

Concerning Voltaire's English Enterprise

Christopher Hartney

Introduction

In 1726 François Marie Arouet was a creative artist scorned. He fled France in a state of fear and loathing. Affronted by the tyrannical and censorious politics of his homeland and by the protection afforded nobles who sought to punish him outside the law for his outspoken behaviour, he turned to England. Voltaire recreated himself as an exile not only from France, but also from his own language. His chosen vocation as simply a man of literature was to change drastically in these years. It became clear, however, that Bourbon-ruled France was no place for such a free thinker. From 1726 to 1728, the spurned creative artist transformed into a philosopher and an historian. More importantly, Voltaire realised that he could use the more liberal English social attitudes he had discovered both to inspire those in his homeland burdened by French totalitarianism and to embarrass those who perpetuated it. To this end he composed a series of letters ostensibly from himself to his good friend in France, Thiriot, which recounted the life, government, faith and thought of the English. In writing on the various faiths of the nation, Voltaire framed himself as one of the modern world's first and most significant commentators on the religion of others.

Les lettres philosophiques, as the collection came to be known, was a sophisticated series of traveller's reports, yet they were so sophisticated they seem today more like a nascent form of ethnography. More interestingly still, Voltaire laboured for over two years to master English, then to write his letters in his new language. He sought to have them published in exile not only as a warning to the French, but also as a report by a foreigner for the delight of those that he was reporting on. *Letters Concerning the English Nation* was published in 1733; a year before the

French edition. It is a matter of speculation as to how much assistance he received from native speakers in editing his style, nevertheless, the labour involved in writing in English seems to suggest Voltaire was refashioning himself as a new man at this time.¹ Despite the fact that the letters were a success in England, the vicissitudes of history have since obscured this original edition. Scholars have always afforded precedence to the French edition. This was mostly due to the work becoming overshadowed by Voltaire's far more famous *Dictionnaire philosophique* (1764). He constructed this work by borrowing extensively from its forerunner. *Les lettres*, both French and English faded from general view. *Letters Concerning the English Nation* disappeared almost completely until revived in 1994. The obscurity of this text is unfortunate and its rediscovery fascinating for anyone interested in the Study of Religion. Voltaire's attention to another's religion in England was unique for these times. In this short paper, I will examine some of the themes Voltaire raises in the first letter of the collection. In it the writer introduces the Quakers, ostensibly a new religious movement and develops some fascinating methodological tools in his attempt to study them.

Of the twenty-five letters in this 1733 collection, the first seven look at various religious communities in the nation including the Quakers, Anglicans, Presbyterians and the Sociniens (Unitarians).² The range of religions covered in this collection is only part of the diversity of faiths that Voltaire encountered

¹ Many years later James Boswell noted in his Journal of 28 December 1764, 'I got (him) to speak English, which he does in a degree that made me now and then start up and cry, "Upon my soul this is astonishing!" When he talked our language he was animated with the soul of a Briton. He had bold fights. He had humour. He had an extravagance; he had a forcible oddity of style that the most comical of our *dramatis personae* could not have exceeded.' Quoted in, Nicholas Cronk, 'Introduction' in *Letters Concerning the English Nation*, Oxford, 1994, viii.

² Voltaire, *Lettres Philosophiques: Avec Le texte Complet Des Remarques Sur Les Pensées de Pascal, Introduction, Notes, Choix de Variantes par Ramond Naves*, Paris, 1956.

abroad. Coming from a France that, after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, embodied the doctrine of *un roi, un loi, une foi*,³ England allowed Voltaire to experience a modicum of the wonder we feel today in the midst of our own modern multicultural and multi-faith societies.⁴ He certainly did not encounter a land that was completely at ease with its multiplicity of religions. The *Toleration Act* of 1689 did not relax the difficulties faced by Catholics and state defined 'extremists' such as Unitarians and Atheists. Yet after years of religious strife, free thought became an element that allowed writers such as Kallen to suggest that these times gave rise to the modern secular state as we know it.⁵ Naturally, Voltaire's first port of call was the French Huguenot settlement in exile around Wandsworth. It was here that a large Jewish community also dwelt and with whom Voltaire banked. Moreover, Voltaire met with men of letters who held diverse religious views. For example, one of these was Pope who '...était catholique, mais à la manière d'Erasme... [and who] était convaincu que tous les hommes de bonne volonté seront sauvés, quelle que soit leur religion, car Dieu n'est pas un tyran, comme l'imaginent les superstitieux.'⁶ Amidst this diversity of religious difference, Voltaire began to examine the Quakers.

Essentially still a New Religious Movement at this time, and a highly controversial one at that, George Fox had founded his

³ The doctrine of 'one king, one law, one faith' which Louis XIV reinforced with his suppression of the Huguenots. Generally this term was a French popularisation of the sentiment, found in the Latin *cuius regio, eius religio* [basically, one region, one religion] of the peace of Augsburg (1555).

⁴ B Amoudru, *La Psychologie Religieuse de Voltaire*, Paris, 1973, 67. 'Décidé, comme il dit, à écouter beaucoup et à remarquer tout, à converser librement avec les whigs et les Tories, à dîner avec un évêque et à souper avec un quaker, à aller le samedi à la synagogue et le dimanche Saint-Paul, il a la chance d'être servi par les circonstances.'

⁵ H M Kallen, 'Secularism as the Common Religion of a Free Society' in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, IV, 2, 1965, 148.

⁶ René Pomeau, *La Religion de Voltaire*, Paris, 1969, 130: '...was Catholic, but in the manner of Erasmus [and] he was convinced that all men of good shall be saved whatever their religion because God was not a tyrant as the superstitious imagined he was [author's translation].'

group soon after he began preaching in 1647. He believed that what he called the *Inner Light* of Jesus was available to all. Guided by his mystical insights, Fox developed *The Society of Friends* as a non-ritualistic, non-clerical and peace-loving antidote to the religious turmoil of England. Worship was extremely plain. Worshippers sat in meeting halls and waited for the Holy Spirit to move them to speak, groan, mumble or quake. Fox's group grew steadily and many Quakers pervaded the English merchant classes, whilst others settled in the American colonies. A significant London-based congregation was on hand to meet with and discuss the finer points of their theology with Voltaire when he arrived in England some 80 years after the movement commenced.

When we consider Voltaire's methodology, the first sentence sets in our minds the idea that this will be a relatively objective study, in fact I dare say it makes a very fitting motto for our work as religion scholars: 'I was of opinion, that the doctrine and history of so extraordinary a people, were worthy the attention of the curious.'⁷ It seems then that Voltaire's primary stance, for us to take or leave, is that of the 'reasonable man.' His general motivation is; any group with an extraordinary history should merit our attention. This remains as revolutionary then as it is today, particularly when we consider that the Quakers were a numerically small development on the religious landscape of England at this time.⁸ Perhaps serendipity played a role in

⁷ Voltaire, *Letters Concerning the English Nation*, Oxford, 1994, 9. Note all the following English quotes come from this section. Where appropriate I have given the French text in the footnotes for the sake of comparison between the 1733 and the 1734 versions. Voltaire, (editor Lanson) op cit, 1. 'J'ay cru que la doctrine et l'histoire d'un Peuple si extraordinaire, méritoient la curiosité d'un homme raisonnable.'

⁸ 'Voltaire's presentation of the Quakers in the first four of the *Lettres Philosophiques* is remarkable for the preponderance of emphasis it places upon a group that formed only a minor element in the rich variety of English religious life. This emphasis is of course to be explained primarily in terms of the critical purpose of the whole work: the remoteness of Quaker doctrine and practice from the Catholic position offers excellent opportunities for attacking the latter.

Voltaire's contact with the group, yet his dedication of the opening four letters to the Quakers shows that he considered their group significant. And it is in the mode of self-declared 'reasonable man' and, more obviously, as a travel writer, that Voltaire frames himself as the stranger; the land is alien to the projected audience. In this position an Anglican could be as fascinating as a Quaker and, at least, of equal value to the observer. It is these perspectives that allow Voltaire to make the topography of this strange land familiar to his reader in its religious dimensions by, as Clifford Geertz noted so many years later, 'analys[ing] those... symbolic forms, words, images, institutions, behaviours-in terms of which, in each place, people actually represented themselves to themselves and to one another.'⁹

Voltaire moves from his opening line to describe for the reader the unnamed Quaker who will be his guide into the faith.

I never in my life saw a more noble or a more engaging aspect than his. He was dress'd like those of his persuasion, in a plain coat, without pleats in the sides, or buttons on the pockets and sleeves; and he had on a beaver, the brims of which were horizontal, like those of our clergy. He did not uncover himself when I appear'd, and advanc'd towards me without once stooping his body; but there appear'd more politeness in the open, humane air of his countenance, than in the custom of drawing one leg behind the other, and taking that from the head, which is made to cover it.¹⁰

But the emphasis is not merely a tactical one, Voltaire clearly saw much in Quakerism which he found sympathetic, and one may perhaps suggest that the attraction had its roots in intellectual and spiritual affinities at a deeper level than Voltaire himself was fully aware of.' W H Barber, 'Voltaire and Quakerism: Enlightenment and the inner light,' in *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, XXIV, 24, 85.

⁹ Clifford Geertz, 'From the Native's Point of View': On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding' in *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion*, Russell T MacCutcheon, editor, London, New York, 1999, 53.

¹⁰ Voltaire, *Letters*, op cit, 9.

The reader, trying of course to make sense of the scene as Voltaire describes it to us, shares Voltaire's naïve and inquiring stance. Reader and inquirer are identified together as 'reasonable.' From this position, Voltaire then sets to work by describing in detail the appearance of the man he is about to interview. He stresses his plain-living, healthy lifestyle.¹¹ He describes the difference in clothes and carefully details his manners. These details are so carefully noted, that in part it seems, he is describing an alien except, of course, when he stops to note the occasional similarity.¹² The Frenchman is carefully balancing his words; drawing a line between the difference of the scene and the respect he is directing to his interlocutor. This balancing attitude is something the modern reader might find turgid, swinging between high respect, occasional shock and with the odd raw laugh tossed in. But it conveys honesty in its distanced and critical reaction to the man, pervaded as it is with deep respect.

In the midst of such descriptions Voltaire begins to insert dialogue. In his questions he seeks out explanations for the differences noted. Voltaire does this with a particular voice noting differences he and his (French) readers have already encountered on their home soil; 'I open'd with that which good Catholicks have more than once made to Huguenots: "My dear sir, says I, were you ever baptiz'd?"'¹³ The question implies 'given what we French know about difference (that is, with the Huguenots), how much more different are you?' Voltaire is almost speaking as the corporate entity of 'France.' This is a

¹¹ Le quaker étoit un vieillard frais qui n'avoit jamais eu de maladie, parce qu'il n'avoit jamais connu les passions ni l'intempérance... Voltaire, *Les Lettres*, 1.

¹² 'Il étoit vêtu, comme tous ceux de sa Religion, d'un habit sans plis dans les côtés, & sans boutons sur les poches ni sur les manches, & portoit un grand chapeau à bords rabatus, comme nos Ecclésiastiques; il me reçut avec son chapeau sur la tête, & s'avança vers moi sans faire la moindre inclination de corps...' Voltaire, (Lanson) op cit, 2.

¹³ Voltaire, op cit,2. 'Je débutai par la question que de bons Catholiques ont faite plus d'une fois aux Huguenots. 'Mon cher Monsieur, lui dis-je, êtes-vous baptisé?'

point Epstein notes; she sees the dialogue more generally as France and England conversing.¹⁴ There are, of course, myriad political implications in taking this approach. It is of little wonder that the book was burned in France when it first appeared there.¹⁵ At one level, Voltaire discusses the Quakers as an example of a kind of religious tolerance in England that France simply could not well... tolerate. On a deeper level Voltaire is clearly managing this constructed dialogue to plead a case for the sort of religion he would like to see on earth. Voltaire the, anti-ritual, anti-dogmatic deist is never very far from Voltaire the curious and reasonable observer.

The answers provided by the Quaker to Voltaire's questions are of course, that he is quite different and Voltaire allows his Quaker to present a series of arguments that justify these differences. One example is the rite of baptism and why it does not necessarily make a Christian, the Quaker states: 'Christ indeed was baptiz'd by John, but he himself never baptiz'd any one. We are the disciples of Christ, not of John.'¹⁶ When the old Quaker suggests that most of the rites of Christianity are not really Christian but instead 'Jewish ceremonies,' Voltaire's surprise is recorded on the page, 'O unaccountable! Says I, what! Baptism a Jewish ceremony?'¹⁷ The old Quaker follows up Voltaire's surprise by noting that many of the apostles circumcised gentiles and asks his questioner if he is circumcised. When Voltaire quips to have 'never had the pleasure' the old Quaker terminates the argument thus, '...thou art a Christian without being circumcis'd, and I am one without being baptiz'd.'¹⁸ It seems pure good

¹⁴ Julia L Epstein, 'Voltaire's ventriloquism: voices in the first *Lettres philosophiques*,' in *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, Vol 182, Oxford, 1979, 220.

¹⁵ Nicholas Cronk, 'Introduction' in Voltaire: *Letters concerning the English Nation*, xxxvii.

¹⁶ Voltaire, (Lanson) op cit, 3, 'Le Christ reçut le Baptême de Jean, mais il ne baptisa jamais personne, nous ne sommes pas les disciples de Jean,...'

¹⁷ Ibid, 3, 'En voici bien d'un autre, m'écriai-je! Des cérémonies Judaïques!'

¹⁸ Ibid 4, '...ah well, he said, you are Christian without being circumcised and I am without being baptised.'

sense. Voltaire clearly demonstrates his sympathy with the Quaker by continually giving him last word. In fact this is a pattern throughout the four letters and it increases the atmosphere of regard from which the author is writing; it is a regard that Voltaire is also pushing onto his readers through his various textual tactics. A similar pattern emerges in the next passage where the lack of communion is explained as a central marker of difference in Quaker worship. Again the last word is given to the Quaker, although in passing, Voltaire makes some pejorative remarks; part of that turgid balancing process I mentioned above. Firstly Voltaire complains that, 'Thus did this pious man make a wrong, but very specious application, of four or five texts of scripture which seem'd to favour the tenets of his sect,'¹⁹ secondly, and most importantly, he admits to resisting further comment 'I had more sense than to contest with him, since there is no possibility of convincing an enthusiast.'²⁰ Against modern trends of academic politeness, Voltaire is clearly telling us how far he is prepared to go in taking on the ideas of the Quaker.

The passage is not a simple one. Firstly let us deal with his idea of an 'enthusiast.' Is Voltaire setting us straight on 'enthusiasts' or is he again playing the role of shocked questioner to better convey the sensibility of the Quaker's message? By answer the first thing to note is that the verb 'abuser' is used in the French volume yet in English Voltaire writes 'specious application'²¹ a much softer fashioning. Yet I wonder – is he suggesting that all sorts of interpretations can be 'abuses' of Scripture? Of course it could be that between the lines Voltaire is digging his teeth into institutionalised Catholic France with its own normalisations of

¹⁹ Ibid, 'Voilà comme mon saint homme abusoit assez spécieusement de trois ou quatre passages de la Sainte Ecriture, qui sembloient favoriser sa secte...'

²⁰ Ibid, 'I was careful not to contest him, there is nothing to be argued with an *Enthousiaste*.'

²¹ A Chevalley and M Chevally, *The Concise Oxford French Dictionary*, Oxford, 1966, 6, 'Abuser in French has never the sense of to "abuse," "to revile," "to insult."'

Biblical interpretation with their own specious applications. The key word in the second sentence is 'enthousiaste' and Raymond Naves suggests that this word '...est souvent employé par Voltaire au même titre que *fanatique*.'²² So why use heavy language? Naves suggests Voltaire is using humour to deflect the intensity, and the humourlessness of the message,

Sans doute le passage est-il humoristique, et Voltaire feint plaisamment une indignation orthodoxe; cependant, nous savons qu'il n'approuvait pas toutes les manières des quakers... il les considérait, pour plusieurs raisons, comme des sages, mais certainement pas comme des *honnêtes gens*, des *gens de goût*; et c'est à cet idéal d'élégance que s'oppose souvent «l'enthousiasme».²³

Barber supports this proposition but argues more strongly along class lines:

There are, of course, hostile elements in the picture. Voltaire, the bourgeois courtier, was no doubt too sensitive on the score of gentlemanly manners to be anything but shocked and amused by the Quaker rejection of insincere civilities and modish luxury of dress; but even so, he is impressed with the honesty which underlies it. A more serious stumbling block was the Quaker belief in direct inspiration and the physical manifestations of religious fervour which accompanied it – manifestations which would scarcely fail to remind Voltaire of the Jansenist *convulsionnaires*.²⁴

²² In Voltaire, *Les lettres*, 177, '...is often used by Voltaire in the same sense as fanatic.'

²³ *Ibid*, 177-8. 'Without doubt in this passage he is being humorous, Voltaire is contriving a pleasant orthodox indignation, however, we know that he did not approve of all the manners of the Quakers ... too inclined to a peculiarity (monomania?) and a certain fakeness in their actions, he considered them, for certain reasons, as wise but certainly not like *honest men*, of *good taste*; and it is this ideal of elegance that he often opposed to "*enthousiasme*."

²⁴ Barber, *op cit*, 86.

To put both these views in their place I suggest that the pejorative attitude is also a sophisticated textual strategy to ally the overall distance between subject and reader. Voltaire is providing rhythmic breathing spaces for his reader, part of a didactic strategy that the young man no doubt inherited from the arch-sceptic Pierre Bayle (1647-1706).²⁵ Pure explanation by the Quaker, which I suspect Voltaire would like to convey, might alienate his book's projected popular audience and so taking on this 'indignation orthodoxe' provides the reader a certain confidence with the way the information is being delivered – that is by someone at arms length from the arguments placed, although, of course the author himself, as a deist, was by no means orthodox in his own beliefs. Voltaire's pause then buys him more grace with the reader. And he takes full advantage of this for the last passages of the *First Letter* are turned over to the Quaker almost completely. In fact we should assess once more to what extent is Voltaire being honest with us – when interviewing someone about their faith, particularly someone close to the operation of a faith, we clearly have to draw lines around what we intend to accept and dismiss on a personal level. This is because the nod of the interviewer is always duplicitous. It can mean 'yes [I understand you, please keep talking]' and it can be taken to mean 'yes [I agree with your sentiments].' The long conclusion that Voltaire allows his interviewee at the end of the *First Letter* delves into this issue. The Quaker rails against the rise of false ritual and politenesses amongst men and the way it is used to separate them. And yet, of course, Voltaire has already made it clear what separates him from the Quaker – the concept of the 'enthousiaste.' In this way Voltaire has cleverly placed his speaker in the position of irreconcilable 'other' (even though Voltaire is the real 'other' in England) yet gives him space enough to explain his view. These

²⁵ Pierre Bayle's influence on Voltaire in the period leading up to the publication of *Letters Concerning the English Nation* is extremely potent, an updated examination of this thinker's contribution to *Letters* would deserve its own article. See the dated, but still worthy H T Mason *Pierre Bayle and Voltaire*, Oxford, 1963.

letters are not written by a figure who wants to impose his own personality over the facts, nor the story, but include them in the story nevertheless.

The Letters as a Study of Religion

Having considered the contents of the letter and examples of Voltaire's textual tactics, what exactly is it that Voltaire brings to the study of religion? The first hint is in the medium of the information; the epistle. Epstein reminds us that in the first copies printed in London a preface was included in which we read, '...that these Letters were not design'd for the Public. They are the result of the Author's Complacency and Friendship for Mr Theriot. Who had desir'd... to favour him with such remarks as he might make on the Manners and Customs of the British Nation.'²⁶ So, clearly the aim of the letters is to be 'ethnographic' but on a very personal level as we the reader 'overhear' Voltaire speaking plainly to his friend, even though, of course, the book is constructed for a wider audience and in the first instance a general English readership. What is just as interesting is the dropping of this introductory conceit for all subsequent editions. These letters therefore sit of the edge of both the public and private realm. This is quite opposed to the modern writer on religion who clearly posits his or her words unequivocally in the public domain and most often without revealing those private thoughts on how we react to the information we gather and the groups we present – unless, that is, we write on our own faith and need to appropriate academic discourse to suggest that our own religion is the normative base from which all should write.²⁷ Does Voltaire's honesty open up to us another possibility for field work, which is, as Alphonso Lingus bravely revealed, nothing but

²⁶ Epstein, op cit, 220.

²⁷ As Greg Bailey suggests has been the case in the Australian academic community of religion scholars in relation to their normative assumption of Christianity. See 'The Discourse of Christianity and The Other' in *Australian Religious Studies Review*, Vol 4, 2, Spring 1991, 61-72.

sophisticated autobiography anyway?²⁸ A possibility not postmodern, self-reflexive, and bricolage-laden as Lingus might suggest, but just plain eighteenth century curiosity and honesty about what we and others think, say and act?

Conclusion

Voltaire makes clear, in a way the modern student of religion would not, what he does and does not like about the Quakers. Brailsford notes, '[t]hough Voltaire felt a sympathy for the Quakers... he was certainly not trying to kindle the inner light in Catholic breasts.'²⁹ Nevertheless, he retains a qualitative attitude. He allows one particular Quaker to speak almost in his own voice for quite a lengthy period. Additionally, he provides in the subsequent letters a report on his visit to a place of worship, provides a short history of the Quakers and looks at an example of that religion's principals in operation (in a final short letter on the Quaker-founded state of Pennsylvania). If, as Sharpe has noted, China allows Voltaire an exotic *oriental* ideal of a more perfect religion, the Quakers give him a very *occidental* ideal to set against France.³⁰ This informs most on his methodology, on one hand rational, on the other, national. His four-part strategy to study the Quakers shows up Religious studies today as clearly a bodiless discipline. A religious scholar is more often than not trained out of his or her need to go into the field by the sorts of methodologies he or she studies. When we consider the writers that Studies in Religion methodologists do acknowledge as forming the ancestry of the discipline we find an amazing group that include armchair anthropologists, sofa-mired philologists, office-bound historians and encamped philosophers and theologians. There has been for many years a problem of fitting the device of field research into the matrix of our study. It should not be like this and at least 100 years before our discipline really

²⁸ See for example: Alphonso Lingus, *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing In Common*, Indiana, 1994, *passim*.

²⁹ H N Brailsford, *Voltaire*, 1963, 27.

³⁰ Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*, London, 1986, 17.

took off, Voltaire provided an excellent starting point for how one could approach a religious group from a number of directions and leave the reader mostly satisfied with the results. It therefore seems strange that those constructing histories of our field would omit this seminal work by a major enlightenment thinker. We also see in the first lines of the first letter Voltaire transforming himself from a playwright and an epic poet into an historian and a social commentator. In making this change, he made a contribution to the history of religions that is yet to be fully acknowledged. He solved problems regarding how one should write on other people's religions by drawing on his literary skills and creativity rather than rely on any previous academic tradition. And finally, Voltaire, perhaps more than any other historical figure, illustrates the utility that arises from the connection of religion and literature, in this case at a very complex and fascinating methodological level. 'Slight as it was, [the Letters] must have given countless readers their first glimpse of a new society.... Its publication made, as Condorcet tells us, for a revolutionary epoch.'³¹

³¹ *Ibid*, 31.