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Exploring Literature: The History of Agnosticism in Voltaire’s *Candide*

The opportunity to expand one’s knowledge on a myriad of topics serves as a significant advantage to reading various types of literature. In *Arguifying*, Empson states that “the main purpose of literature is to grasp a wide variety of experience, imaging people with codes and customs very unlike your own” (13). Similarly, in *Dylan’s Visions of Sin*, Christopher Ricks contends that “one of the ways in which art is invaluable is by giving us sympathetic access to systems of belief that are not our own…. It is our responsibility not only to believe but to entertain beliefs” (377). These ideas imply that readers can gain valuable insight into the actions and thought processes of themselves and those around them by studying literary works. For example, when reading Voltaire’s *Candide*, audiences have an opportunity to learn about the thought processes behind enduringly optimistic Christian philosophies as well as those of agnostics and atheists such as Voltaire himself. The perspectives of these characters are offered through what Ricks calls “sympathetic access,” in which beliefs are presented seamlessly within the world of the story rather than being forced onto the reader through persuasive means. “Sympathetic access” is achieved throughout *Candide* in which philosophies are woven into the struggles and triumphs of the characters. The idea that readers benefit immensely by exploring beliefs through literature is exemplified through studying Voltaire’s *Candide* and the historical context surrounding the classic work.

When examining the beliefs satirized throughout *Candide*, one should first note the difficulties Voltaire faced throughout his life. In *Candide: Destroying Optimism*, Haydn Mason writes that “the problem of evil … had long troubled Voltaire. Why is there suffering in the world? Why are human beings malicious toward one another?” (3). Such questions appear discreetly throughout *Candide* as Candide and his companions attempt to discern the meanings behind the actions and beliefs of others. Voltaire’s views on this topic, shaped by personal trials such as the death of his former mistress and best friend in 1749 and the hypocrisy of the Protestant pastors he encountered when he moved to Geneva, Switzerland, can assist readers as they try to relate to his literary work (3). Understanding his skepticism (which is conveyed through “sympathetic access” in *Candide*)adds a level of validity to the work that makes it more applicable to contemporary life.

Voltaire’s personal religion also impacts the reception of *Candide* and may help religious audiences gain a better understanding of modern agnosticism. In his *Dictionnaire philosophique*, Voltaire condoned atheism, arguing that “most of the great ones of this earth live as if they were atheists” and that believing in God had “not the slightest influence on war and ambition, interests and pleasures” (215). Additionally, he stated in the same work that “we have no adequate idea of the divinity” and that “we merely drag ourselves from supposition to supposition, from possibilities to probabilities” (227). Knowledge of Voltaire’s personal beliefs (or lack thereof) provides readers with an understanding of the frame through which he wrote *Candide*. Whether readers personally agree or disagree with Voltaire’s beliefs, knowing this context provides valuable insight into the text’s creation.

Voltaire used his agnostic beliefs primarily to critique the Christian philosophy of optimism, as it was presented by several specific philosophical authors. In his detailed biography of Voltaire, Theodore Besterman reminds readers that when studying the author and his views, the definition of optimism “has nothing to do with one’s outlook on life: it is the belief that all that is and happens is for the best” (365). This belief is referenced by Voltaire throughout *Candide* as the characters undergo evidently unfair, arduous trials which are then painted as occurring in “the best of all possible worlds.” Besterman explains Voltaire’s perspective on the topic at the time *Candide* was written:

Voltaire had realized that the doctrine of optimism is in reality the opposite of what it seemed: philosophical optimism is really a doctrine of despair, an antisocial belief, ‘a cruel philosophy under a consoling name.’ If all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds, what is the use of bothering? No, replies Voltaire, all is not for the best in this world; what is good does not make up for what is bad; the good will not increase nor will evil diminish, on their own, through the operation of laws invented by metaphysicians. On the contrary, it is up to us to haul ourselves out of the slough of despond. We must act. We must cultivate our garden (373).

The above quotation blatantly attacks the philosophies of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, who serves as the primary philosopher criticized by Voltaire in *Candide.* Reflected throughout satirical phrases in the book such as “the best of all possible worlds” and Pangloss’ beloved “metaphysico-theologico-cosmo-nigology,” Voltaire conveys early on in the work that he believes Leibniz’s philosophies to be laughably incorrect (Voltaire). Leibniz subscribed to the belief that “God controls, or at least could control, every detail of the events in the world” (Griffin 17). Achieving fame primarily for the popular phrase “the best of all possible worlds” (as mentioned regularly in *Candide*), Leibniz demonstrated “an explicit denial that there is any genuine evil in the universe” (Griffin 131). He even contended that creating a world without any sin or suffering would have been impossible even for God because “God is constrained by the nature of the eternal truths which, as eternal, are beyond volition” (Griffin 132). In response to Leibniz’s work, Voltaire wrote the *Métaphysique de Newtown*, in which he posed, “Just show me…why so many men slit each other’s throats in the best of all possible worlds, and I shall be greatly obliged to you” (Besterman 367). An understanding of Leibnizian philosophies is crucial to interpreting Voltaire’s *Candide* and applying it to one’s own beliefs (whether those beliefs correspond to belief in higher powers or not).

In addition to satirizing the philosophical work of Leibniz, Voltaire addressed the ideas of English poet Alexander Pope in *Candide*. In his *Essay on Man*, Pope painted a similarly optimistic vision of mankind, writing the following verse:

All Nature is but Art, unknown to thee;

All Chance, Direction which thou canst not see;

All Discord, Harmony not understood;

All partial Evil, universal Good:

And spite of Pride, in erring Reason’s spite,

One truth is clear, ‘Whatever is, is RIGHT’ (Mason 6).

Pope’s words fail to recognize the fact that any evil exists in the world, instead referring to bad things simply as “discord” and “harmony not understood” and advocating for “total submission” to the universe (Mason 7). This philosophy, combined with that of Leibniz, made for excellent satire when Voltaire penned *Candide*. Familiarizing oneself with these ideas helps readers gain an understanding of the beliefs which shaped Voltaire’s agnosticism. Whether or not readers decide to further investigate these beliefs, they will at least gain an awareness of the causes of early agnosticism.

In addition to these philosophies, several world events shaped Voltaire’s worldview and aided him in the process of writing *Candide*. One of these events, the Seven Years’ War, is discreetly referenced in the book, when Candide and Martin witness two ships in battle. When one of the ships is defeated and the two characters watch a crew sink slowly to their demise, Martin sighs, “Well, there you have it… That is how men behave towards each other” (Voltaire 57). This statement reflects Voltaire’s sentiments on the real-life parallel and can be applied to numerous atrocities committed in recent years. Additionally, when a major earthquake struck Lisbon, Portugal in 1755 and killed as many as 100,000 people, Voltaire felt outraged at the continued optimism of Christians worldwide (Besterman 365). In response to the reactions of others, he wrote a poem entitled “Poeme sur le desastre de Lisbonne” which targeted these optimistic views (as made evident by the poem’s subtitle, “Examination of the Axiom, *All is well*”). Mason writes in *Candide: Optimism Demolished*:

He assaults these complacent philosophers with questions: What explanation have they to offer? Was the earthquake the result of necessary laws? How can these laws constrain a God both good and free? Or was it divine revenge? In which case, was Lisbon more sinful than London or Paris? (5)

In “Poeme sur le desastre de Lisbonne”, Voltaire sought to unmask what he believed to be the foolishness of overly-optimistic Christians in their attempts to cope with disasters like the earthquake. Knowledge of this event and Voltaire’s critical response to it assists readers in gaining Ricks’ aforementioned “sympathetic access” by providing them with a horrible event that promotes understanding of Voltaire’s beliefs.

Although one of the primary benefits of reading literature like *Candide* remains learning more about the worldviews of others, the opportunity to solidify one’s own beliefs and learn more about the history of those beliefs serves as another valuable option. As an agnostic who grew up in a rural southern community for the first eighteen years of my life (and then proceeded to attend college in an even more rural southern community), I have often experienced a sense of isolation in my skepticism. On numerous occasions, I have been shamed for my beliefs. This is also frequently accompanied by the warning that unless I declare my belief in a higher power before my expiration, I will most definitely spend eternity burning in Hell.

As I read *Candide* and learned about Voltaire’s personal beliefs and the historical context from which the book emerged, I was offered some reassurance that I am not alone in my convictions. A sense of relief washed over me as I read about Voltaire’s often comical reactions to Christians who remained frustratingly optimistic when faced with tragedies. This historical context reminded me greatly of my own thought processes and inspired a greater sense of self-confidence within me. Similarly, reading about Christian philosophers like Pope and Leibniz confirmed that I do not (and likely never will) subscribe to beliefs of that nature. In this way, the words of Ricks and Empson proved personally true: I gained “sympathetic access” to the beliefs of others and used this avenue to reflect inwardly.

By studying Voltaire’s *Candide* and its rich historical context, readers like myself may explore beliefs that they otherwise may not have been exposed to and gain a historical and personal understanding of why people subscribe to said beliefs. Literary depictions of foreign systems of emotional and moral values assist readers by providing them with alternative perspectives that may either solidify or alter their current beliefs. Additionally, these literary works provide readers with valuable “sympathetic access” in that beliefs are introduced rather than forced upon them. In this context, readers may be more receptive to learning about the beliefs and practices of others. *Candide* achieves this by inserting beliefs (both agnostic and Christian) discreetly throughout the story and leaving readers to form their own opinions based on its content. *Candide* and the lessons to be taken from it exemplify the importance of reading literature.

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