

Religious satire in voltaire's candide essay sample

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During Voltaire's lifetime, traditional social institutions and government systems held power. Arguably the most influential of those was the Catholic Church, which was considered sacred and above the state in authority and importance. Although Voltaire was a deist, he despised the Church clergy for its corruption, impiety, and hypocrisy. Having been sexually abused by teachers while attending a Jesuit school, he harbored a special hatred towards the Jesuits. Yet his abhorrence of religion extended past Catholicism. Voltaire condemned Protestant clergy in much the same way as Catholic priests. Furthermore, although in theory Voltaire believed in religious equality, he held strongly anti-Semitic views, even calling Jews "abominable" in his *Dictionary of Philosophy*. Muslim clerics were described in much the same way. Clearly, Voltaire hated all religious institutions and customs. In his most satirical and important work, *Candide*, he incessantly mocks not only the Catholic Church, but also Protestants, Jews, and Muslims. Voltaire's sharpest criticism was directed at the Catholic Church. His relationship with the Church "was one of uninterrupted hostility" (*Candide*, "Religion", pg. 13), and in *Candide*, he attacks all aspects of its social structure and doctrines. When Pangloss explains how he contracted syphilis, he states that Paquette "received this present from a very learned Franciscan monk...who owed it to a marquise...who caught it from a Jesuit" (*Candide*, Chapter 4, pg. 48). This passage, apart from being a parody of Bible genealogies, illustrates the lack of celibacy of respectable Church members, contrary to their own doctrines. Voltaire shows the promiscuity of the Catholic clergy in several other instances, such as through the Grand Inquisitor who hypocritically has a mistress, Cunegonde. The author also

introduces the daughter of a Pope, who fails to help her out of her hardships. In Chapter Ten, Cunegonde's jewels are stolen by "a venerable Franciscan who slept at the same inn with us" (Candide, Chapter 10, pg. 59 **), although Franciscans take a vow of poverty. Voltaire also satirizes the corruption of the Jesuits through Cacambo, who is talking about Paraguay (Candide, Chapter 14, pg. 68): "The government of the Padres...is marvelous.

The Padres have everything, the people nothing. It's a masterpiece of reason and justice." The author viewed the Church as "exercis[ing] religious authority but not religion" (Candide, "Religion", pg. 12); in other words, the Church only cares for personal gain or wealth, even at the expense of others. This truth is expressed by Brother Giroflee (Candide, Chapter 24, pg. 102), who sums up the author's point of view: "Jealousy, discord, and rage fill the monastery. [...] With a few bad sermons I bring in some money. [...] But when I return to the monastery at night, I am ready to smash my head against the walls of the dormitory – and all the brothers feel the same." Among the other Church activities Voltaire ridicules or exaggerates in order to show their hypocritical nature are the superstitious and brutal auto-da-fes and the homosexuality of some Jesuits, whose Order adamantly denounced it as a terrible sin.

However, in criticizing the clergy, Voltaire attacked Catholics and Protestants without distinction, believing them both to be corrupt and impractical. Although there is only one such example for a Protestant minister in Candide, it clearly reveals the hypocrisy of the clergy. After escaping from a

battle between Bulgars and Abares, Candide reaches a Protestant orator who has just finished talking about the importance of charity to an assembly. After Candide tells the orator that he isn't sure whether the Pope is the Antichrist, but that he needs bread, the minister angrily refuses and tells him to "never show your face here again." In the meantime, his wife drops — on Candide's head (Candide, Chapter 3, pg. 46-47). Voltaire clearly structured the passage to be especially ironic. The orator represented the Christian theologians who lectured and debated on charity and doctrine while ignoring the real problems of poverty and disease.

Perhaps the most intriguing satirical religious comments in Candide refer to non-Christians – most importantly, to Jews and Muslims. In the Dictionary of Philosophy, Voltaire called Jews "the most abominable people in the world" and Muslims "tyrants over women and enemies of the arts." This attitude is reflected in Candide. Don Issachar, Cunegonde's master, is described as a "hot-tempered...Jew...who had a passionate taste for women" (Candide, Chapter 8, pg. 56-57). Later on, Candide, although "having saved many diamonds [from El Dorado]...was so cheated by the Jews that he soon found himself with nothing more than his little farm" (Candide, Chapter 30, pg. 116).

Similarly, Voltaire includes an ironic passage in which a faction of one of the sons of Emperor Muley Ismael kills the pirates that abducted the old woman (Candide, Chapter 11, pg. 62): "Scenes like this were occurring...without anyone failing to observe the five daily prayers prescribed by Mohammed." Later on, a "pious and compassionate" imam convinces the Janissaries to

merely cut off a buttock from each of the women and eat it, “ pleas[ing] heaven with such a charitable deed” (Candide, Chapter 12, pg. 64). Apart from showing that the Turks valued military duty over life, the description of the imam is dripping with satire. Voltaire also ridicules the punishments given by Muslim cadis.

As is clear, Candide shows the hypocrisy of religious institutions and officials through exaggerations and satire. Voltaire even contrasts the corrupt religions of the Old World with the simple, thankful religion of the natives of El Dorado. However, Voltaire did not criticize devout believers, such as the Anabaptists. Rather, he set out to purify European society of its flaws through respectable means. Even today, his writings and treatises are considered the pinnacle of the Enlightenment and an influential cause for the French Revolution.

** References based on the Bedford Books edition of Candide, including Introduction by Gordon/Daniel.