

Summary of voltaire's philosophical dictionary assignment

[History](#)



Voltaire was overwhelmingly concerned with religious and ethical issues. His belief that spirituality was a private matter simply didn't correspond with the norms of the day. Particularly unreceptive was the church which more times than not was the chief target of Voltaire's criticism. The church had long wielded great power in Europe, and the morals which it claimed to support were often overshadowed by an obsession with ensuring its own theological proclamations were honored.

Voltaire was quick to exploit this hypocrisy, and it inspired him to come up with his own philosophy on ethics and the role of the church. From being an atheist which he considered a "bold and misguided scholar," Voltaire believed in an "eternal, supreme, intelligent being" (208) and thought religion was a good thing in a civilized society (56). However, what he hated was religious fanaticism, and it was something he saw all too often. He saw "religion, far from being a beneficial food... [i]ngle into poison in infected brains" (203). He saw men who backed "madness with murder" and men who killed "for love to god" (202). And he saw this happening all throughout the church. If this was the effect religion would have on society, if it would only create an "epidemic illness," then even atheism would be better, for at least atheists wouldn't kill those who thought differently than them. For Voltaire, a man who championed reason and empiricism, fanaticism had only one cure: free thought.

Reason, Voltaire believed, was an ability which God gave all men as an instrument to guide moral behavior. Thus, any reasonable man who studied the Bible would know that human killing was something God always despised. The fanatics then were without excuse as "enemies of reason and

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of God" (28). Voltaire believed these people, the persecutors, and the theological disputes they created to be humanity's worst problem. Because of man's inherent desire to dominate Others, a just society led by religious leaders was impossible. In order to find the good and the true. Away must rule the land and men must be allowed to express themselves without the fear of punishment. At the conclusion to his essay on Certainty, Voltaire provides two poignant insights: " As for me, who have undertaken this little Dictionary to put questions, am far from being certain" (107). In a place and time where the public was expected to play the role of children and acquiesce to everything put before them, Voltaire, first, wanted people to think, ask questions, and arrive at their own conclusions: " Natural law permits everyone to believe what he pleases" (88).

Secondly, Voltaire recognized the " limits Of the human mind, " that only so many questions contained mathematically certain answers. In one of his essays, he challenged the church With that fact: " I could compose for you a folio volume of questions to which you would have to reply only with four words: ' I do not now? '" (74). To Voltaire it was clear enough. Not all things were in man's grasp, and it was an individual choice as to how to deal with those areas. These two points capture the grand message Voltaire sacrificed his life to spread.

Religious faith will always be just that: faith. Yet, the most atrocious acts of evil have been committed when people assume that their own faiths are universal truths. This is the mistake Voltaire most wanted to discourage. Instead, he proposed a society where a secular body governed by laws

derived from reason and permitted its tizzies to freely exercise their natural rights to free speech and religion, The Age of the Enlightenment saw many of the events which have had the greatest impact present sociably.

Voltaire and his contemporaries introduced the ideas of free speech, religion, assembly, and press. They openly questioned the established authorities and influenced the revolutions in both England and Prance. Today, most countries in the Western World reap the benefits of such thinkers and the changes they introduced, embracing the Enlightenment culture and its love for secular leadership.