

TOLERATION AND OTHER ESSAYS

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649145829

Toleration and other essays by Voltaire & Joseph McCabe

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VOLTAIRE & JOSEPH MCCABE

**TOLERATION AND
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BY

VOLTAIRE

TRANSLATED, WITH AN INTRODUCTION, BY

JOSEPH McCABE

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
NEW YORK AND LONDON
The Knickerbocker Press

1912

The Knickerbocker Press, New York

INTRODUCTION

It seems useful, in presenting to English readers this selection of the works of Voltaire, to recall the position and personality of the writer and the circumstances in which the works were written. It is too lightly assumed, even by many who enjoy the freedom which he, more than any, won for Europe, and who may surpass him in scepticism, that Voltaire is a figure to be left in a discreetly remote niche of memory. "Other times, other manners" is one of the phrases he contributed to modern literature. Let us genially acknowledge that he played a great part in dispelling the last mists of the Middle Ages, and politely attribute to the papal perversity and the lingering vulgarity of his age the more effective features of his work. Thus has Voltaire become a mere name to modern rationalists; a name of fading brilliance, a monumental name, but nothing more.

This sentiment is at once the effect and the cause of a very general ignorance concerning Voltaire; and it is a reproach to us. We have time, amid increasing knowledge, to recover the most obscure personalities of the Middle Ages and of antiquity; we trace the most elementary contributors to modern culture; and we neglect one of the mightiest forces

that made the development of modern culture possible. I do not speak of Voltaire the historian, who, a distinguished writer says, introduced history for the first time into the realm of letters; Voltaire the dramatist, whose name is inscribed for ever in the temple of the tragic muse; Voltaire the physicist, who drove the old Cartesianism out of France, and imposed on it the fertile principles of Newton; Voltaire the social reformer, who talked to eighteenth-century kings of the rights of man, and scourged every judicial criminal of his aristocratic age; Voltaire the cosmopolitan, who boldly set up England's ensign of liberty in feudal France. All these things were done by the "flippant Voltaire" of the flippant modern preacher. But he can be considered here only as one of the few who, in an age of profound inequality, used the privilege of his enlightenment to enlighten his fellows; one of those who won for us that liberty to think rationally, and to speak freely, on religious matters which we too airily attribute to our new goddess, Evolution.

The position of Voltaire in the development of religious thought in Europe is unique. Even if his words had no application in our age, it merits the most grateful consideration. Trace to its sources the spirit that has led modern France and modern Portugal to raise civic ideals above creeds, and that will, within a few decades, find the same expression in Spain, Italy, Belgium, and half of America. You find yourself in the first half of the nineteenth century, when, in all those countries, a few hundred men, and some women, maintained a superb struggle with restored monarchs and restored

Jesuits for the liberty that had been wrested from them; and you find that the vast majority of them were disciples of Voltaire. Go back to the very beginning of the anti-clerical movement; seek the generators of that intellectual and emotional electricity which, gathering insensibly in the atmosphere of Europe in the second half of the eighteenth century, burst at last in the lurid flashes and the rolling thunders of the Great Revolution. On the religious side, with which alone I am concerned here, that devastating storm was overwhelmingly due to the writings of Voltaire. Rousseau, it is true, gave to the world his simple Deistic creed, and with sweet reasonableness lodged it in the minds of many; Diderot and d'Holbach and La Mettrie impressed their deeper scepticism with a weight of learning. But Voltaire was the oracle of Europe. "I have no sceptre, but I have a pen," he once said to Frederick the Great. And when, in his later years, he poured out from his remote château on the Swiss frontier the flood of satires, stories, sermons, dialogues, pamphlets, and treatises which ate deep into the fabric of old Europe, his pen proved mightier than all the sceptres of its kings.

« To ignore Voltaire is to ignore history. » ✓

My object, however, in introducing to English readers these few characteristic specimens of his anti-clerical work is not solely to bespeak some gratefulness for the toleration and freedom which he enforced on a reluctant world, or to gratify a simple curiosity as to the character of his power. These are not dead words, not ashes of an extinct fire, which we disinter; for the world is not dead

at which they were flung. If they cause resentment in the minds of some, the publication will be the more justified. But before I explain this paradox, let me show how the works came to be written, and written in such a way.

The life of Voltaire, which some conceive as a prolonged adolescence, has a very clear and instructive division into adolescence, manhood, and ripe age. All the works given in this volume belong to the last part, but we must glance at the others. François Marie Arouet was born, in the very comfortable *bourgeois* family of a staid Parisian notary, in 1694. He became a precocious, sharp-eared boy. His godfather was an *abbé*, a kind of ecclesiastic—not usually a priest—in the France of the time who drew his income from the Church, and therefore felt more entitled than the ordinary layman to scoff at its dogmas and ignore its morals. He could plead the example of his bishops. Several of these *abbés* visited the home of the Arouets, and gave little “Zozo” his first lessons in Biblical criticism. In the great college of the Jesuits he learned to articulate his scepticism. In his seventeenth year he set out on the career of letters. The kindly *abbé*, who, having answered to God for him at the baptismal font, felt bound to guide his fortunes, introduced him to one of the most brilliant and dissolute circles in Paris. It was a kind of club of *abbés*, nobles, writers, etc., and in it he would rapidly attain that large and peculiar knowledge of the Old Testament which appears in his writings. He sparkled so much at the suppers of the Epicureans, and earned such reputation, that he was

put in the Bastille for certain naughty epigrams, which he had not written; and he was exiled for another epigram, on a distinguished sinner, which he had written. In the pensive solitude of the Bastille he changed his name to Voltaire.¹ He emerged bolder than ever, wrote tragedies and poems and epigrams, was welcomed in the smartest salons of Paris, and behaved as a young gentleman of the time was expected to behave, until his thirty-first year.

In 1726 he was, through the despotic and most unjust action of a powerful noble, again put in the Bastille, and was then allowed to exchange that fortress for the fogs of London. Up to this time he had no idea of attacking Church or State. He had, in 1722, written a letter on religion—in the vein, apparently, of some of Swinburne's unpublished juvenilia—which a distinguished writer of the time, to whom he read it, described as "making his hair stand on end"; it was, however, not intended for circulation. But experience of England, for which he contracted a passionate admiration, and which (as Mr. Churton Collins has shown) he studied profoundly, sobered him with a high and serious purpose. He met all the brilliant writers of that age in England, and took a great interest in the religious controversy which raged over Anthony Collins's *Discourse*. He returned to France in 1729, vowing to win for it the liberty and en-

¹ Probably adopting a name which is known to have existed among his mother's ancestors. But it is curious that "Voltaire" is an anagram of his name—Arouet 1 (e) j (eune)—if u be read as v and j as i.