

Treatise of the Three Impostors

1719

*Most of the major philosophers of the seventeenth century were devout Christians. Many of the people who read them were not. When we speak of the populist origins of the Enlightenment, we inevitably speak about the clandestine and the heretical, about the deist, the pantheist, and even the atheist. As we saw in the discussion of the counterfeit publisher "Pierre Marteau" (see pages 37–43), hundreds of anonymous writers, publishers, and readers took the ideas of Descartes or Spinoza or Hobbes and ran with them. Some ran headlong into disbelief and a mocking scorn for the clergy. None ran any faster than the men who wrote *Traité des trois imposteurs* (*Treatise of the Three Impostors*). For centuries, their identities were hidden, but today we believe we know who they are.*

*Jean Rousset de Missy was the leading Freemason of Amsterdam and a leader of the revolution there in 1747–48 (see page 35). His letters, buried in manuscripts at the university library in Leiden, reveal that in his youth he and his friend Charles Levier, a bookseller, were involved in creating *Treatise of the Three Impostors*. The actual author, or compiler, was probably Jan Vroese, a lawyer in the service of the Dutch government, about whom very little is known. One thing is clear: These men hated organized religion, did not believe in God, and thought that Jesus, Moses, and Muhammad were the greatest impostors of all time. They believed that people should abandon their belief in the devil, sin, heaven, and hell and instead find a natural religion that suits them. Circulating such ideas would have gotten them into deep trouble with the authorities, both secular and religious. The importance of this work lies in its origins: obscure, educated men who, through their reading of the great seventeenth-century philosophers, came up with their own, sometimes shocking ideas. This selection illustrates how original and outrageous those ideas could be.*

Abraham Anderson, ed., *The Treatise of the Three Impostors and the Problem of Enlightenment: A New Translation of the *Traité des trois imposteurs* (1777 Edition)* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), pp. 3–9, 23–25, 33, 39–40. The author has altered the 1997 translation in places.

CHAPTER I

Of God

§ I

Although it matters to all men to know the truth, there are nevertheless very few who enjoy this advantage; some are incapable of searching it out by themselves, & others do not want to give themselves the trouble. One should therefore not be astonished that the world is filled with vain & ridiculous opinions; nothing is better able to give them currency than ignorance; it is the only source of the false ideas which men have of the Divinity, the Soul, Spirits, & of almost all the other objects which compose Religion. Custom has prevailed, men content themselves with the prejudices of birth, & rely in the most essential things on interested persons who make it a law to themselves stubbornly to uphold received opinions, & who dare not destroy them for fear of destroying themselves.

§ II

What renders the evil without remedy, is that after having established the false ideas men have of God, they omit nothing to engage the people to believe them, without permitting the people to examine them; on the contrary, they give the people an aversion for Philosophers or the truly Learned, for fear that the reason which they teach should make the people know the errors in which it is sunk. The partisans of these absurdities have succeeded so well that it is dangerous to combat them. It matters too much to these impostors that the people be ignorant, to suffer that they be disabused. Thus one is constrained to disguise the truth, or to sacrifice oneself to the rage of the falsely Learned, or to base & interested souls.

§ III

If the people could understand into what an abyss ignorance throws them, they would soon shake off the yoke of unworthy leaders, for it is impossible to let reason act without its discovering the truth.

These impostors have sensed this so well, that to prevent the good effects which it would infallibly produce, they have had the idea of painting it to us as a monster which is not capable of inspiring any good sentiment, & although they blame in a general way those who are unreasonable, they would nevertheless be much annoyed if the truth were listened to. Thus one sees these sworn enemies to good

sense falling into continual contradictions; & it is difficult to know what they claim. If it is true that right reason is the only light which people should follow, & if the people are not . . . incapable of reasoning . . . it is necessary that those who seek to instruct the people apply themselves to rectifying false reasonings, & to destroying prejudices; then we will see eyes gradually opening & minds convinced of this truth, that God is not at all what is ordinarily imagined.

§ IV

To accomplish this, there is need neither for high speculations, nor to penetrate far into the secrets of nature. One needs only a little good sense to judge that God is neither angry nor jealous; that justice & mercy are false titles which are attributed to him; & that what the Prophets & Apostles have said of him teaches us neither his nature nor his essence.

In fact, to speak without disguise & to say the thing as it is, must one not agree that these teachers were neither more able nor better instructed than the rest of men; that far from it, what they said on the subject of God is so gross that one must be altogether vulgar* to believe it? Although the thing is evident enough in itself, we shall make it even more sensible,† by examining this question: If there is any likelihood that the Prophets & Apostles were otherwise formed than men?

§ V

Everyone agrees that with respect to birth & the ordinary functions of life, they had nothing to distinguish them from the rest of men; they were engendered by men, they were born of women, & they conserved their lives in the same fashion as we. As for the mind, some would have it that God animated that of the Prophets far more than of other men, that he communicated himself to them in a quite particular fashion: this is believed with as good faith as if the thing were proved; & without considering that all men resemble each other & that they all have the same origin, it is claimed that these men were of an extraordinary temper; & chosen by the Divinity to announce his oracles. Now, besides the fact that they had neither more wit than the vulgar, nor a more perfect understanding, what does one see in their writings which obliges us to adopt so high an opinion of them? The greater part of the things they have said is so obscure that one understands none of it, &

*illiterate and uneducated

†comprehensible

in such poor order that it is easy to perceive that they did not understand themselves, & that they were but ignorant scoundrels. What gave occasion for the opinion that has been conceived of them was their hardihood* in boasting that they got immediately from God whatever they announced to the people; a belief both absurd & ridiculous, since they admit themselves that God spoke to them only in dreams. There is nothing more natural to man than dreams, in consequence a man must be quite impudent, quite vain, & quite mad to say that God speaks to him by this means, & he who puts his faith in it must be very credulous & very mad to take dreams for divine oracles. . . .

§ VI

Let us examine a little the idea which the Prophets have had of God. If we are to believe them, God is a purely corporeal Being; Micah sees him seated; Daniel, clothed in white & in the form of an old man; Ezekiel sees him as a fire, so much for the Old Testament. As for the New, the Disciples of Jesus Christ imagine they see him in the form of a dove, the Apostles as tongues of fire, & finally St. Paul as a light which dazzles & blinds him. Then as to the contradiction between their opinions, Samuel believed that God never repented of what he had resolved to do; on the contrary Jeremiah tells us that God repents of the counsels he has taken. Joel teaches us that he repents only of the evil he has done to men: Jeremiah says that he does not repent it. Genesis teaches us that man is the master of sin, & that it depends upon him alone to do right, while St. Paul assures us that men have no empire over concupiscence[†] without a quite particular grace of God, &c. Such are the false & contradictory ideas which those pretenders to inspiration give us of God, & such as it is desired we should have, without considering that these ideas represent the Divinity to us as a sensible being, material & subject to all the human passions. Nevertheless they come along afterwards & tell us that God has nothing in common with matter, & that he is a Being incomprehensible to us. I should very much like to know how all that can be made to agree, if it is just to believe such visible & unreasonable contradictions, & if finally one should rely on the testimony of men gross enough to imagine, despite the sermons of Moses, that a Calf was their God![‡] But

*boldness

†sexual desire, lust

‡a reference to the event in the Old Testament where Moses's followers abandon the Hebrew God to worship a golden calf

without pausing over the dreamings of a people raised in servitude & in absurdity, let us agree that ignorance has produced the belief in all the impostures & errors which reign among us at the present day.

CHAPTER II

Of the Reasons Which Have Led Men to Imagine an Invisible Being Which Is Commonly Called God

§ I

Those who are ignorant of physical causes have a natural fear which proceeds from uneasiness & from the doubt they are in, if there exists a Being or a power which has the capacity to harm them or to preserve them. Thence the penchant which they have to feign* invisible causes, which are only the Phantoms of their imagination, which they invoke in adversity & which they praise in prosperity. They make themselves Gods out of these in the end, & this chimerical fear of invisible powers is the source of the Religions which each forms after his own fashion. Those to whom it mattered that the people be contained & arrested by such dreamings have fostered this seed of religion, have made a law of it, & have finally reduced the peoples by the terrors of the future, to obeying blindly.

§ II

The source of the Gods being found, men have believed that they resembled themselves, & that like them they did all things for some end. Thus they say & believe unanimously that God has done nothing but for man, & reciprocally that man is made for God alone. This prejudice is general, & when one reflects on the influence which it must necessarily have had on the morals & opinions of men, one sees clearly that it is thence that they have found occasion to form the false ideas of good & of evil, of merit & of demerit, of praise & of shame, of order & of confusion, of beauty & of deformity, & of the other similar things.

§ III

Everyone should agree that all men are in profound ignorance at birth, & that the only thing which is natural to them, is to seek what is

*pretend or invent

useful & profitable to them: thence it comes, 1°. that they think that it is enough in order to be free to feel within oneself that one can will & wish without troubling oneself in the least about the causes which dispose us to will & to wish, because one does not know them. 2°. Since men do nothing but for the sake of an end which they prefer to every other, their only aim is to know the final causes of their actions, & they imagine that after that they have no more subject for doubt, & since they find in themselves & outside themselves several means of arriving at what they propose to themselves, seeing that they have, for example, eyes for seeing, ears for hearing, a sun to light them, &c., they have concluded that there is nothing in nature which is not made for them, & which they cannot enjoy & use as they wish; but since they know that it was not they who have made all these things, they thought they were justified in imagining a supreme being the author of all, in a word, they thought that everything that exists was the work of one or several Divinities. On the other hand, the nature of the Gods which men have acknowledged being unknown to them, they judged of them by themselves, imagining that they were susceptible of the same passions as they; & since the inclinations of men are different, each rendered to his Divinity a cult according to his humor, with the view of attracting his blessings & of thereby making the whole of nature serve his own desires.

§ IV

It is in this manner that prejudice transformed itself into superstition; it rooted itself so thoroughly that the crudest people believed themselves capable of penetrating into final causes, as if they had an entire knowledge of them. Thus instead of showing that Nature does nothing in vain, they believed that God & nature thought after the fashion of men. Experience having made known that an infinite number of calamities trouble the sweetnesses of life like storms, earthquakes, diseases, hunger, thirst, &c. they attributed all these evils to celestial anger, they believed the Divinity irritated against the offenses of men, who have not been able to free their brains of such a chimera, nor disabuse themselves of these prejudices by the daily examples which prove to them that goods & evils have in all times been common to the good & the wicked. This error was due to the fact that it was easier for them to remain in their natural ignorance than to abolish a prejudice received for so many centuries & to establish something probable.

§ V

This prejudice led them to another, which is to believe that the judgments of God were incomprehensible, & that for this reason the knowledge of the truth was beyond the strength of the human mind: an error which we would still be in, if mathematics, physics & some other sciences had not destroyed it.

§ VI

There is no need for long speeches to show that nature never proposes any end to itself, & that all final causes are but human fictions. It suffices to prove that this doctrine removes from God the perfections that are attributed to him. That is what we are going to show.

If God acts for an end, whether for himself, or for some other, he desires what he does not have, & one will have to agree that there is a time at which God not having the object for which he acts, he wished to have it: which is to make an indigent God. But not to omit any of what can support the reasoning of those who hold the contrary opinion; let us suppose, for example, that a stone which breaks off a building, falls on a person & kills him, it must be, say our ignorant ones, that this stone fell by design to kill this person; but this can only have happened because God willed it. If one replies to them that it was the wind which caused this fall at the time that this poor unhappy fellow was passing, they will ask you in the first place, why he was passing precisely at the moment that the wind disturbed the stone. Answer them that he was going to dine with one of his friends who had invited him, they will wish to know why his friend had rather invited him at that time than at another; they will thus put you an infinity of bizarre questions to rise from cause to cause & to make you admit that the will of God alone, which is the refuge of the ignorant, is the first cause of the fall of this stone. In the same way when they see the structure of the human body, they fall into admiration; & because they do not know the causes of the effects which seem to them so marvelous, they conclude that it is a supernatural effect, in which the causes that are known to us can have no part. Thence it comes that he who wants to examine to the bottom the works of creation, & to penetrate like a true philosopher into their natural causes without enslaving himself to the prejudices formed by ignorance, passes for an infidel, or is soon decried by the malice of those whom the vulgar recognize as the interpreters of nature & of the Gods: These mercenary souls know very

well that the ignorance which holds the people in wonderment, is what gives them subsistence & conserves their credit. . . .

CHAPTER III . . .

§ II

The fear which made the Gods also made Religion, & ever since men have got it into their heads that there were invisible Angels which were the cause of their good or bad fortune, they have renounced good sense & reason, & they have taken their chimeras for so many Divinities which were in charge of their conduct. Having thus forged themselves Gods they wanted to know what their nature was, & imagining that they ought to be of the same substance as the soul, which they believe resembles the phantoms which appear in the mirror or during sleep; they believed that their Gods were real substances; but so tenuous & so subtle that to distinguish them from Bodies they named them *Spirits*, although these bodies & these spirits are in effect but the same thing, & differ only as more from less, since to be *Spirit* or *incorporeal*, is something incomprehensible. The reason is that every Spirit has a shape which is proper to it, & is enclosed in some place; that is to say, it has its limits, & in consequence it is a body however subtle one supposes it.¹

§ III

The Ignorant that is to say, the greater part of men, having fixed in this way the nature of the substance of their Gods, tried also to penetrate by what means these invisible Angels produced their effects; but being unable to achieve this, because of their ignorance, they believed in their conjectures; judging blindly of the future by the past: as if one could reasonably conclude from the fact that a thing happened once in such & such a manner, that it will happen, or that it should always happen in the same manner; above all when the circumstances & all the causes which necessarily influence events & human actions, & which determine their nature & actuality, are different. Thus they envisaged the past & augured well or ill from it for the future, according as the same enterprise had formerly succeeded well or badly. . . .

¹See Hobbes *Leviathan de homine*. Cap. 12 & pag. 56, 57, 58.

§ IV

The empire of invisible Powers being established in this way, men at first revered them only as their Sovereigns; that is to say, by marks of submission & of respect, such as are presents, prayers, &c. I say, at first, for nature does not teach us to use bloody Sacrifices in this affair: They were only instituted for the subsistence of the Sacrificers & Ministers destined for the service of these imaginary Gods.

§ V

This germ of Religion (I mean hope & fear) seconded by the different passions & opinions of men, produced that great number of bizarre beliefs which are the causes of so many evils & of so many revolutions which happen in States.

The honors & the great revenues which have been attached to the Priesthood, or to the Ministries of the Gods, have flattered the ambition & the avarice of those cunning men who have known how to profit from the stupidity of the Peoples; the latter have fallen so thoroughly into their snares that they have insensibly made it a habit for themselves to revere the lie & to hate the truth.

VI

The lie being established, & the ambitious taken with the sweetness of being raised above their fellows, they attempted to gain reputation by feigning to be the friends of the invisible Gods that the vulgar feared. The better to succeed in this each one painted them in his own fashion & took the liberty of multiplying them to the point that one encountered them with every step one took.

§ VII

The formless matter of the world was called the God *Chaos*. In the same way they made a God of the *Sky*, of the *Earth*, of the *Sea*, of *Fire*, of the *Winds* & of the *Planets*. They did the same honor to men & to women; birds, reptiles, the crocodile, the calf, the dog, the lamb, the serpent & the pig, in a word all sorts of animals & plants were worshipped. Every river, every spring bore the name of a God, every house had its own, every man had his genius. In short all was filled, as much above as below the earth with Gods, Spirits, Shadows & Demons. It was still not enough to feign Divinities in every imaginable

place; they would have believed they were offending *time*, the *day*, the *night*, *concord*, *love*, *peace*, *victory*, *contention*, *trust*, *honor*, *virtue*, *fever*, & *health*; they would, I say, have believed they were doing an outrage to such Divinities which they thought always ready to fall upon the heads of men; if they had not raised to them temples & altars. Next they had the idea of adoring one's *genius*, which some invoked under the name of *Muses*; others under the name of *Fortune* worshipped their own ignorance. Some sanctified their debauches under the name of *Cupid*, their anger under that of the *Furies*, their natural parts under the name of *Priapus*; in a word there was nothing to which they did not give the name of a God or of a Demon.²

§ VIII

The founders of Religions, sensing clearly that the basis of their impostures was the ignorance of the Peoples, resolved to keep them in it by the adoration of images, which they feigned that the Gods inhabited; this made fall on their Priests a rain of gold & of Benefices which were regarded as holy things, because they were destined for the use of the holy ministers, & no one had the temerity nor the audacity to pretend to them, nor even to touch them. The better to deceive the People, the Priests put themselves forward as Prophets, Diviners, Inspired persons capable of penetrating the future, they boasted of having commerce with the Gods; & as it is natural to want to know one's destiny, these impostors by no means neglected a circumstance so advantageous to their design. Some established themselves at Delos, others at Delphi* & elsewhere, where, by means of ambiguous oracles; they responded to the questions that were put to them: even the women got involved; the Romans had recourse in great calamities to the Books of the Sibyls.† The mad passed for inspired. Those who feigned that they had a familiar commerce with the dead were called Necromancers; others claimed to know the future by the flight of birds or by the entrails of beasts. In short the eyes, the hands, the face, an extraordinary object, everything seems to them of a good or bad augury, so true is it that ignorance receives whatever impression one wants, when one has found the secret of taking advantage of it.

²Hobbes ubi supra *de Homine. Cap. 12. pag. 58.*

*Delos and Delphi were sites of oracles in ancient Greece.

†female prophets of ancient Rome

§ IX

The ambitious who have always been great masters in the art of deceiving, have followed this route when they gave laws; & to oblige the People to submit itself voluntarily they have persuaded it that they had received them from a God or a Goddess.³

Whatever is the case with this multitude of Divinities, those among whom they were adored & who are called *Pagans*, had no general system of Religion. Every Republic, every State, every City & every individual had its own rites, & thought about the Divinity as it fancied. But afterwards there arose legislators trickier than the first ones, who used more studied & surer means in giving laws, cults, & ceremonies proper to nourish the fanaticism which they wanted to establish.

Among a great number, Asia has seen three born who distinguished themselves as much by their laws & the cults which they instituted, as by the idea which they gave of the Divinity, & by the manner in which they set about getting this idea accepted & rendering their laws sacred. Moses was the most ancient. Jesus Christ come after him, worked on his plan & conserving the heart of his laws, he abolished the rest. Mahomet* who appeared the last upon the scene, took from the one & from the other Religion the wherewithal to compose his own, & thereafter declared himself the enemy of both. Let us see the characters of these three legislators, let us examine their conduct, so that one can judge afterwards who are better founded, those who revere them as divine men, or those who call them tricksters & impostors.

§ X

Of Moses. The celebrated Moses the grandson of a great Magician by the report of Justin Martyr,[†] had all the advantages proper to render him what he became afterwards. Everyone knows that the Hebrews of whom he made himself the Chief, were a nation of Shepherds, whom the Pharaoh King Osiris I received into his land in consideration of the services which he had received from one of them in the time of a great famine: He gave them some lands in the East of Egypt in a country fertile in pasturages, & by consequence proper to nourish their herds; during almost two centuries they multiplied considerably, whether because being considered as strangers, they were not obliged to serve in the

³Hobbes ubi supra *de Homine. Cap. 12, pag. 58 & 59.*

*Muhammad, the prophet of the Islamic religion

[†]an early church historian and philosopher of the second century

armies, or because on account of the privileges which Osiris had accorded them, several natives of the country joined themselves to them, or finally because some bands of Arabs came to join themselves to the character of their brothers, for they were of the same race. Whatever the case, they multiplied so astonishingly, that no longer able to fit themselves in the land of Goshen, they spread through all of Egypt, & gave Pharaoh a just reason to fear that they would be capable of some dangerous enterprises in case Egypt were attacked, (as happened at the time fairly often) by the Ethiopians his inveterate enemies: Thus a reason of state obliged this Prince to take away their privileges, & to seek the means of weakening them & of enslaving them. . . .

It is with similar precautions & by always characterizing his torments as divine vengeance that Moses reigned as an absolute Despot; & to finish in the manner in which he had begun, that is to say as a trickster & an impostor, he precipitated himself into an abyss which he had caused to be dug in the middle of a solitude where he retired from time to time, under the pretext of going to confer secretly with God, so as to conciliate thereby, the respect & the submission of his subjects. In short he threw himself down this precipice prepared long in advance, so that his body would not be found & so that it would be believed that God had carried him off to render him like himself: he was not ignorant that the memory of the Patriarchs who had preceded him, was in great veneration, even though their sepulchres had been found, but this did not suffice to satisfy his ambition: he had to be revered like a God, over whom death had no hold. . . .

§ XII

Of Jesus-Christ. Jesus Christ who was ignorant neither of the maxims nor of the science of the Egyptians, gave currency to this opinion, he thought it suited his designs. Considering how much Moses had made himself famous, although he had commanded but a people of ignoramuses, he undertook to build on this foundation, & got himself followed by some imbeciles whom he persuaded that the Holy Spirit was his Father; & his Mother a Virgin: these good people, accustomed to indulge themselves in dreams & fancies, adopted his notions & believed all that he wanted, the more so because such a birth was not really anything too miraculous for them.

Being born of a Virgin by the operation of the Holy Spirit then, is no more extraordinary nor more miraculous than what the Tartars tell of their Gengiskan, of whom a Virgin was also the mother, the

Chinese say that the God Foë owed his birth to a Virgin made fecund by the rays of the sun.

This prodigy happened at a time when the Jews tired of their God, and wanted to have a visible one like the other nations. As the number of fools is infinite, Jesus Christ found Subjects everywhere; but since his extreme poverty was an invincible obstacle⁴ to his elevation, the Pharisees, sometimes his admirers, sometimes jealous of his audacity, lowered him or raised him up according to the inconstant humor of the Populace. There was rumor of his Divinity; but stripped of forces as he was, it was impossible that his design succeed: Some sick persons whom he cured, some pretended dead people whom he resuscitated brought him into fashion; but having neither money nor army, he could not fail to perish: if he had had these two instruments, he would have succeeded no less than Moses or Mahomet, or than all those who have had the ambition to raise themselves above others. If he was more unhappy, he was no less adroit, & some places in his history prove that the greatest defect of his politics was not to have provided enough for his safety. For the rest, I do not find that he took his measures less well than the two others; his law has at least become the rule of belief of the Peoples who flatter themselves that they are the wisest in the world.

§ XIII

Of the Politics of Jesus-Christ. Is there, for example, anything subtler than the reply of Jesus on the subject of the woman surprised in adultery? The Jews having asked of him if they should stone this woman, instead of replying positively to the question, which would have made him fall into the trap which his enemies held out to him, the negative being directly contrary to the law, & the affirmative convicting him of rigor & of cruelty, which would have alienated minds from him: instead, I say, of answering as an ordinary man would have, *let whoever*, he said, *of you who is without sin throw the first stone at her*. An adroit reply & one which clearly shows his presence of mind. Asked on another occasion if it was permitted to pay Caesar's tribute, & seeing the image of the Prince on the coin which was shown him, he eluded the difficulty by replying *that one had to render to Caesar what belonged to Caesar*. The difficulty consisted in this that he rendered himself guilty of the crime of Lèse-Majesté,* if he denied that

⁴Jesus Christ was of the sect of the Pharisees, that is to say, of the wretched, & these were all opposed to the Saducees who formed the sect of the rich &c. See the Talmud.

*a crime against the sovereign ruler

that was permitted, & that in saying that it had to be paid he overturned the law of Moses, which he protested he never wanted to do, at a time when he no doubt believed himself too weak to do it with impunity, for when he had made himself more famous, he overturned it almost totally: He did like those Princes who always promise to confirm the privileges of their Subjects, while their power is not yet well established, but who later on do not trouble themselves about keeping their promises. . . .

§ XIV

Such were the defeats of [Jesus] the destroyer of the ancient Law, & of the father of the new Religion, which was built on the ruins of the old, in which a disinterested mind sees nothing more divine than in the Religions which preceded it. Its founder, who was not altogether ignorant, seeing the extreme corruption of the Republic of the Jews, judged it near its end, & believed that another ought to be reborn from its ashes.

The fear of being anticipated by men more adroit than himself, made him hasten to establish himself by means opposed to those of Moses. The latter began by rendering himself terrible & formidable to the other nations; Jesus Christ on the contrary drew them to himself by the hope of the advantages of another life which one would obtain, he said, by believing in him, whereas Moses promised none but temporal goods to the followers of his law, Jesus Christ made men hope for some which would never end. The Laws of the one regarded but externals, those of the other go as far as what lies within, influence the thoughts, & take in all things a footing opposed to the Law of Moses; from which it follows that Jesus Christ believed with Aristotle that it is with Religion & with States as with all individuals which are generated & which grow corrupt; & since nothing can be made except from what has grown corrupt, no Law gives way to any other which is not entirely opposed to it. But since men find it difficult to resolve themselves to pass from one Law to another, & since the majority of minds are difficult to shake in matters of Religion, Jesus Christ, in imitation of the other innovators, had recourse to miracles which have always been the shipwreck of the ignorant, & the refuge of the adroitly ambitious.

§ XV

Christianity having been founded by this means Jesus Christ planned cleverly to profit from the errors of the politics of Moses, & to render

his new Law eternal, an enterprise which succeeded for him beyond, perhaps, his hopes. The Hebrew Prophets thought to do honor to Moses in predicting a successor who would resemble him; that is to say, a Messiah great in virtues, Powerful in goods & terrible to his enemies; but their Prophecies produced an effect altogether contrary. . . .

§ XIX

After having examined the politics & the moral teaching of Jesus Christ, in which one finds nothing as useful & as sublime as in the writings of the ancient Philosophers, let us see if the reputation which he acquired after his death is a proof of his Divinity. The People are so accustomed to unreason, that I am astonished that anyone claims the right to draw any conclusions from their conduct; experience proves to us that they always run after phantoms, & that they do not do or say anything which indicates good sense. Nevertheless it is on similar chimeras, which have at all times been in fashion, despite the efforts of the learned who have always opposed them, that belief in him has been founded. Whatever care they have taken to uproot the reigning follies, the People have laid them aside only after having been sated with them.

No matter that Moses boasted of being the interpreter of God & of proving his mission & his rights by extraordinary signs, he had but to absent himself (which he did from time to time to confer, he said, with God, & which Numa Pompilius & several other legislators similarly did); he had, I say, but to absent himself, & he found on his return nothing but the traces of the cult of the Gods which the Hebrews had seen in Egypt. No matter that he kept them for 40 years in a desert to make them lose the idea of the Gods they had laid aside, they had not yet forgotten them, they still wanted visible ones that marched ahead of them, they stubbornly adored them, whatever cruelty they were made to suffer.

Only the hatred for other nations which their leaders inspired in them by means of a pride of which the most idiotic are capable, made them insensibly lose the memory of the Gods of Egypt, & attach themselves to that of Moses, they adored him for a while with all the circumstances prescribed in the Law, but they laid him aside later to follow that of Jesus Christ, by that inconstancy which makes men run after novelty.

§ XX

The most ignorant of the Hebrews had adopted the Law of Moses; it was also people of this sort who ran after Jesus; & as the number of them is infinite, & as they are fond of each other, one should not be astonished if his new errors spread easily. It is not that novelties are not dangerous for those who embrace them, but the enthusiasm which they excite annihilates fear. Thus the Disciples of Jesus Christ all wretched as they were while following him, & all dying of hunger (as one sees from the necessity they were in one day together with their leader to pluck Ears of corn in the fields to nourish themselves), the disciples of Jesus Christ, I say, did not begin to become discouraged until they saw their Master in the hands of the executioners & incapable of giving them the goods, the power & the greatness which he had made them hope for.

After his death his disciples in despair at seeing themselves frustrated of their hopes made a virtue of necessity; banished everywhere & pursued by the Jews who wanted to treat them like their Master, they spread about in the neighboring countries, where on the report of some women they retailed his resurrection, his Divine sonship & the rest of the fables of which the Gospels are so full. . . .

§ XXI

One can judge from all that we have said that Christianity like all other Religions is no more than a crudely woven imposture, whose success & progress would astonish even its inventors if they came back to the world; but without advancing farther into a labyrinth of errors & visible contradictions of which we have spoken enough, let us say something about Mahomet, who founded a law on maxims altogether opposed to those of Jesus Christ.

§ XXII

Of Mahomet. Hardly had the Disciples of Christ extinguished the Mosaic Law, to introduce the Christian Law, than men swept along by force & by their ordinary inconstancy, followed a new legislator, who raised himself up by the same ways as Moses, he took like him the title of Prophet & Envoy of God; like him he made miracles, & knew how to profit from the passions of the people. First he found himself escorted by an ignorant populace, to which he explicated the new

Oracles of Heaven. These wretches seduced by the promises & the fables of this new Impostor, spread his renown & exalted him to the point of eclipsing that of his predecessors.

Mahomet was not a man who seemed fit to found an Empire, he excelled neither in politics nor⁵ in philosophy; he knew neither how to read nor how to write. He even had so little firmness that he would often have abandoned his enterprise if he had not been forced to stand by his wager by the skill of one of his Sectaries.* As soon as he began to raise himself up & to become famous; Corais, a powerful Arab, jealous that a nobody had the audacity to deceive the people, declared himself his enemy & crossed his enterprise; but the People persuaded that Mahomet had continual conferences with God & his Angels brought it about that he defeated his enemy; the family of Corais had the worse of it, & Mahomet seeing himself followed by an imbecile crowd which believed him a divine man, judged he had no more need of his companion: but for fear that the latter would reveal his impostures, he wanted to prevent him, & in order to do it the more surely, he loaded him with promises, & swore to him that he only wanted to become great in order to share with him his power, to which he had contributed so much. "We are arriving, he said, at the time of our elevation, we are sure of a great People which we have won over, we must now assure ourselves of it by the artifice which you have so happily imagined." At the same time he persuaded him to hide himself in the ditch of the Oracles.

This was a well from which he spoke in order to make the People believe that the voice of God declared itself for Mahomet who was in the midst of his proselytes. Tricked by the caresses of this traitor, his

⁵"Mahomet says the Count de Boulainvilliers, was ignorant of vulgar Letters: I am ready to believe it; but he was assuredly not so of all the knowledge which a great traveler can acquire with a great deal of natural intelligence, when he endeavors to employ it usefully. He was by no means ignorant in his own language; of which use, & not reading, had taught him, all the finesse & the beauties. He was not ignorant in the art of knowing how to render odious what is truly worthy of condemnation, & of painting the truth with simple & lively colors, which do not allow one to mistake it. In fact, all that he said is true, in relation to the essential dogmas of Religion; but he did not say all that is true: & it is in that alone that our Religion differs from his." He adds below "that Mahomet was neither gross, nor barbarous, that he conducted his enterprise with all the art, all the delicacy, all the attention to circumstance ["toute la circonstance"], the intrepidity, the large views of which Alexander & Caesar would have been capable in his place, &c." *Vie de Mahomet, by the Count of Boulainvilliers*, Bk. 2, page 266, 267 & 268, Amsterdam Edition 1731.

*members of his sect

associate went into the ditch to counterfeit the Oracle in his usual fashion; Mahomet passing by at the head of an infatuated multitude, a voice was heard which said: "I who am your God I declare that I have established Mahomet to be the Prophet of all the nations; it will be from him that you will learn my true law which the Jews & the Christians have adulterated." This man had been playing this role for a long time, but in the end he was rewarded with the greatest & the blackest ingratitude. In fact Mahomet hearing the voice which proclaimed him a divine man turning towards the people, commanded it in the name of this God who recognized him for his Prophet, to fill with stones this ditch, from which had issued so authentic a testimony in his favor, in memory of the stone which Jacob raised up to mark the place where God had appeared to him. Thus perished the wretch who had contributed to the elevation of Mahomet; it was on this pile of stones that the last of the most famous impostors established his law: this foundation is so solid & fixed in such a manner that after more than a thousand years of reigning one does not yet see any sign that it is on the point of being shaken.

§ XXIII

Thus Mahomet raised himself up & was happier than Jesus, insofar as he saw before his death the progress of his law, which the son of Mary was not able to do because of his poverty. He was even happier than Moses, who by an excess of ambition cast himself down a precipice to finish his days; Mahomet died in peace & with all his wishes gratified, he had moreover some certainty that his Doctrine would subsist after his death, having accommodated it to the genius of his sectaries, born & raised in ignorance; which an abler man might perhaps not have been able to do.

This, Reader, is the most remarkable of what might be said touching the three celebrated Legislators whose Religions have subjugated a great part of the universe. They were such as we have painted them; it is for you to examine if they merit that you respect them, & if you are excusable if you let yourselves be led by guides whom ambition alone has raised up, & whose dreamings are eternalized by ignorance. To cure yourself of the errors with which they have blinded you, read what follows with a free & disinterested spirit, that will be the way to discover the truth.

CHAPTER IV

Truths Sensible & Evident

§ I

Moses, Jesus & Mahomet being such as we have just painted them, it is evident that it is not in their writings that one must search for a true idea of the Divinity. The apparitions & the conferrings of Moses & Mahomet, like the divine origin of Jesus, are the greatest impostures which anyone has been able to hatch, & which you should flee if you love the truth.

§ II

God, as we have seen, being but nature, or, if one wishes, the assemblage of all beings, of all properties & of all energies, is necessarily the immanent & not distinct cause of its effects. . . .

CHAPTER VI

Of the Spirits That Are Called Demons

§ I

We have elsewhere said how the notion of Spirits introduced itself among men, & we have shown that these spirits were but Phantoms which exist only in their own imagination.

The first teachers of the human race were not enlightened enough to explain to the people what these Phantoms were; but they did not fail to tell them what they thought on the matter. Some seeing that Phantoms dissipated themselves, & had no consistency called them *immaterial; incorporeal*, forms without matter, colors & shapes, without however being bodies neither colored nor shaped, adding that they could clothe themselves with air as if with a garment when they wanted to render themselves visible to the eyes of men. The others said that they were animate bodies, but that they were made of air or of another subtler matter, that they thickened at will, when they wanted to appear.

§ II

If these two sorts of Philosophers were opposed to each other in the opinion they had of Phantoms, they agreed in the names they gave

them, for all called them *Demons*; in which they were as insensate, as those who believe they see in their sleep the souls of dead persons, & that it is their own soul that they see when they look at themselves in a mirror, or finally who believe that the stars which one sees in the water are the souls of the stars. In accordance with this ridiculous opinion they fell into an error no less absurd, when they believed that these Phantoms had an unlimited power, a notion destitute of reason; but usual among the ignorant, who imagine that the Beings which they do not know have a marvelous power.

§ III

This ridiculous opinion was no sooner divulged than the Legislators made use of it to support their authority. They established the belief in Spirits which they called *Religion*, hoping that the fear which the people would have of these invisible powers would keep it to its duty; & to give more weight to this dogma they distinguished the *Spirits* or *Demons* into good & bad ones: the first were meant to excite men to observe their laws, the others to restrain them & prevent them from breaking them. . . .

§ VI

This is why the Bible is completely filled with tales about Spirits, Demons & Demoniacs; but it is nowhere said how & when they were created, which is quite unpardonable in Moses who, it is said, presumed to speak of the creation of Heaven & Earth. Nor does Jesus who speaks often enough of Angels & of good or evil Spirits tell us if they are material or immaterial. This makes it clear that both of them only knew what the Greeks had taught their ancestors on the matter. Otherwise Jesus Christ would be no less blamable for his silence than for his malice in refusing to all men the grace, the faith & the piety which he assures us he could give them.

But to come back to Spirits, it is certain that these words *Demons*, *Satan*, *Devil*, are not proper names which designate some individual, & that no one but the ignorant have ever believed in them, as much among the Greeks who invented them, as among the Jews who adopted them: After the latter were infected with these ideas, they appropriated these names which signify *enemy*, *accuser* & *exterminator*, sometimes to invisible Powers, sometimes to visible ones, that is to say to the Gentiles who they said inhabit the Kingdom of Satan, there being none but themselves in their opinion, who inhabit that of God. . . .

The world has long been infected with these absurd opinions but in all times there have been solid intellects & sincere men, who despite persecution have decried the absurdities of their century as we have just done in this little Treatise. Those who love the truth will find there, no doubt, some consolation; it is they whom I wish to please without troubling myself about the judgment of those for whom prejudices take the place of an infallible oracle.

3

VOLTAIRE

Letters concerning the English Nation

1733

Born in 1694, François-Marie Arouet renamed himself Voltaire. The experience of being imprisoned in the Bastille in 1717, for writing a lampoon against the government, gave him the impetus to take on a new name and a new direction in his life. Voltaire rebelled against the authority of church and state. By the 1720s, he had grown to hate organized religion and had become a denizen of the Parisian cafés and of libertine circles. His restlessness led him in 1722 to visit the Dutch republic, where he associated with some of the men who had a hand in giving birth to the Treatise of the Three Impostors (see Document 2).

Upon his return from the Dutch republic, Voltaire got in trouble with an aristocrat and was jailed merely on the word of this man. In disgust, he left for England in the spring of 1726. There he entered the best literary and intellectual circles in London and quickly learned English. He wrote his friends back home that "this is a country where all the arts are honored and rewarded... where one thinks freely and nobly without being held back by any servile fear." Thus began Voltaire's love affair with England, which eventually fueled a European fascination with English institutions and cultural mores.

When it came to France and all of Catholic Europe, Voltaire emerged as the devil incarnate. In Letters concerning the English Nation