

The French Philosophes - 'Ecrasez l'infame'

In France, where heresy suffered more abuse under the Church than in England, freethinkers tended to be both more secretive and more bitterly anticlerical. In the 18th century, deists and atheists known as "Philosophes" championed science and democracy and challenged the church more and more openly.

A century after Montaigne died, Pierre Bayle (1647-1706) laid the foundation of French freethought by publishing his *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, a series of short biographies from both ancient and recent history. A convert from Catholicism, Bayle was apparently a sincere Calvinist, but he was also a fideist skeptic like Montaigne. For that reason, Bayle strongly criticized religious intolerance. He argued that because Christianity was not supported by reason, each individual should be allowed to follow his own conscience. Bayle published his latitudinarian work from relative safety in Holland. The Dictionary was very popular and remains fun to read today.

Bayle ridiculed the idea that morality requires the support of religion. He listed examples from antiquity of virtuous, peaceable atheists, contrasted with religious societies which were violent and vicious. Bayle shocked his contemporaries by contending that a society of atheism was possible and even preferable to a society of superstition. Other writers called this "Bayle's paradox".

Jean Meslier (1664-1729), an obscure country priest, was a secret atheist who wrote bitterly about the false church which had quashed his attempts to stand up for the peasants of his parish against their oppressive manor lord. To avenge himself and make amends to his parishioners for his own religious hypocrisy, Meslier prepared a manuscript denouncing all religions as human inventions intended to give power to priests. He also advocated replacing the monarchy with a socialistic system in which wealth would be shared as equally as possible. After Meslier died, copies of his manuscript were passed around by the growing community of freethinkers in France. Several also used his name to cover their own ideas. Voltaire, Sylvain Maréchal, and Baron d'Holbach all wrote books they claimed were by Meslier.

Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle (1657-1757) has been called the first Philosophe. His early fame rested on his book, *Dialogue on the Plurality of Worlds*, which made the religions of our world seem petty by comparison with thousands of other inhabited worlds. The book popularized both Copernican astronomy and Cartesian physics, but unfortunately it was published only a year before Newton's

Principia. Fontenelle criticized Newton's ideas because they required interactions at a distance, namely gravity. This seemed to be a return to magical explanations. Fontenelle also wrote *On the Origin of Fables*, exposing the false origins of primitive religions, and by implication, of Christianity as well.

In 1721 an anonymous satire of French Society, *Persian Letters*, appeared in Paris. The author was Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu (1689-1755), President of the Parliament of Bordeaux. The immense popularity of *Letters* soon made Montesquieu a leading member of the growing circle of Philosophes. Montesquieu turned to political science and after studying the governments of many European states, especially England, he published *The Spirit of Laws* in 1748. The revolutionary constitutions of both America and France were indebted to Montesquieu for his ideas on the rule of law over all, even the monarch or executive, and the separation of power between legislative, executive, and judicial branches. Montesquieu held that each country had a natural form of government and that monarchy and aristocracy was right for France.

The man most responsible for making infidelity fashionable in France was Francois Marie Arouet, better known as Voltaire (1694-1778). The most famous French playwright of his day, Voltaire wrote more than 50 plays. He finished his first play while spending 11 months in the Bastille in 1717 for ridiculing the government. Much like Erasmus two centuries earlier, Voltaire was largely protected from prosecution by his celebrity status and by his ingratiating flattery and teasing of monarchs and aristocrats. Voltaire spent three years in England where he was impressed by the relative freedom of religion, the science of Newton, the philosophy of John Locke, and the 'natural religion' of the English deists. His *Letters Concerning the English Nation* was condemned as indirectly critical of the French government, and Voltaire fled to Lorraine, where for fifteen years he lived as the guest and lover of the intelligent Marquise de Chatelet. She collaborated on some of his most important work, and wrote her own biography of Newton.

After the death of his mistress in 1749, Voltaire accepted an invitation to the court of Frederick the Great, the freethinker King of Prussia. But Voltaire found Frederick to be an intellectual tyrant and after three years left for Switzerland, where he eventually settled with his niece on an estate called Ferney on the French border. There he worked on his *Philosophical Dictionary* and a grand history called *Essay on the Manners and Spirit of Nations*. Voltaire built a model village at Ferney, dedicated to the benefit and education of his peasant tenants.

The tragic Lisbon earthquake of 1755 marked a major turning point in Voltaire's

work. The judgement of some churchmen that it was God's will, and the doctrine of Leibniz and Shaftesbury that this is the best of all possible worlds, inspired Voltaire's greatest book, the bitter satire *Candide*. At about the same time, Voltaire was outraged by the disgusting prosecution of two Protestant families accused of murdering their children to prevent their conversion to Catholicism. Jean Calas had already been tortured and executed, but after several years of making the French courts look ridiculous, Voltaire cleared his name. He also secured the reversal of the conviction of the Sirven family. For the remainder of his life, Voltaire campaigned vigorously against the abuses of the Church, using his famous battle cry, 'Ecrasez l'infame' (crush the evil superstition). But he remained a sincere believer in a deistic God and quarreled with his atheist friends. Voltaire made a triumphant return to Paris just before his death. Julien Offray de La Mettrie (1709-1751) was a physician whose army experience and his studies of anatomy under the famous Boerhaave of Leyden convinced him that the mind is entirely dependent on the brain. Descartes had already deduced that animals were automatons without souls, and La Mettrie extended that to humans in his notorious book, *Man a Machine*. The reckless La Mettrie made no attempt to disguise his heresies, unlike most other Philosophes. Diderot and Voltaire, who needed allies in the government, both denounced La Mettrie, although as Diderot progressed from deism to atheism he later accepted many of La Mettrie's ideas. La Mettrie fled to the safety of Frederick the Great's new Academy of Science, where he wrote Epicurean tracts on the harmfulness of guilt.

Etienne Bonnot, Abbe de Condillac (1715-1780), John Locke's most devoted disciple in France, undertook to become 'the Newton of Psychology' by investigating the implications of sensationalism. Among other innovations, Condillac advanced the theory that language is the basis of thought. Condillac formed a bridge between Locke and the educational and penal reforms proposed by Helvetius and later the Utilitarians. The term 'Abbe' refers to his education in a seminary, but Condillac, a close friend of Diderot and d'Alembert, was firmly in the Philosophe camp.

At the middle of the century, the Philosophe movement was invigorated by the production of *L'Encyclopedie, ou Dictionnaire raisonne des sciences, des arts et des metiers*, edited in 17 volumes by Denis Diderot (1713-1784), and Jean Le Rond d'Alembert (1717-1783). The work began as a translation of an English encyclopedia of Ephraim Chambers, but it soon blossomed into a much larger work, borrowing heavily from Bayle, and with many articles on mechanical arts by Diderot, himself the son of a master cutler. Many of the best scientists and

scholars of France contributed. The most helpful to Diderot was the Chevalier de Jaucourt, a noble philosophe with connections to the radical pantheists of Holland. Diderot called him 'The Mill', for grinding out articles when no other author could be found.

The specialty of D'Alembert was mathematics; indeed, he was considered a genius. He was the product of a liaison between an artillery officer and a nun notorious for her paramours; she abandoned him on the steps of a church. D'Alembert's membership in all the major scientific societies of Europe brought a prestige to *L'Encyclopedie* which Diderot lacked. But he continued to live with his beloved stepmother in a poor section of Paris, long after he became famous. D'Alembert's introduction to the first volume of *L'Encyclopedie*, called *Discours Preliminaire*, masterfully sketches the history of ideas, with a liberal slant of course, and heavy praise of Bacon, Montesquieu, and Voltaire. It was D'Alembert who persuaded Voltaire to contribute some articles. After Voltaire introduced him to some Calvinist minister friends from Geneva, D'Alembert wrote an article praising them for being in effect 'Socinians'. They were outraged, and the furor over the article helped bring about the suppression of *L'Encyclopedie*.

L'Encyclopedie was not overt freethought propaganda, but it was easy to read between the lines for criticism of superstition and bigotry. The church attempted from the first to censure the work, but thousands of wealthy Frenchmen had subscribed, it was major employment for the printers of Paris, and it was the pride of France. It also helped that the government censor, Malesherbes, sympathized with the philosophes. So it was not until 1759, after the annual publication of seven volumes, that the remaining work was suppressed. Not one subscriber asked for a refund. D'Alembert bowed out, but Diderot and Jaucourt slaved on in pretended secrecy, with the manuscripts hidden at Malesherbes' house, until the last ten volumes were published in 1765.

His great work done, Diderot visited Catherine the Great of Russia. Catherine corresponded with many liberal reformers and was attempting to apply their ideas to Russia until the French Revolution frightened her. Catherine bought Diderot's library but left it with him until he died. She acquired Voltaire's in the same manner.

As a young man, Diderot had defended providential deism against atheistic materialism, but in his maturity his views changed. Diderot often cited examples from biology, especially from the *Histoire Naturelle* of the great Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon (1707-1788), himself considered a philosophe although he conformed meticulously to the rituals of the church. Buffon was the leading

proponent of spontaneous generation, and developed a theory that as the earth cooled, new kinds of life inherent to matter at each temperature were generated. Other planets with the same temperature would have exactly the same kinds of life. In this way, Buffon explained why different fossils were found in rocks from different time periods. Interestingly, churchmen opposed, and philosophes such as Diderot supported, this non-miraculous explanation of how organisms originate. Buffon was later proven mistaken, but the argument over spontaneous generation has been resurrected with the theory of the chemical evolution of the first living organisms.

One reason for the suppression of *L'Encyclopedie* in 1759 was the uproar over the publication the year before of *L'Esprie*, by Claude Adrien Helvetius (1715-1771). Helvetius was the third generation of a family of physicians to the royal family. *L'Esprie* took the sensationalist theories of Locke and Condillac another step by applying them to a scheme for a perfect society. Assuming that people act totally in their own self-interest and that every person is a product of his environment, Helvetius designed a system of education, rewards, and punishments to guarantee that self-interest and the good of society were identical. Helvetius argued that religion, which attempts to teach virtue for its own sake, would never produce a perfect society.

Although Helvetius was not a contributor to *L'Encyclopedie*, the public associated him with his fellow philosophes, who often met at his grand estate. It did not help that Diderot criticized Helvetius; times were bad and France needed scapegoats. *L'Esprie* was burned by the public hangman; *L'Encyclopedie* lost its royal privilege.

Another center of Philosophe socializing was the salon of Paul Thiry, Baron d'Holbach (1723-1789), a wealthy German immigrant who was called the 'Maitre d'Hotel de la Philosophie'. The arguments of Diderot converted D'Holbach into the most dogmatic of atheists. D'Holbach published most of his work anonymously, even his articles on geology in *L'Encyclopedie*. His most famous work, *Le Systeme de la Nature*, was a pedantic defense of atheism.

Most of the Philosophes were not democrats. They came from the nobility or the wealthy middle class, and distrusted 'the People', who could be stirred up by religious demagogues into savage mobs. When they talked of overthrowing the "Ancien Regime", they were referring to the oppressive alliance of the church with an ignorant and selfish form of aristocracy, not monarchy itself. Although they believed that education could enlighten anyone, they doubted that the common worker would ever have leisure for good education.

Unlike Bayle, many Philosophes felt that superstitious religion was necessary to enforce morality among the common people. Philosophy and natural religion was only for the enlightened few. They traced this doctrine of "double truth" back to Pomponazzi and even to ancient Romans such as Cicero. Voltaire had a church built for the tenants of Ferney.

Voltaire and his friends cultivated kings and other powerful nobility, hoping to show them how to rule for the good of the people. Although Philosophie literature was forbidden and censured as blasphemous, it was tolerated in anonymous and underground form, because the Philosophes controlled much of public opinion and the nobility needed their support.

One politically influential philosophe, Jacques Turgot, was appointed Comptroller General in 1774 by the new king, Louis XVI. With charge over economic policy, Turgot attempted reforms influenced by his allies, the 'Physiocrats', who were attempting to find economic and moral laws in harmony with natural law. Founded by Francois Quesnay, a court physician, the physiocratic school held that only farm produce contributed to a nation's true wealth. Turgot attempted to establish a freer grain market by reducing the privileges of the nobility, but his enemies prevailed on the king to dismiss him in 1776. Possibly if the king had backed Turgot, the Revolution could have been avoided.

As the French Revolution gained momentum, some of the younger Philosophes supported democratic reforms. Marie Jean Antoine Nicholas de Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet (1743-1794), was a mathematician disciple of D'Alembert who had served under Turgot as overseer of the mint. Condorcet's life work was to apply the 'calculus of probability' to moral and political science.

At the beginning of the Revolution, Condorcet, alongside his friend Thomas Paine, served in the Legislative Assembly and wrote most of the draft Constitution. Condorcet included a complicated democratic machinery for determining majority consent, rather inappropriate for the emergencies of the day. The draft was rejected by the radical Jacobin party. Condorcet and Paine tried to prevent the execution of King Louis XVI.

After the Jacobins expelled the moderate Girondists from the Convention, Condorcet was also targeted. Robespierre hated him for being a Philosophe and enemy of his idol, Rousseau, and for Condorcet's noble title. Meanwhile the rewritten Constitution, including the famous statement of the "Rights of Man", contained most of Condorcet's ideas. While in hiding, Condorcet wrote a book asserting that human nature could be perfected by education and that history shows a steady progress toward enlightened civilization. Condorcet was arrested

and died in prison, an apparent suicide.

Another young philosophe, Sylvain Marechal (1750-1803), attempted to set up a state religion of atheism in revolutionary France. Priests would be replaced by 'hommes sans Dieu' (H.S.D.) who would perform marriages and rites in the name of Reason and Virtue. Marechal's most famous book was his *Dictionary of Ancient and Modern Atheists*.

The revolutionary government also attempted to replace the Catholic Church with a new religion based on science. The people were instructed to worship the God of Reason. The influence here was more from Rousseau than from the philosophes. When Napoleon took over the revolution, he brought back the Catholic state religion.