**Group 2**

**On Universal Toleration: Voltaire**

The Enlightenment is often characterized as an era of empirical reasoning and critical thought,of doubt and skepticism,of individual assertion at the expense of formal control by the state or church. For the most part, this is a fair assessment. God, if he existed, was prone to be antiseptic, the "great clock-winder," who created the universe and then sat back,uninvolved in the lives of his creations.This philosophy,called deism, generally prevailed among the philosophes. It did not deny the existence of God,but it gave virtually no support to organized religion. The deists particularly denounced the mys­ teries of the Christian religion such as the Trinity and miracles like the Virgin Birth and the Eucharist. Since God was disinterested in the affairs of the world, formal prayers were useless. Deism enabled many of the philosophes to effect a reconciliation between a perfect God and an imperfect world.

Voltaire was the quintessential personality of the Enlightenment. An author of dramas, histories, and scathing satires, his wit and intellectual power dominated the age. Voltaire was an adamant opponent of organized religion, but one of the most enthusiastic advocates of religious toleration and the deist viewpoint. The first selection is from his famous Treatise on Toleration.In the letter that follows,Voltaire argues for the logic and necessity of a supreme deity. His ideas are generally representative of the enlightened thinkers of the age.

Source: "On Universal Toleration," is from Tobias Smollett,ed.,*The Works of Voltaire* (london: E. R. DuMont,1901),vol. 4, pp. 272-273, 275--276, 278. Text modernized by the editor.

VOLTAIRE

It does not require any great art or studied elocution to prove that Christians ought to tolerate one another. Nay, I shall go still farther and say that we ought to look upon all men as our brethren. How! Call a Turk, a Jew, and a Siamese, my brother? Yes, doubtless; for are we not all children of the same parent, and the creatures of the same Creator?

But these people hold us in contempt, and call us idolaters!Well, then, I should tell them that they were to blame.

And I fancy that I could stagger the headstrong pride of an imam, or a talapoin [religious leaders], were I to address them in the following manner:

''This little globe, which is no more than a point, rolls, together with many other globes, in that immensity of space

in which we are all alike confounded. Man, who is an animal, about five feet high, is certainly a very inconsiderable part of the creation; but one of those hardly visible beings says to others of the same kind inhabiting another spot of the globe: Hearken to me, for the God of all these worlds has enlightened me. There are about nine hundred millions of us little insects who inhabit the earth, but my ant-hill is alone cherished by God, who holds all the rest in horror and detestation; those who live with me upon my spot will alone be happy, and all the rest eternally wretched."

They would here stop me short and ask, ''What madman could have made so ridiculous a speech?" I should then

be obliged to answer them, "It is yourselves.". . .

0 you different worshippers of a God of mercy! If you have cruel hearts, if, while you adore that Deity who has placed the whole of His law in these few words, "Love God and your neighbor," you have loaded that pure and holy law with sophistical and unintelligible disputes, if you have lighted the flames of discord sometimes for a new word, and at others for a single letter only; if you have annexed eternal punishment to the omission of some few words, or of certain ceremonies which other people cannot comprehend, I must say to you with tears of compassion for mankind: "Transport yourselves with me to that great instant in which all men are to receive judgment from the hand of God, who will then do unto every one according to their works, and with me behold all the dead of past ages appearing in His presence. Are you very sure that our heavenly Father and Creator will say to the wise and virtuous Confucius, to the great legislator Solon, to Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, the divine Antoninus, the good Trajan, to Titus, the delight of humankind, and to many others who have been the models of humankind: 'Depart from me, wretches! into torments that know neither alleviation nor end; but are, like Himself, everlasting."'

I think I see you start with horror at these words. . . .

May all men remember that they are brethren! May they alike abhor that tyranny which seeks to subject the free­ dom of the will, as they do the rapine which tears from the arms of industry the fruits of its peaceful labors! And if the scourge of war is not to be avoided, let us not mutually hate and destroy each other in the midst of peace; but rather make use of the few moments of our existence to join in praising, in a thousand different languages, from one extremity of the world to the other, Thy goodness, 0 all-merciful Creator, to whom we are indebted for that existence!

"IF GOD DID NOT EXIST, HE WOULD HAVE TO BE INVENTED" VOLTAIRE

Source: H'lf God Did Not Exist, He Would Have to Be lnvented.'n is from S. G. Tallentyre,trans.,*Voltaire*

*in His Letters* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons,1919).

*To Frederick William,* Prince *of Prussia:*

Monseigneur, the royal family of Prussia has excellent reasons for not wishing the annihilation of the soul. It has more right

than anyone to immortality.

It is very true that we do not know any too well what the soul is: no one has ever seen it. All that we do know is that the eternal Lord of nature has given us the power of thinking, and of distinguishing virtue. It is not proved that this faculty survives our death: but the contrary is not proved either. It is possible, doubtless, that God has given thought to a particle to which, after we are no more, He will still give the power of thought: there is no inconsistency in this idea.

In the midst of all the doubts which we have discussed for four thousand years in four thousand ways, the safest course is to do nothing against one's conscience. With this secret, we can enjoy life and have nothing to fear from death.

There are some charlatans who admit no doubts. We know nothing of first principles. It is surely very presump­ tuous to define God, the angels, spirits, and to pretend to know precisely why God made the world, when we do not know why we can move our arms at our pleasure. Doubt is not a pleasant condition, but certainty is an absurd one.

What is most repellent in the System of Nature [by the Baron d'Holbach] . . . is the audacity with which it decides that there is no God, without even having tried to prove the impossibility. There is some eloquence in the book: but much more rant, and no sort of proof. It is a pernicious work, alike for princes and people: "Si Dieu n'existait pas, il faudrait !'inventer." [If God did not exist, he would have to be invented].

But all nature cries aloud that He does exist: that there is a supreme intelligence, an immense power, an admirable

order, and everything teaches us our own dependence on it.

From the depth of our profound ignorance, let us do our best: this is what I think, and what I have always thought, amid all the misery and follies inseparable from seventy-seven years of life. . . . I am, with deep respect, Voltaire

*Answer the following questions based on the text above in complete sentences.*

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| Why was toleration so important to Voltaire? |  |
| Do you regard him as a religious individual? Why is deism a comfortable philosophy? |  |