principally they share a common scepticism, derived in Bayle's case from his own sufferings as a Protestant driven, like Locke, into exile in Holland. His famous work *Commentaire philosophique sur ces mots de Jésus-Christ, contrains-les d'entrer* (1686) is often considered to be the main source of the French Enlightenment's ideas on tolerance, and was reread by Voltaire as he drafted his *Treatise*. Like Locke's *Epistle*, it is more academic in style than Voltaire's text.

More important, there is a basic difference of approach between the two writers. Bayle treated faith as a matter of profound inner conviction, and the whole of his argument in favour of tolerance was organised around the inviolable rights of individual conscience. So thoroughgoing is he in this respect that he seems to accord a place to atheists, traditionally feared by eighteenth-century philosophers as a threat to the social order. Indeed the logic of his argument could lead to an acceptance of the persecution of those of another persuasion, if conscience so demanded. He was aware that this sort of conclusion might be drawn, for he added that such a state of mind should be opposed by more enlightened reasoning. Nevertheless, in the final analysis he emphasises the overriding value of belief (or non-belief) as something that no external authority should have the power to challenge. In stark contrast to this, Voltaire's most usual attitude towards the details of Christian belief, in both the *Treatise* and his other writings, is one of unrestrained sarcasm. He refers mockingly to petty disputes about the Holy Trinity (chapter 11) and about the Logos (chapter 21). While he follows Bayle in examining in detail a famous parable from Saint Luke (chapter 14), his criteria for evaluating it are very different from those of his predecessor – they are much more external and secular. What is of greatest value for him, as he clearly states at the end of the fourth chapter, is 'the physical and moral well-being of society'. Tolerance is necessary in the 'political interest of nations'.

The whole agenda has therefore changed from a religious to a social one. Voltaire and his contemporaries may have been regressive when compared with Bayle on the matter of individual conscience, but they were surely progressive in the sense that their arguments against persecution were no longer formulated in terms of traditional Christian concepts, nor was their case for tolerance being made within a strictly Christian framework. Voltaire widens the angle of vision in the *Treatise on Tolerance* and gives us a world view of the human race embracing a multitude of beliefs: 'Let us reach out of our narrow little sphere and examine what goes on in the rest of the globe' (chapter 4). A similar spirit of internationalism is evident in the closing stages of the work. Chapter 22 is significantly entitled 'On Universal Toleration', and in the following chapter, 'A Prayer to God', there is a vibrant plea for co-operation among mankind. This is a fitting conclusion to the book, so that the postscriptum together with its sequel and an addendum come as something of an anticlimax, although Voltaire may have deemed it necessary to provide a progress report on the Calas affair with which he had started out.

Voltaire's brand of optimism may well strike us, two and a half centuries later, as naïve and misplaced, but there is no doubt that his ideas continue to strike chords with us. Poignantly, in chapter 4 in a passage about atrocities committed in Ireland, he stated that they could never happen again, but his analysis of parades and processions in mid-eighteenth-century Toulouse, designed to

incite hatred against a minority of the population, is both pertinent and disturbing. The twentieth-century experience of religious and political fanaticism has led to renewed sympathy with Voltaire's humane plea for general tolerance in the public realm. Barthes might have been right to suggest that Voltaire was fortunate to be fighting in a just cause and, by implication, that his cause was better than his arguments, yet there is no doubt that he has made an immense contribution to our understanding of the causes and effects of prejudice.

Chronology

1694	Birth of Voltaire in Paris as François-Marie Arouet
1704–11	Educated at the Jesuit College of Louis-le-Grand
1713	Secretary to the French ambassador at The Hague
1717	Imprisoned in the Bastille for a scurrilous satire
1718	Success of his tragedy *Oedipe*. Signs himself 'Arouet de Voltaire'
1722	Journey to Holland. Admires its tolerance and prosperity
1726	Quarrel with the chevalier de Rohan. Exiled from Paris, Voltaire goes to England and stays until 1728, when he published *La Henriade*, an epic poem on the Wars of Religion
1734	Publication of the *Lettres philosophiques*, condemned by the Paris parlement. Flees to Cirey, where he stays with Madame du Châtelet for most of the next decade
1737	Publishes *Eléments de la philosophie de Newton*
1745	Appointed Royal Historiographer to Louis XV
1746	Elected to the French Academy
1747	Publishes *Zadig*. Loses his newly won position at the French court
1748	Stays at the court of Stanislas at Nancy
1750	Accepts invitation to the court of Frederick the Great
1751	First edition of *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*
1752	Composes the poem *La Loi naturelle* in opposition to La Mettrie
1753	Breaks with Frederick and leaves Berlin
1755	Settles at Les Délices on the outskirts of Geneva
1758	Buys the property of Ferney on the Franco-Swiss border
1759	Publishes *Candide*
1762	Start of the Calas Affair. First reference to the Sirven family
1763	Publication of the *Treatise on Tolerance*
1764	First edition of the *Dictionnaire philosophique*

1766	Dedicates his account of the death of the chevalier de La Barre to Beccaria. Publishes *Le Philosophe ignorant*
1767	Publishes *L'Ingénu*
1778	Returns to Paris, where he dies on 30 May

Further reading

There are three great editions of Voltaire's writings: the so-called Kehl edition, edited by Beaumarchais and others, *Œuvres complètes*, 70 vols. (1785–89); *Œuvres*, edited by A. J. O. Beuchot, 72 vols. (1829–40); and *Œuvres complètes*, edited by Louis Moland, 52 vols. (1877–85). Moland's edition, based on Beuchot's scholarship, has long been the vulgate, but a new *Complete Works* with full critical apparatus is now being published by the Voltaire Foundation in Oxford (1969–). It will eventually comprise more than a hundred volumes. Equally extensive is Theodore Besterman's edition of Voltaire's correspondence (1953–65). An edition of the *Treatise on Tolerance* itself, which is likely to become the standard one, has been prepared by John Renwick and is due to be published by the Voltaire Foundation in 2000 (*Complete Works*, 56B). In the meantime a briefer edition by Renwick is available in paperback (Vif, 1999). Accompanying it in the same series is a useful collection of essays on the *Treatise* edited by Nicholas Cronk.

Some of Voltaire's other important works have also been published in separate critical editions. For example, Gustave Lanson's exemplary, fully annotated two-volume edition (1909, reprinted several times) should be consulted for the *Lettres philosophiques*. But Voltaire's original text of this in English, entitled *Letters concerning the English Nation*, has recently been issued in the World's Classics series with an excellent introduction by Nicholas Cronk. There are also good English translations of the *Philosophical Dictionary* and of *Candide* in the Penguin Classics series. Of similar interest to English readers are the editions of the *Traité de métaphysique* (H. Temple-Patterson), *Zaïre* (E. Jacobs), *Zadig* (H. Mason), *Candide* (J. Brumfitt), *L'Ingénu* (W. R. Jones) and *Le Philosophe ignorant* (J. L. Carr), all of which contain very scholarly introductions. Mention must also be made of D. Williams, *The Political Writings of Voltaire* (1994), which gives the complete text of the Commentary on Beccaria in English translation. This is a seminal piece for Voltaire's thinking on crime and punishment.

Further reading

The fullest and most up-to-date account of Voltaire's life and works is a huge five-volume opus, *Voltaire en son temps* (1985–94), edited by René Pomeau. Rather more manageable, and still a standard work, is the same scholar's provocatively entitled *La Religion de Voltaire* (1956). Even more approachable is Haydn Mason, *Voltaire: A Biography* (1981), an authoritative piece by a leading English specialist on Voltaire. Also highly recommended is Peter Gay, *Voltaire's Politics* (1959), which, as its title implies, concentrates on his social attitudes and his campaigning efforts. Gay's bibliographical essay at the end of the volume is especially rewarding.

On the particular question of religious toleration the most comprehensive study is probably to be found in Graham Gargett, *Voltaire and Protestantism* (1980), which has a detailed discussion of Voltaire's involvement with Dutch, English and Swiss reformers as well as a lengthy treatment of the Huguenot movement in France. David Bien, *The Calas Affair* (1959), offers a useful corrective to the Voltairean view of persecution in eighteenth-century Toulouse from a modern historian's perspective. In terms of the history of ideas there have been a number of important contributions in recent years: *Voltaire, Rousseau et la tolérance* (Amsterdam, 1980); Elizabeth Labrousse, 'Note à propos de la tolérance au XVIIIe siècle', *Studies on Voltaire*, 56; R. A. Leigh, *Rousseau and the Problem of Tolerance* (Oxford, 1979); and S. O'Cathasaigh, 'Bayle and Locke on Toleration', in *De l'humanisme aux lumières*, ed. M. Magdelaine et al. (Oxford, 1996). For a general evaluation of the topic by philosophers in our own century, see the collective volume *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*, ed. Robert Wolff (London, 1969), which includes a typically combative essay by Herbert Marcuse.

Note on the texts

Many of Voltaire's works deal with the question of tolerance, but from 1762 onwards it becomes one of his key themes. The publication of the *Treatise on Tolerance* is closely bound up with Voltaire's involvement in the Calas affair that year: if we quote the full title in French we see that the work is directed against a specific evil; indeed the *Traité sur la tolérance à l'occasion de la mort de Jean Calas* begins and ends with the famous case. Other writings concerning the affair both precede and follow the *Treatise*: of these I have included the piece *The Story of Elisabeth Canning and the Calas Family*, produced in August 1762 as a polemic to stir up opinion abroad, and the *Address to the Public concerning the Parricides imputed to the Calas and Sirven Families* (printed in 1766), which, while more immediately concerned with the Sirven affair, uses the Calas trial as well to make its point. While these two texts, like the *Treatise on Tolerance*, were translated into English soon after their original appearance, a new version is called for to make them accessible to the modern reader.

A third affair was to follow closely on those of Calas and Sirven, that of the chevalier de La Barre. Voltaire's powerful *Account of the Death of the Chevalier de La Barre*, composed in 1766 and dedicated to the marquis de Beccaria, is published here in its first full English translation, together with the companion piece, *The Cry of Innocent Blood*, produced nine years later in defence of La Barre's friend who had escaped to Prussia.

These four relatively short brochures help us both to broaden our understanding of the *Treatise on Tolerance* and to fit it into its immediate context. The *Treatise* itself – started in the autumn of 1762, completed in January 1763, and printed in April but not circulated until later that year – was translated into English soon after its publication in France. The translation by Brian Masters used here, which was originally published by the Folio Society, was commissioned to coincide with the tercentary of Voltaire's birth in 1694. The text translated by Masters is the one which first appeared in the second volume of the

Nouveaux mélanges in 1765, when Voltaire added a final chapter to celebrate the clearing of Jean Calas. It is this text, together with the author's original footnotes, which is presented in the most readily available of current French editions (*L'Affaire Calas*, ed. J. Van den Heuvel, Folio, 1975; *Traité sur la tolérance*, ed. R. Pomeau, Garnier-Flammarion, 1989).

The translation of the title *Traité sur la tolérance* calls for some comment. Since the eighteenth century this has usually been given as *A Treatise on Toleration*, in conformity with Locke's *Letter on Toleration*, which was published in English in 1689–90. In the French language there is no specific term to denote religious toleration as such, and Voltaire himself refers to Locke's work in a footnote as the *Lettre sur la tolérance*. In the present volume the word 'tolerance' has been used throughout, in chapter headings and in the main body of the text, in preference to 'toleration'. It not only possesses a more modern ring, but also corresponds more closely to Voltaire's wider concern with individual liberty and with the more general issues of freedom of thought and speech.