

Voltaire

The writer François-Marie Arouet, better known by his pen name, Voltaire, was born November 21, 1694 in Paris, France and died on May 30, 1778. Voltaire originally studied law but abandoned it to become a writer. During his life Voltaire received acclaim for the plays he wrote, but was also a novelist, essayist, historian, and most importantly one of the most astute critics of his time. Voltaire



often wrote essays criticizing the established powers of the time period including the French monarchy and Catholic Church. Voltaire's razor sharp wit and sarcastic remarks caused him trouble. On one occasion he was severely, beaten by the servants of a noble he ridiculed. He was twice imprisoned in the infamous French political prison known as the Bastille. The Bastille was a political prison because the people who were detained there were accused of opposing or criticizing the King of France or his government. On the first occasion, Voltaire landed in jail after being falsely accused of writing a crude poem about a powerful noble governmental official. This false allegation and the resulting prison sentence had a lasting impact of Voltaire's view of the French justice system and the importance of free speech. While in prison the first time, Voltaire wrote several acclaimed plays. Not long after his first release, Voltaire was imprisoned again in the Bastille for making remarks that insulted a powerful member of the noble class. This time, Voltaire was released after two weeks imprisonment on the condition that he leave France and begin a period of exile.

- **Why was the Bastille a political prison?**
- **Why did Voltaire think the right of freedom speech was so important?**

In 1726 Voltaire began his exile by the King of France to England for three years where his philosophical interests deepened. Ironically,

his exile probably hurt the King of France more than Voltaire, because while he was in England he was inspired by the teachings of Locke, Newton, and other English intellectuals. He had time to study and admire the government reforms England had adopted which set limits on the power of the King by establishing a written constitution and bill of rights which promised to protect citizen's liberties such as freedom of speech, free press, and freedom of religion from abuse by a powerful king.

- **Why did Voltaire go to England?**
- **What elements of government did Voltaire admire in the British system?**

In 1729 Voltaire returned to his native land of France as a strong advocate of personal liberty and freedom of the press. Armed with these new ideas from England, he produced *Letters on the English Nation* in 1734. In this book he explained the ideas of Locke to his fellow French citizens. He also fiercely attacked the ancient regime (traditional social order) in France which gave greater political and economic privileges to members of the Church and nobility at the expense of members of the middle class and commoners. Voltaire celebrated the new political reforms that he saw in England and began to question the concept of the divine right of kings. He did not abandon support for monarchy all together, but he did believe that a just government should include a king whose powers are limited by the rule of law and protects the individual liberties of its citizens. Inspired by Locke, Voltaire believed that any monarch that did not work to protect the rights of its citizens should not be recognized as a legitimate monarch. Voltaire wrote letters to a number of monarchs in surrounding European countries and often went to visit them at their courts. He encouraged these monarchs to make reforms to improve the lives of common people and make reforms to protect the individual rights of their citizens.

- **What does the term ancient regime mean?**
- **Why did Voltaire disagree with the ancient regime?**
- **What type of monarchy did Voltaire support?**
- **What did Voltaire write to the monarchs of Europe about?**

Voltaire used his works as weapons to attack any practice or tradition that he believed violated basic standards of fairness or decency. He

was once quoted as saying, “to hold a pen is to be at war.” To Voltaire, the most important element of a just government was to provide for freedom of speech and the protection of a free press. He believed that for a government to function best, all ideas on issues needed to be shared and debated so that the best possible decision or viewpoint could surface and be accepted. Voltaire believed that all speech, including the expressions of ideas that were most unpopular should be protected for the sake of informed discussion and better decision making. He was also quoted as saying, “I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to death your right to say it.”

- **What do you think Voltaire meant by his quote, “to hold a pen is to be at war”?**
- **How did Voltaire use his writing as a weapon?**
- **Why did Voltaire believe free speech and free press were important to society?**

Voltaire especially despised the power that the Catholic Church and the nobility had in France. He believed they had too much power in government and the ability to unfairly imprison the poor and silence the ideas of those who challenged their authority. He wrote against the cruel treatment of prisoners and how indifferent the rich and powerful were about the poverty of the lower classes. During his lifetime, Voltaire witnessed the persecution of French Protestants, Huguenots, by the Catholic Church and French monarchy. Voltaire detested this intolerance and saw it as another example of the corrupting influences of organized religion. Voltaire believed a just government must allow for freedom of religion. Like many philosophers, Voltaire believed humans were by nature good. He believed it was organized religion and the established divine-right monarchies that corrupted people. Voltaire did believe in God and was a Deist. As a Deist, he believed God created the universe, but after that was not involved in man’s day to day affairs. Voltaire believed organized religion, like the Catholic Church used fear and the teachings of miracles and divine revelations to keep control over the people and protect its own power and influence in government. He believed that monarchs used religion and fear to support their position of power when they claimed to rule by divine right. Instead, Voltaire hoped that people would make decisions guided by scientific reasoning, logic, and observations of the natural world around them as opposed to by faith alone.

- **Why did Voltaire believe that organized religion could have corrupting influences of human behavior and human nature?**
- **What do Deist's believe?**
- **What did Voltaire believe about religion and government?**
- **What types of policies or laws would he have supported regarding religion and government?**
- **How did Voltaire hope people would make decisions and choose their leaders?**

Voltaire's attacks of the Catholic Church and the crown earned him a reputation as a significant writer. But his mocking, sarcastic, and often insulting style also created many enemies. In 1758, the French government was so outraged by his ceaseless attacks that it banned him from Paris. But his enemies failed to silence him. Voltaire lived in fear of being attacked or killed for his ideas, so he moved to Ferney, Switzerland, near the French border. Here on a large estate he continued his virulent criticism of the ancient regime for twenty years, producing an astonishing number of plays, essays, articles, letters, and novels. In his lifetime, Voltaire wrote over ten thousand letters, expressing his ideas about government and society. In these works he attacked irrational and unjust laws and traditions and criticized arrogant religious and government officials who Voltaire believed clung to their traditional and outdated privileges on the claims that God chose them to rule over others. "Whatever you do, crush this infamy!" he once thundered. By this he meant the destruction of prejudice, superstition, ignorance, intolerance and all other enemies of freedom. Both widely praised by admirers and condemned by enemies, Voltaire was indisputably the most influential individual thinker and writer of the eighteenth century. By his death in 1778, even monarchs such as Prussia's Frederick the Great and Catherine II of Russia openly praised his work. He also became very popular among oppressed French commoners who considered him a revolutionary and supporter of individual freedoms.

- **Why did Voltaire move to Switzerland?**
- **How do you think this influenced his views about the power of the king?**
- **Why did the French commoners praise Voltaire?**