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Voltaire and Locke: Leaders of Dissenting Thought in the Enlightenment

During the eighteenth century, an explosion of new ideas and ways of thinking produced what came to be known as “the Enlightenment.” Philosophers, scientists, and even the common person approached with skepticism previously accepted doctrines and institutions during a time of rising political and religious tensions across Europe. People increasingly registered curiosity about how the world worked and why it supposedly had to function *that* way.

England was the model country during the Enlightenment, for its progress in all institutions and leaving a legacy of new ideas, products, and practices that have shaped twenty-first century society. For example, science affected how people saw and understood government, religion, and the natural world around them. Newton famously made advancements in the understanding of light and how to more logically approach fundamental questions of science. His *A Letter of Mr. Isaac Newton, Professor of the Mathematics in the University of Cambridge, Containing His New Theory about Light and Colors* (1672)*,* modeled his step-by-step process of hypothesizing, experimenting, and analysis. His work further suggests that science can prove that the universe is governed by laws that humans can discover through empirical studies. Thus, the instructions that make up the universe can and should also govern our laws and institutions. A Newtonian system of government, therefore, is one where reason lights the way for a successful constitutional government (16 Jacob). The implications of his findings came just before the Glorious, or Bloodless, Revolution in 1688 which “came to be seen as the beginning of a stabilized, unified Great Britain” (Greenblatt and Noggle 5). In addition, Newtonian theories illuminate the smallness of humans in comparison to the greater universe, and that if gravity is what holds us together on this seemingly unimportant planet, who is God and what is our purpose (Porter 13-14). This opened several discussions in almost all areas of thought. Further, Newton’s optics suggests that God was the watchmaker and the universe was the watch; there was a universal design in which natural laws took place (Greenblatt and Noggle 10). This further suggests that once God finished crafting the watch, he left it to function with all the gears and screws it needed, evidence for deism, another rising idea of the eighteenth century.

All this is not to say that science was the sole medium of thought. Rather, it sparked evidence for and of new ideas *philosophes* explored. Like Newton, these *philosophes* worked to prove logically their skepticism regarding well established social, political, and religious institutions. But why? After all, England was ahead of the rest of Europe with its centralized government and increased importance placed on Parliament, a move to balancing of powers. England has more ideas circulating because several censorship laws had not been renewed in 1695 and the government enacted the Statute of Anne in 1710 which was “the first copyright law in British history not tied to government approval of works’ content” (Greenblatt and Noggle 15), allowing for the dissemination of all types of ideas and literature. However, England was still reeling for the religious tensions during English Civil War and after with the Test Act of 1673 Anglicans against other denominations (Greenblatt and Noggle 4). And although the installation of William and Mary beheld a promising future, there would still be many years of political turmoil as the monarchy and parliament vie for power over the other.

Just a short twenty-one miles across the English Channel, tensions were rising in France with the tyranny and sparks of r*evolution* under Louis XVI. And unlike their neighbors, the French still had censorship laws that limited, or made more difficult, to express one’s ideas (47 Jacob). In terms of religion, persecutions of “heretics” were the norm as legal and societal laws were still heavily influenced by the tensions between the Catholic Church and Protestants. The *philosophes* wanted out with the *ancient régime,* but according to Porter, none were willing to take up the cause and bring about a revolution simply because these *philosophes* enjoyed their relative stability (23-24). Additionally, no one was quite sure what type of government would be born from such a revolution; many thinkers in the 1700s had unrealistic ideas of government or ideas that would lead to corruption and gerrymandering (24). Montesquieu argued that the best type of government was the one who protected liberties, in fear that the monarchy under Louis XVI and those who came after were moving towards despotism (25). Rousseau felt that man was free but “in chains” by any society he would live in (26). The Catholic Church exerted political power while draining funds, giving itself the power to approve both education and speech (Porter 36).

Uniting a common cause, albeit decades apart, between these two disparate and different countries was John Locke and Voltaire. Although their societies and beliefs were very different, both believed that religious tolerance was key to a functioning society because religious tolerance was common sense; if religious liberty was natural, right, and individual from others’ authority, then that religious and political institutions should not claim authority over one’s personal religious beliefs and those that have are hypocritical. However, while both promoted rather progressive ideas for the time, Locke was more inclined to continue support for the Christian faith while Voltaire purported deism.

JOHN LOCKE

John Locke was concerned with the creation of human understandings that shape unique individuals’ practices and beliefs. For Locke, this included evaluating the relationship between religious and political institutions and the people. For example, Locke writes in *A* *Letter Concerning Toleration* “in support of the dissenters’ resistance to government imposition of Anglican uniformity and struggle for religious toleration, including civil equality, in Restoration England.” Much of Locke’s push against the totalitarian control of government over its citizens resulted from his Whiggish views on authority. According to Jacob, Locke’s mission was to “stop the advance of monarchical absolutism in England, to prevent their country’s return to the Catholic Church, and to offer theories about the nature of government that would justify their stance on dogged opposition” (6). Thus, in *A Letter,* Locke argues that the government can only control outward things that put others in danger, not extending to what Locke considers inwards, such as religious ideas or practices or one’s experiences. Even to some extent the outward form of religion should not be touched by laws, again unless it causes harm to others. Nicolson breaks down this opposition of authority into five main points or themes to Locke’s work: First, there exists “The natural right of all men to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”; and people “therefore have the right to defend themselves and their interest when these are endangered”; and this “resistance is not rebellion”; because “nobody should be subjected to authority without his consent”; and “this freedom can only be secured if the principle be accepted that minorities must obey majorities and the fiction be admitted that the acts of the majority are by nature and reason the acts of the whole community” (274). There is a sort of contract or understanding between people and the authority that neither can be fully controlled by the other, but that they share a mutual responsibility to keep one another in check in order to keep stability and order, without detracting from his liberties and rights. This Lockean opposition to the absolute power is a rejection of Hobbe’s *Leviathan* and represents a general skepticism for the role of authority over the individual that marked the Enlightenment. Locke continued to write until his death in 1704, and several of his manuscripts were published posthumously. Today, Locke is remembered for his philosophical work on religious tolerance, one’s liberties, and the role of government over its citizens.

VOLTAIRE

Voltaire’s career started much later than Locke’s, but he equally opposed the intolerances bred from absolutism. Voltaire, given the name François-Marie Arouet at birth, was educated at a Jesuit College. His father’s choice for a Jesuit college is interesting, particularly considering his brother attended a Jansenist one. There, Voltaire learned how to write and began to develop his deist views (Pearson 31). Later in life, Voltaire will use this foundation to argue against Jansenist ideas, such as in his lengthy breakdown of Pascal in *Letters Concerning the English Nation,* published in English in England in 1733, to be published in French in 1734*.* As Voltaire grew older, he grappled with Leibnizian optimism and pessimism, exemplified by Martin in *Candide* (1759)*,* and how to rectify these opposite mindsets. Ultimately, Voltaire chose a deistic approach, a sort of neutral approach to the role of God and explanation for the mysteries of life, and turned much of his attention to *Écrasez l’infâme,* or his engagement in the eradication of fanatics, of which he defined as those who used religion and power to think and act on harmful, unfounded ideas of intolerance. Voltaire had a long career as a writer, taking on many different genres and ideas. But overall, his works similarly defended the necessity and common sense of rejecting blind agreement to religious and political institutions. His works included *Candide, Zaïre* (1732)*, Letters Concerning the English Nation,* or *Lettres Philosophiques,* and many more.

POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS BOUNDARIES

Locke and Voltaire both argue that the government and the church should remain separate spheres, particularly in law creation and enforcement. To understand this separation of powers, it must be understood that they considered one’s beliefs as natural rights that should be protected from persecution or control. Locke considered natural rights to include “the Care of Souls” (Locke 26-27). What is inwards, such as the soul or one’s belief and relationship with God, is only between the person and God; God has given no human the absolute authority over others and their religion. The government does, however, have some authority over one’s “civil interests,” like “Life, Liberty, Health, and Indolency of Body; and the Possessions of outward things, such as Money, Lands, Houses, Furniture, and the like” (Locke 26-27). By applying its power to matters of civil interests, the government no longer infringes upon what Locke considers inwards, or individual. Thus, forcing another person to believe in one’s own ideas is like forcing a sick man to take medicine that he does not want because “Men cannot be forced to be saved whether they will or no. And therefore, when all is done, they must be left to their own Consciences” (Locke 38). Thus, a person must decide for themselves how they wish to be saved, if at all. This means that a person will have an independent relationship with God and his beliefs, and that these ideas are built upon experiences derived from the senses, of which Locke further discusses in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding.*

Voltaire concurs in “Letter V” of *Letters Concerning the English Nation,* “An *Englishman,* as one to whom liberty is natural, may go to heaven his own way” (26). This individual choice cannot be governed by others, otherwise all factions different from one another would be pitted against one another: “all the rest of time is passed in impertinent quarrels; Jansenist against Molinist, Parliament against the Church…it is eternal war” (Voltaire, *Candide,* 95). This war, offers both *philosophes,* could be easily solved by tolerance because “Reason is gentle and humane, and it encourages toleration…” (Locke, *A Letter*, 30). Afterall, like Locke, Voltaire believed that one should learn from nature, or one’s experiences and senses, not from corrupt and hypocritical ministers or those zealots who abuse religion (*Treatise* 60). Perhaps Locke would not have agreed with the tolerance Voltaire saw in England, believing his own country to be rather intolerant, but the idea stands clear: toleration just makes sense.

This natural right to religious beliefs was openly challenged by the government and churches across Europe. In the eighteenth-century, the government and the church worked hand in hand, or as Locke would say, the Church was affected by the whims of those in power (Locke 38). Since the two main authorities, church and government, were interrelated, laws were enforced with religious bias, resulting in clear acts of religious intolerance and discrimination. For example, in predominantly-Catholic France, Protestant Jean Calas was accused and executed for the murder his son on ground s that his son was *rumored* to be converting to Catholicism. The people of Toulouse had been ready to pounce on a “heretical” Protestant. When Voltaire heard about this discriminatory situation and the unfair trail that followed,he offered legal defense for Calas’ remaining family in the name of religious toleration.

Voltaire openly criticized how religion became a weapon against others and wondered: why does the Church hold so much power over someone and affect so greatly affect one’s treatment? Are humans not all humans? For him, this was an act of hypocrisy that exceeds fallacy and becomes “zeal,” something far worse in Voltaire’s eyes. Voltaire mocks this hypocrisy in *Candide* where botha Catholic and a Jesuit abuse and rape Candide’s love, Cunegonde, and yet the Catholic Inquisitor “was interred in a handsome church” whereas the Jew, Issachar, “was thrown upon a dunghill” (Voltaire, *Candide,* 32). Locke, who also felt religion was too often used as a “Fire and Sword,” writes in *A Letter Concerning Toleration,* “If the Law of Toleration were once settles, that all Churches were obliged to lay down Toleration as the Foundation of their own Liberty; and teach that Liberty of Conscience is every mans natural Right, equally belonging to Dissenters as to themselves; and that no body out to be compelled in matters of Religion, either by Law or Force” (24; 51). Further, because one’s natural right to an individual practice of religious faith, one cannot condemn another, especially through legal means.

Perhaps clear to a modern society, but this intolerance and discrimination was the norm of the period. Voltaire certainly felt that France was behind in its modernization, citing in his *Letters Concerning the English Nation,* several comparisons between France and England, lamenting, “Will we always be the last ones to adopt the sane policies of other nations?” (59). For Voltaire, much change was needed in France and he yearned for a freedom that other countries had already been given, but it was Locke who offered a course of action. Locke suggests that a separation of church and state powers would reduce persecution and improve conditions between people. But additionally, he believed that “the overwhelming threat of punishment by an omniscient god cold outweigh the worldly advantage of immoral and illegal activity” (Tully 8). Locke believed that Christians, and maybe Catholics if they abandoned the Pope, did not necessarily need a judicial system to maintain order. Instead, their own belief in a faith of moral integrity and a promise of a paradisiacal afterlife would provide the structure for order needed, if only they also respected one’s individual beliefs.

RELIGIOUS AND PERSONAL PRACTICE

While both Voltaire and Locke saw clear evidence against religious intolerance that almost required dissent from traditional institutions, their views differed in their development; each *philosophe* took from his own experiences and ideas when shaping their arguments. Voltaire took a deist approach for he had been skeptical of the Christian and Catholic faiths for a long time. After the death of love Adrienne Lecouvreur, who was refused a burial because she was a heretic, in tandem with his distrust for those who wanted to limit speech on all subjects, but mainly religion, Voltaire had no proof that the Catholic church offered him any sort of benefit or just reason to subscribe to their “God.” Instead, Voltaire originally found comfort a Leibniz Optimist, but after a *tremblement de terre* destroyed Lisbon in 1755, Voltaire could not but help question God’s role. If God was supposed to be an almighty power that intervened to prevent the bad, “or everything is as it should be,” then why did He allow for such destruction and death? Voltaire struggled with his old optimist and new pessimistic views. Ultimately, Voltaire found deism to make the most sense in a world where both good and bad things happen, seemingly without reason; deism seemed rational and refuted the religion he spent his life trying to understand and fight (Pearson 224, 250). In his Ode on Fanaticism, Voltaire used Emilie’s “good sense” deism to contrast with the zealots and fanatics who claimed Christian faith but acted murderously unchristian (Pearson 96). And in *Candide*, Voltaire writes, “He has given us all we need, and we return Him thanks without ceasing” (69). While life is not perfect like utopic El Dorado, it is the way God designed it and He left it to humans to “cultivate their garden,” meaning they must take what they were given to create meaning and purpose. After all, if humans were meant to be divine creatures in a perfect world, God would have created that version. Further, this means that God is the sole authority on punishing those according to religion. It is not up to humans to interpret or act on behalf of God, but to act according to what God has given them. Furthermore, this deist approach Voltaire took was progressive during this era, but ultimately his viewpoint marked a shift in ideology of which historians retrospectively identify as key for the Enlightenment.

Locke, whose career ended with his death in 1704, was perhaps as radical as Voltaire, but took a non-deistic route. For him, toleration could be achieved through promotion of a more Christian dogma in opposition to the less-tolerant Catholic one, as evidenced by his critiques of the Pope and the unreliability of Catholic obedience to any secular power. A Christian faith, on the other hand, had enough guidelines for moral integrity and behavior that the political power was only necessary to enforce toleration of others and the protection of civil interests (Tully 8). Seven years after the publication of *A Letter Concerning Toleration,* Locke published *The Reasonableness of Christianity* where he again argued that believing in Christianity could “consonant with reason and experience” but only if “the reasonable Christian was not obliged to accept features of traditional faith at which his reason baulked” (Porter 33).

CONCLUSION

In an era where institutions were scientific discoveries created new lenses to view traditional institutions, inciting skepticism and dissent, Locke and Voltaire were key figures. Without their work promoting religious toleration and the necessity of control on absolute powers, many modern, democratic societies would be without ideas of natural rights, separation of powers, and checks and balances. In the United States of America, James Madison was influenced by Locke’s works, such as *Essay Considering Human Understanding* and *A Letter Concerning Toleration.* As a Founding Father and credited with the *Constitution of the United States*, Madison’s belief in a separation of government from religious matters was pivotal in designing the foundations for a tolerant society. Clearly influenced by Locke’s *A Letter,* Madison explains in *The Federalist* that the government cannot “form or act on religious opinions…” nor prevent citizens from practicing their religion, unless “those practices threaten the rights of others,” or what Locke would call “civil interests” (Sikkenga 748); the government has no reason to interfere with the individual’s beliefs or to use religion as a form of power over its citizens. Another example of Voltairean and Lockean theory in practice is Thomas Jefferson’s *Statute for Religious Freedom*, passed by the General Assembly in 1786, heavily influenced by Locke and Voltaire. Jefferson wrote any person has the right to free worship of “Nature’s God,” vague to apply to different religious views. Additionally, the individual can practice as he pleases without obligation to church or state. Thus, the *Statute for Religious Freedom* champions toleration of all views, allows free practice and belief, and separates Church and State (“Thomas Jefferson”). Locke and Voltaire would be proud to see their contributions folded into practice, rather than remaining hypothetical philosophy.

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