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Voltaire's Critique of Organized Religion in *Candide*

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Voltaire expressed his contempt towards organized religion and its disregard for human suffering in his famous satirical novel, *Candide*. He targeted Leibnitz's teaching that "all is for the best" by creating characters that fall into miserable situations and face both internal and external strife by attempting to fit it into the church's world view.¹ The only place free from Voltaire's critiques was a made up New World town known as El Dorado where the only religion is an appreciation for life and nature.² El Dorado represented Voltaire's perfect society and provided insight into how he would have preferred society in Europe to be structured. Even though efforts to reform the Church were brought forward through Calvinism and the Council of Trent, Voltaire shows disdain for the major principles of organized religion in the 18th century. Although, like the Council of Trent, John Calvin's beliefs carried the principle that all is for the best, which did align with Voltaire's criticisms by pointing out that the Church should serve society rather than hold themselves in a dignified higher place and criticized the strict adherence to sacraments and Christian ritual.³

Through his major characters, Pangloss and Candide, Voltaire ridiculed the insistent belief that misfortunes in life hold one's best interest in the end. The stories told throughout the

¹ Voltaire, *Candide, or Optimism*, trans. by John Butt (London: Penguin Books, 1947), 10.

² Ibid, 73-84.

³ John Calvin, "On the Necessity of Reforming the Church," *Documents in World History*, CD-ROM, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2004), 310-311.

novel were laced with human suffering, yet the typical response that Pangloss and Candide gave was that “this is the best of all possible worlds.”⁴ An example of this was when Pangloss contracted a venereal disease and justified it by stating that if Columbus had not caught it when he discovered the New World, then other goods such as chocolate and cochineal would not have come to the Old World so thus it is for the best. This statement implies that everything has sufficient reason as it happens as a part of God’s plan and will eventually turn out in their favor or the world’s favor. Leibnitz’s belief was echoed in John Calvin’s letter to the Holy Roman Emperor known as “On the Necessity of Reforming the Church.” He argued that those working with the people who submit to Christianity “shall have a sure passage to a better life” in regards to salvation.⁵ This promise of salvation by faith was a reformed version of the Catholic church’s idea of salvation through sacraments and rituals, however Voltaire would have disagreed with it as it would entitle people to the best life if they had faith. Calvin also argued that Christ will preserve the church “in the way which to him seems good” which implies that choices that the church would take would be for the best and is something Voltaire would again disagree with as he painted the clergy as corrupt and abusive of their power in his novel.⁶

The Calvinist thought did reflect the idea that there were problems in the Catholic Church that did need to be addressed and that they were not infallible. John Calvin made a plea to the Holy Roman Emperor that “divine worship being corrupted by so many false opinions and perverted by so many impious and foul superstitions”.⁷ Calvin argued that since religious figures are models of Christianity, they should not support ideas that do not align with Christian beliefs and called upon the Catholic Church to reform its abuses of power. Voltaire also critiqued

⁴ Voltaire, 37

⁵ Calvin, 312.

⁶ Ibid, 311.

⁷ Calvin, 311.

religious figures for their corruption and their abuses of power by showing them partaking in grotesque acts. While *Candide* was in Holland, he begged for food from a Protestant minister who was preaching that people should participate in charity. The minister responded by asking *Candide* to declare if he thought the Pope was the antichrist and upon *Candide* not saying no, he rudely refused to follow in the principle of charity.⁸ Another instance shows that religious figures were not strictly bound to uphold a moral standard when Cunegonde's jewels were stolen by a Franciscan friar without any consequences.⁹ While the Council of Trent also pointed out some of these problems with corrupt religious figures, they still commanded holding religious figures in reverence and so Voltaire would have agreed even more with the Calvinist critique.¹⁰

The Council of Trent also insisted that religious figures were devoted to God and represented a model for Christianity, and would thus never disobey a sacrament or Christian law. One of the expectations for religious figures was that they do not marry or participate in adultery, but Voltaire would have been more likely to reject this idea as the old woman was shown to be an illegitimate daughter of the Pope.¹¹ When discussing his venereal disease, Pangloss mentioned a lineage filled with religious figures which shows that expectations of purity by religious figures were not fulfilled. Calvin, on the other hand, argued that performing sacraments such as Baptism, Communion and the Holy Supper in hopes of salvation were "frivolous and insignificant."¹² When *Candide* visited El Dorado, he asked about the form of prayer that the people offer to God. The king replied that they never asked God for anything, yet they were

⁸ Voltaire, 27.

⁹ *Ibid*, 47.

¹⁰ Council of Trent, "The Canons and Decrees of The Council of Trent," *Documents in World History*, 317.

¹¹ Council of Trent, 317; Voltaire, 49.

¹² Calvin, 311.

thankful for what was given to them and to Voltaire this was seen as more logical than rules and sacraments.¹³

As Voltaire's novel, *Candide*, is a satirical piece on European society and human suffering, much of what was said by characters such as Pangloss and Candide made fun of ideals held by the Church while the land of El Dorado represented a paradise of reason.¹⁴ Through his writing, it is clear that Voltaire did not favor organized religion and viewed it as hypocritical. However, Calvinism made appeals toward reforming the clerical hierarchy and Christian rituals that Voltaire would have found more favorable to Catholicism at the time.

About the author

Fatima Khan is a recent graduate from Wesleyan College with a double major in Biology and International Relations. Her research interests are in exploring the intersection between historical and social identities and delivery of healthcare.

¹³ Voltaire, 79.

¹⁴ Ibid, 10.