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Voltaire and the Paradoxes of Fanaticism

> What can be said in answer to a man who says he
> will rather obey God than men, and who conse-
> quently feels certain of meriting heaven by cutting
> your throat?
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> —Voltaire, entry for "Fanaticism,
> *Philosophical Dictionary*[1]

VOLTAIRE'S QUESTION REGARDING the use of religion to justify violence is timely, but the cogency of his answer is hard to assess because professional philosophers rarely read Voltaire these days. In *Voltaire and the Enlightenment*, a short book published, ironically enough, in the "Great Philosophers" series, John Gray explains this indifference: "Voltaire's writings on philosophical questions are unoriginal to the last degree. They amount to little more than a reworking of some ideas from John Locke and Pierre Bayle."[2] Although A.J. Ayer's *Voltaire* contains an identical judgement, Ayer suggests why he admires an eighteenth-century figure who made no original contribution to philosophy: "Voltaire is a great symbol."[3] A conventional way of expressing his symbolism is to hold up Voltaire as an enemy of fanaticism. Indeed, this paper is premised on his status as someone who fights those who express their commitment to God with throat-cutting and bomb-

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[1] Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, ed. and trans. H.I. Woolf (New York: Knopf, 1928) "fanaticism." Hereafter *Philosophical Dictionary*.

[2] John Gray, *Voltaire and The Enlightenment* (London: Orion, 1998) 3.

[3] A.J. Ayer, *Voltaire* (New York: Random House, 1986) 171.

throwing. To provide a context for the paper's overall argument, however, section one will briefly discuss how treating Voltaire as a historical symbol obscures his understanding of what he was fighting. Section two then elucidates the original concept of fanaticism Voltaire employs in his later writings, while section three elaborates the latter in terms of a theoretical paradox. Section four attempts to resolve the paradox by re-examining fanaticism from the point of view of its opposite—tolerance.

Voltaire's War on Fanaticism

Ayer's enthusiasm for the symbolic Voltaire is not difficult to understand. As the author of the classic English defence of logical positivism, Ayer admires the Enlightenment *philosophe* who promoted Lockean empiricism and was emotionally committed to social reform. Of course, "the Enlightenment" is itself a symbol. In using the term, Ayer refers not just to a distinguishable historical reality but to a normative ideal, and this opens the door for other philosophers to project a very different evaluation of the Enlightenment ideal onto a far less attractive Voltaire. For example, Isaiah Berlin's weighty claim that "Voltaire is the central figure of the Enlightenment" is far from admiring.[4] Berlin conceives the Enlightenment with J.G. Herder's pluralistic eye, so Voltaire's ideal of a "universal civilization" struggling to free itself from regressively parochial forces appears to be based on "an enormous fallacy."[5] Voltaire, he says, fixes on the valuable features of one ideal and, lacking historical sensitivity, fails to recognize the value of other unique and often incommensurable cultural ideals. Berlin sharpens this criticism by linking Voltaire with the proto-fascist Joseph de Maistre. Berlin acknowledges that in some sense the two are "polar opposites."[6] Yet he bypasses any textual exegesis or evidence gathered from specific works to concentrate on those highly symbolic qualities that identify Voltaire's literary style with de Maistre's politics. What is historically significant is their common embrace of "the dry light against the flickering flame" and "their icy, smooth, clear surface"

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[4] Isaiah Berlin, *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991) 88.

[5] Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990) 38.

[6] Berlin, *Crooked Timber* 159.

that deflates all sentiment.[7] Voltaire's "ruthless" and "chilly" analyses act as a series of "shock treatments" that "strip away all liberal illusions" so that the ground is clear for Maistre's type of political administration.[8] In this nexus, Berlin glimpses the source of a twentieth-century form of fanaticism: "modern totalitarian systems combine the outlooks of Voltaire and Maistre."[9]

Berlin's Voltaire is the inverse of the exemplary figure that Ayer admires because the Enlightenment of Berlin's argument closely resembles the symbol that shapes the influential thesis of Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*. The "dissolvent rationality" of the Enlightenment, that is, works inevitably toward the complete disenchantment of the world and creates a disastrous totalitarianism.[10] One obvious difference between the two arguments is that Horkheimer and Adorno represent Sade rather than Voltaire as the central figure of the Enlightenment. Nevertheless, all such symbols create a frustrating ambiguity. Voltaire *or* Sade consummates the normative logic of "the Enlightenment," and Voltaire is either the open-minded advocate of tolerance *or* a fanatic. The ideas of a specific eighteenth-century intellectual are rarely engaged because Voltaire has disappeared into the vagaries of what has been called "the inflated Enlightenment." This notion, says Robert Darnton, "can be identified with all modernity," and from one popular point of view Voltaire then stands for a cult of reason from which post-modernity ought to be seeking a liberating cure.[11] The argument of this paper, by contrast, depends on a "deflated" view of the Enlightenment. This does not signal an impossible attempt to examine Voltaire from some ahistorical or axiologically neutral point of view. The point, rather, is to place Voltaire in the more restricted context of a self-conscious group of intellectuals in eighteenth-century Paris who exploited all forms of contemporary media in a highly partisan campaign for a secular cause. I intend to

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[7] Berlin, *Crooked Timber* 159.

[8] Berlin, *Crooked Timber* 160.

[9] Berlin, *Crooked Timber* 159.

[10] Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, trans. John Cummings (New York: Seabury P, 1972) 3.

[11] Robert Darnton, "George Washington's False Teeth," *The New York Review of Books* (27 March 1997): 25–32. Roger Pearson provides an excellent response to this sort of interpretation of Voltaire in *The Fables of Reason: A Study of Voltaire's "Contes Philosophiques"* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) 241–49.

explore Voltaire's "unique role" in this campaign with the goal of illuminating the complexity of the phenomenon against which he claimed to be fighting—fanaticism.[12]

It is well known that attacks on fanaticism constitute a leading motif in Voltaire's *oeuvre*. *La Henriade*, for example, the epic poem compared in its time to Homer and Virgil, is full of descriptions of outbreaks of fanaticism typified by the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre. R.A. Ridgeway, in fact, claims "its main underlying subject is fanaticism in both its political and religious manifestations."[13] *Mahomet*, the most popular of his tragedies, concentrates on how a religious leader turns into a fanatic. For philosophers, however, *tolerance* is the canonical problem. Hence fanaticism tends to be reduced to a catch-all category for a whole spectrum of actions and policies that cause reasonable people to promote the positive value of tolerance. This does a particular disservice to the later writings of Voltaire on which this paper will focus. For example, the very last sentence of Ayer's *Voltaire* refers to "the recrudescence of fundamentalism in the United States, the horrors of religious fanaticism in the Middle East, the appalling danger which the stubbornness of political intolerance presents to the whole world."[14] Yet in the absence of any substantive analysis of Voltaire's concept of fanaticism, the book provides no specific suggestion as to how he might help illuminate or remedy our contemporary situation. Such an analysis depends upon recognizing that Voltaire philosophized within "the human clash of social purpose and aspirations" and the advantage of adopting Darnton's deflationary Enlightenment is particularly clear regarding the later work.[15] For Voltaire was attempting to shape public opinion with the motivating passion and the ethos of an investigative journalist. *The Treatise On Tolerance*, for example, provides a gripping account of Jean Calas, "the father of an innocent family was delivered up to the hands of fanaticism."[16] *The Philosophical Dictionary* was writ-

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[12] Martin Fitzpatrick, "Toleration and the Enlightenment Movement," *Toleration in Enlightenment Europe*, ed. Grell and Porter (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000) 23–68.

[13] R.S. Ridgeway, *Voltaire and Sensibility* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens UP, 1973) 52.

[14] Ayer, 174.

[15] John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1948) v.

[16] Voltaire, *Treatise on Tolerance*, ed. and trans. Brian Masters and Simon Harvey (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000) chap. 1. Hereafter *Treatise on Tolerance*.

ten as part of a broader intellectual campaign to eradicate fanaticism. Designed to get into as many hands as possible, Voltaire's strategy was animated by the rallying cry *écrasez l'infâme*, and Richard Holmes wisely suggests that a "free and spirited version of this vivid but almost untranslatable motto might be *Make war on Fanaticism.*"[17]

Enthusiasm, Superstition and Fanaticism

What kind of war was Voltaire pursuing? And to what extent was it successful? These questions turn on the meaning of fanaticism, and this section will argue that Voltaire developed a novel concept that differentiated him not only from his religious antagonists but also from an otherwise sympathetic contemporary, David Hume. As a first step toward understanding his innovation, I need to clarify the important relationship between the original meaning of a fanatic and what had traditionally been referred to as *enthusiasm*. In the *Philosophical Dictionary*, Voltaire says that enthusiasm is derived from the ancient Greek word signifying "a painful affection of bowels." However, this physiological affection expresses itself in religious behaviour because it was caused by an activity intended to have a spiritual effect. Voltaire offers the example of Pythia who "received the inspiration of Apollo in a place apparently intended for the receipt of body rather than spirit," suffered internal agitations and nervous shocks, and then exhibited bodily "contortions."[18] In brief, enthusiasm refers to strange bodily contortions that physically express the impact of a god (or spiritual reality). Voltaire thereby identifies the word with the original meaning of "fanatic" which derives from the Latin *fanum*, the temple where oracles were pronounced. The *fanum* is the place of prophecy and in Rome inspired soothsayers interpreting omens were called *fanatici*. Within certain cults a *fanaticus*, receiving inspiration from a divine otherworld, expressed messages in a frenzied, ecstatic fashion.[19]

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[17] Richard Holmes, "Voltaire's Grin," *The New York Review of Books* (30 November 1995): 30–37. Martin Fitzpatrick, 51, also comments on the "untranslatable" nature of the slogan.

[18] *Philosophical Dictionary*, "enthusiasm."

[19] A good source of information regarding these words is James Baldwin, *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology* (New York: Macmillan, 1901) "fanaticism.".·" A more recent account of the relevant etymology is contained in Andre Haynal, Miklos Molnar and Gerard de Puymege, *Fanaticism: A Historical and Psychoanalytical Study*, trans. Linda Butler Koseoglu (New York: Schocken, 1983) chap. 2.

It is important not to go further and conflate Voltaire's un-
derstanding of the enthusiasm characterizing a fanatic with his own
concept of fanaticism, because the latter is conditioned by an inter-
vening change in the original meaning of fanatic. To identify this
change, consider that the word originally carried no pejorative
meaning. Indeed, extravagant raving and contortions were taken
as a good sign that a god actually was speaking through the vision-
ary. Into the eighteenth century, members of some sects continued
to call themselves fanatics precisely in order to characterize their
behaviour in this positive way. Embracing the Camisard (Hugue-
not) prophets who had fled to England from France in 1706, for
example, John Lacy (at the time a leading member of the Presbyte-
rian Westminster chapel) claimed "that the contortions and agitations
that accompanied the prophets' performances proved their authen-
ticity, for many prophets in the Old Testament had also displayed
'divers strange gestures of Body.' Like them, the three French Proph-
ets insisted that they were only passive instruments of a higher
power."[20] After the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth
centuries, however, many Christians were increasingly alarmed by
attempts to privilege the frenzied behaviour of visionaries. Indeed,
most theologians would have sympathized with the repulsion later
expressed by Voltaire toward the antinomianism that characterized
the whole range of fanatics, from Old Testament varieties to Paris-
ian convulsionaries. The *Philosophical Dictionary* makes clear the
relevant danger: "such persons are fully convinced that the holy
spirit which animates them is above all laws; that their enthusiasm
is the only law which they must obey."[21] By the end of the seven-
teenth century, the term fanatic had acquired a pejorative sense
that was tied to the behavioural mode or manner in which one's
religious commitment was expressed. A Muslim might be described
as a fanatic due to startlingly foreign behaviour, but the same was
true of Quakers because of their trembling movements. Protestant
as well as Catholic theologians could agree on a condemnation of
the ecstatic Camisards: "like the Catholics" the majority of the ex-
iled Huguenot clergy "called them 'fanatics'."[22]

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[20] Clarke Garrett, *Spirit Possession and Popular Religion: From the Camisards to the Shakers* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987) 45.

[21] *Philosophical Dictionary*, "fanaticism."

[22] Garrett, 34.

Antipathy toward enthusiasm is at the heart of Voltaire's exposition of fanaticism. For, although the enthusiast is a person who has "ecstasies, dreams and visions," the content of these extraordinary experiences is only "taken for reality."[23] In actual fact, the enthusiast is in a "feverish" state and imagines all sorts of mad and ridiculous things just as a person with a fever often suffers from "delirium."[24] On the face of it, this does little more than make explicit the change in the meaning of fanatic that had already gained currency, but Voltaire was actually in the process of effecting a second, more radical change. To be sure, the immediate social danger posed by persons whose religious commitment was being denigrated because of the *manner* in which they sought to authenticate their beliefs, remained in the forefront of his attention. However, his long-term strategy needed to address a commonality between these fanatics and their accusers. After all, the shift from an approving to disapproving use of fanatic took place within an absolutist culture in which each of many religious groups—Muslim and Christian, Catholic and Protestant, Anglican and Dissenter, etc.— was convinced it was the "true religion." A meta-belief in the absolute truth of one's own religion shaped the consciousness of believers, whether they identified truth with divine ecstasy (that must be directly experienced) *or* with the revealed word (that might have to be disseminated by human intermediaries). Tactics aside, therefore, Voltaire could not align himself with those persons or groups labeling others as fanatics. For the disputes between enthusiasts and orthodox believers could erupt only when the enthusiasts began to *interpret* their visions and contortions—from the core claim that certain visions are, in fact, divinely inspired, to the most arcane of theological points. According to Voltaire, however, these conflicts of interpretation are futile, and obscure the crucial point that there exists no religious "dogma" that withstands rational scrutiny.[25] As part of the tradition that includes Bayle and Montesquieu, he is corrosively skeptical toward the *content* of any religious commitment and hence the very notion of religious truth.

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[23] *Philosophical Dictionary*, "fanaticism."

[24] *Philosophical Dictionary*, "fanaticism."

[25] *Philosophical Dictionary*, "dogmas."

His concept of fanaticism is shaped by this skepticism, as is evident in the radical claim that "there has only been one religion in the whole world which has not been polluted by fanaticism," namely, the "sects of philosophers" in China.[26] He admires this one religion because the philosophical spirit of its practitioners enabled it to be free of "superstition." This is one of Voltaire's favorite terms of abuse, and it is not much of an exaggeration to say that Voltaire subsumed the creedal content of all other religions under the category of error and superstition. Although one might well ask whether or not he was justified in characterizing these "sects of philosophers" as religious, the key definitional issue concerns the claim that to be free of fanaticism is to be free of superstition. This claim implies that fanaticism must be understood not in terms of enthusiasm, as was traditionally the case, but rather in *the dynamic interplay between enthusiasm and superstition*. Before Voltaire, that is, enthusiasm marked off fanatics (either approvingly or disapprovingly) as a sub-set of religious believers. However, if the content of religious commitment is superstition and the presence of superstition is a necessary condition of fanaticism, then fanaticism must "pollute" the whole pool of religious believers. Section three will address the philosophical problem raised by the devastating breadth of Voltaire's concept of fanaticism. Still, it is not ridiculously broad. For, even if it is granted that all organized religions are polluted or tainted by fanaticism, it does not follow that every religious believer is a fanatic, a conclusion that would immediately destroy the cogency of Voltaire's position. Rather, each one is *potentially* a fanatic. This is not a vacuous truism since a person who does not believe in any religious superstition lacks, *ex hypothesi*, the potential to become a fanatic (although he or she might be prone to a range of *other* social or ethical dangers). Nevertheless, Voltaire is convinced that it is only a contingent, though fortunate psychological feature of many believers, that superstition does not spark the enthusiasm that turns a person into a fanatic.

David Hume's *Of Superstition and Enthusiasm* provides an illuminating contrast with Voltaire on precisely this point. For Hume was also a critic of religion but, instead of exploring the interplay of superstition and enthusiasm in terms of a radical new concept of fanaticism, he sharply separated enthusiasm from superstition to

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[26] *Philosophical Dictionary*, "fanaticism."

create two opposing personality types. Then, quite conventionally, he placed the fanatic within the enthusiastic type. In fact, Hume describes the fanatic as the embodiment of enthusiasm: "when this frenzy once takes place, which is the summit of enthusiasm ... the fanatic madman delivers himself over, blindly, and without reserve, to the supposed ... inspiration from above."[27] Hume's interpretation contains an interesting twist. He does not, of course, approve of the fanatic the way some ancients might, but neither does he go along with religious critics among his contemporaries. Rather, he argues that the enthusiasm of the fanatic (no matter how deluded) is a sign of abundant, elevated feelings, and arises "from prosperous success, from luxuriant health, from strong spirits, or from a bold and confident disposition."[28] Predicting that the fury of the fanatics will quickly exhaust itself, Hume concludes that they will eventually turn into independently minded citizens with little patience for dogma and empty ritual. By contrast, he says, the need for superstition is a sign of apprehensive, frightened feelings, and arises "from the unhappy situation of private or public affairs, from ill health, from a gloomy and melancholy disposition" or all of the latter.[29] Hence the "terrified credulity" of the superstitious types will make sure they are kept in thrall to priests or any entrenched political authority.

Hume's case for preferring an enthusiastic fanatic relative to a superstitious wimp depends on the principle of utility that Voltaire also embraced. So their background disagreement on the *psychological* issue becomes all the more important. And although the primary goal of this section is to clarify rather than defend Voltaire's position, I suggest that events of the past 250 years tend to confirm the wisdom of Voltaire's decision to explore a dynamic interplay between enthusiasm and superstition. For instance, consider two connected flaws in Hume's account. First, by separating the confident enthusiast and the apprehensive, superstition-ridden believer into opposing personality types, Hume could make little sense of demagogic leaders who are able to play on the humiliations and fears of the timid masses in order to *create* confident enthusiasts.

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[27] David Hume, "Of Superstition and Enthusiasm" in *Essays: Moral, Political and Literary* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1987) 74.

[28] Hume, 74.

[29] Hume, 73.

For the special skill of such leaders, according to Voltaire, lies in exploiting inspiring and death-defying superstitions (often not believed by the power-hungry leader themselves) to produce a volatile collection of fanatics. "These knaves," he says, "promised them a whole eternity of pleasures if they would go and assassinate all those that he should point out to them."[30] Secondly, by defining the fanatic within the enthusiastic personality type, Hume does not allow for a fanatic who shows no signs of raving and contortions. Voltaire, on the other hand, refers to the "cold-blooded fanaticism" of persons who are under the iron control of one idea but are extraordinarily calm and dispassionate.[31] Such fanatics refuse to tolerate anyone who does not acquiesce to the same controlling idea. If they have the power, he says, they will "sentence men to death for no other crime than that of thinking differently from themselves," like the Catholic churchmen who murdered Jean Calas.[32] Cold-blooded fanaticism is likely to be the most dangerous form of fanaticism in the long run because it can so easily permeate bureaucracies and shape institutions.

It is worth emphasizing that the psychological advantages of Voltaire's account are created by a semantic shift. More specifically, he used "an affix to form a new word by derivation"—*fanaticism* from *fanatic*.[33] By forming this derivational affix, however, he undermined the traditional meaning of the latter word that, I have argued, was used in an approving and then disapproving way in the context of an absolutist culture. Note that Hume discussed the fanatic within one of the "two species of *false* religion"—enthusiasm and superstition—implying the possibility of a "*true* religion."[34] From Voltaire's perspective, this highlights the flaws of Hume's argument because, insofar as the campaign to *écrasez l'infâme* moves toward to the goal of an "enlightened" culture, the very notion of a true religion (and hence the old word fanatic) loses any meaning. In sum, fanaticism, the "derivational affix" of fanatic, becomes the key normative concept while the displaced word, fanatic, takes on the function of referring to the range of people who are afflicted with full-blown fanaticism. Hume was essentially us-

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[30] *Philosophical Dictionary*, "fanaticism."

[31] *Philosophical Dictionary*, "fanaticism."

[32] *Philosophical Dictionary*, "fanaticism."

[33] Celia M. Millward, *Handbook For Writers* (Toronto: Harcourt Brace, 1999) 411.

[34] Hume, 74. Emphasis added.

ing the word fanatic in a sense that had fallen out of favour within the influential group of French intellectuals with which Voltaire was associated. This claim is supported by a rare account of the lexicographical context of Voltaire's writings:

> The fact is striking. "Fanaticism" does not appear in the seventeenth century French dictionaries. Antoine Furetière, in his *Dictionnaire Universel* (The Hague, 1690) ignores fanaticism but devotes a brief article to the fanatic. The *Dictionnaire de L'Académie* of 1694 carries only "fanatic." Louis Morei, at the beginning of the eighteenth century devotes two long articles to fanatics but does not mention fanaticism …. As a sign of the changing times, the *Encyclopédie* (1777) devoted a mere column to "fanatics" and seventeen full pages of two columns each to "fanaticism."[35]

Voltaire eventually influenced intellectual discourse in Britain, too. In the theological and intellectual attacks on the "resurgent enthusiasm" of the religious sects that proliferated in early eighteenth-century Britain, fanatics were still being identified through the enthusiastic manner of their belief by persons who remained believers in the cogency of their own religious truths. Alasdair MacDonald indicates that it was only in the last half of the eighteenth century—after *The British Magazine* for March 1765 "gives an account of fanaticism from Voltaire's *Dictionnaire Philosophique* (1764)"—that fanaticism started to be used in Britain in Voltaire-like fashion.[36]

The Paradoxes of Fanaticism

Although my goal is to defend the lasting value of Voltaire's formulation, his concept of fanaticism opens up deep theoretical paradoxes and I will begin this section by clarifying the underlying definitional problem. The object of Voltaire's attack, that is, must be defined in contradistinction to tolerance, yet tolerance is a normative ideal that gained widespread appeal in the West during the

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[35] Haynal et al., 20.

[36] Alasdair MacDonald, "Enthusiasm Resurgent," *Dalhousie Review* 42 (1962): 358.

eighteenth century. Hence fanaticism must be treated as "one of those labels that have long been in use as an integral part of cultural history rather than objective classification."[37] Only by taking this approach is it possible to make war on fanaticism and to promote tolerance at the same time. However, Voltaire uses the word to label a *disease*. And insofar as Voltaire diagnoses fanaticism as if he were a physician making use of an "objective classification" rather than a historian paying attention to the axiological nuances of different cultures, Isaiah Berlin's symbolism seems to be appropriate. At the very least, this sharpens the edge on what I referred to previously as the devastating breadth of Voltaire's concept. Only a circumscribed set of religious believers—full-blown fanatics— should be treated as patients suffering from a disease, but all believers, according to Voltaire, are infected with fanaticism and should be kept under a watchful eye. Nor was his prognosis favorable: "once fanaticism has infected a brain the disease is almost incurable."[38]

Ecrasez l'infâme, in this light, starts to look like a slogan of *intolerance*—expressing a commitment to a world-view that conceives religious commitment as pathological. Voltaire's problem can be formulated as a self-referential paradox: he spent his life fighting against fanaticism, defined in such a way that his own attacks were inevitably fanatical.[39] This charge can be prosecuted, according to Susan Sontag's well-known argument, by claiming that Voltaire exhibited the bad intellectual habit of using disease as a metaphor.[40] If so, he was acting like his religious enemies. Andrew Murphy, for example, points to the seventeenth-century Massachusetts Bay Puritan magistrate Joseph Cotton, who regularly "compared the banishment of heretics and other troublemakers to ex-

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[37] Edward Said, *Covering Islam* (New York: Pantheon, 1981) 9.

[38] *Philosophical Dictionary*, "fanaticism."

[39] This paradox has actually been stated in various ways before. Ridgeway gives Flaubert as its source (18). Haskell M. Block's introduction to *Candide and Other Writings* (New York: Modern Library, 1956) says that Voltaire responded to fanaticism "with a fanaticism of his own" (xvii). John Gray says "Voltaire's opposition to Christian fanaticism had a fanatical bent" (1). These commentators, however, bring up the point casually and then let it disappear. It has not been examined in anything like the necessary detail.

[40] Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1978).

cluding someone with the plague or other infectious disease."[41]
The metaphor of disease is certainly a rhetorically powerful way of
responding to the threat of a terrifying "Other" standing outside
one's own belief system, but Voltaire's fanaticism would lack the
theoretical rigour and explanatory power characteristic of a truly
scientific concept if it was no more than a metaphor.[42] The obvious
defensive option is to supply an intellectual context that would
enable one to take *seriously* Voltaire's claim that fanaticism is some
sort of disease. My comments on the psychological dynamics of
fanaticism in the previous section were tentative and sketchy, but
they do provide a bridge to that possibility. Specifically, if Voltaire
conceptualized the various forms of this alleged disease in terms of
the interplay between enthusiasm and superstition, can this inter-
play be explained through some variable that is a plausible object
for scientific investigation?

Consider Voltaire's comments on certain Eastern ascetics. Their
significance lies not in what they believe, but in what they do. For
example, a "young fakir who fixes his eye on the tip of his nose
when saying his prayers" gradually moves into an "intermediate
state between sleeping and waking."[43] This evokes James Braid's
nineteenth-century notion of "nervous sleep" (or hypnotism) and
there is good reason for Voltaire to be fascinated with the extraor-
dinary focus or "devotional ardour" achieved by fakirs.[44] First of all,
exercising this auto-hypnotic power allows the practitioners to
achieve the single-mindedness that is an effect of enthusiasm, with-
out the frenzied emotional and behavioural affects that tradition-
ally defined this state. Secondly, there remains a key difference
between these religious ascetics and cold-blooded fanatics even
though both exhibit supreme calm and self-control. For the latter
form of fanaticism is conditioned by *beliefs* (or a belief system),
and the trajectory of commitment is toward *social action*. Religious
fanatics, therefore, present a danger lacking in those Muslim and

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[41] Andrew Murphy, *Conscience and Community* (University Park, PA: Pennsylva-
nia State UP, 2000) 44.

[42] I recognize that "truly scientific concept" is a loaded phrase. The sense in which
Voltaire's conception might be scientific is suggested in what follows.

[43] *Philosophical Dictionary*, "enthusiasm."

[44] An excellent account of how these ideas started to take systematic form in the
French milieu shortly after Voltaire, is contained in Adam Crabtree, *From Mesmer
to Freud* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1993).

Hindu ascetics who participate in psycho-physiological *practices* that are not necessarily bound up with superstition and culminate in *self-absorption*. Evaluative issues aside, the auto-hypnotic power of the fakirs might provide a clue to the mechanism underlying the varieties of fanaticism. Could symptoms be explained as patterns of behaviour linked to a specific set of conditions—psychological, physiological, social, etc.—that shape human suggestibility in predictably dangerous ways?

This idea is obviously premised on Voltaire's belief that fakirs were not anomalies, but rather persons skilled at exploiting the inherent suggestibility of consciousness. In a letter regarding the Calas affair, Voltaire writes: "fanaticism is usually confined to young people" because they can be more easily "inflamed by superstitions."[45] However, he recognized that the interplay between enthusiasm and superstition is capable of being inflamed insofar as individuals form part of a collective. The latter condition, then, along with more specialized forms of psycho-physiological conditioning, can produce behaviour in adults similar to what might be expected of hyper-suggestible young people. Hence Voltaire referred to fanaticism as an "epidemic malady" that intensified through feedback between superstition and enthusiasm.[46] With this approach, he was moving speculatively toward the themes explored more systematically in the "group psychology" that grew up around the likes of Gustav LeBon and Sigmund Freud.[47] Still, my immediate goal is to defend the coherence of Voltaire's root claim that a fanaticism is a disease, so it makes sense to connect the fanatic directly with the range of pathological types treated by Freud and his predecessors such as the French psychiatrists Charcot and Janet. Regarding hysteria, for example, revisionists make the case that scientists who considered diagnosis to the application of an "objective classification" were confused.[48] In fact, it was a value-laden

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[45] Voltaire, "Letter to M. Damilaville, March 1 1765," in *Candide and Other Writings*, ed. Block, 527.

[46] *Philosophical Dictionary*, "fanaticism."

[47] Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, ed. Robert K. Merton (New York: Viking, 1960); Sigmund Freud, "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego," trans. James Strachey, *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth P, 1948) 18:66–144.

[48] Alan Krohn, *Hysteria: The Elusive Neurosis* (New York: International Universities P, 1978. For a relevant philosophical context for pursuing this line of thought,

interpretation of a set of symptoms that women might have integrated into their behaviour as a response to social expectations of their role. This does not mean hysteria did not exist. It simply points to a complex of social and psychological variables that are irrelevant to pathologies such as tuberculosis or influenza.

Voltaire's concept of fanaticism gains plausibility if it refers to a psychiatric disorder of a similar type. Nevertheless, there is another obstacle that can derail a defence along these lines. For in paradigm cases of hysteria there was a consensus that subjects actually were suffering from an ailment despite many conflicts regarding diagnosis and/or treatment. By contrast, there is an attractive option to conceiving fanaticism as a pathological condition, namely, conceiving it as a vice that can be ascribed on the basis of the *mode* of a person's commitment rather than the *content* of belief. It is the vice of over-commitment, to give it an Aristotelian flavor.[49] I will call this a "moderate" concept of fanaticism because it does not have to refer to "superstition" (or to other terms that imply, less abusively, the flawed nature of the beliefs to which a person is committed). Hence, it avoids the apparent intolerance of Voltaire's radical concept according to which the huge numbers of people committed to religious beliefs are potential fanatics. In this regard the moderate concept re-establishes continuity with the view of the fanatic that prevailed before Voltaire's radical revision. Fanaticism, of course, is now an integral part of everyday speech, but if this derivational affix does not carry the semantic shift described in the previous section then it might be possible to attack fanaticism while at the same time promoting tolerance.

To test this strategy for moderating Voltaire's concept of fanaticism, consider the paradigm case of a small Danish sect mentioned in Ayer's book on Voltaire. Its members believed that "infants who die before being baptized are damned, those who die immediately after having received baptism enjoy eternal glory. They accordingly went around killing as many newly baptized infants as they could discover, thereby preserving them from sin, from the miseries of this life and from hell, and sending them infallibly to

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see Ian Hacking, *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995) chap. 14.

[49] This is essentially the position of Jay Newman, *Fanatics and Hypocrites* (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1986).

heaven."[50] Moderates would join Voltaire in identifying sect members *as fanatics* because it is the role played by the sect's beliefs that distinguishes members from systematic child-killers motivated by revenge or some psychosis unrelated to fanaticism. Many Christians, however, believe in sin, damnation, hell, soul, baptism, heaven, eternal bliss, and the like, but never express their commitment by killing newly baptized infants. Hence the moderate concept, neutral regarding the content of the sect's beliefs, ascribes fanaticism on the basis of an *over-commitment* to beliefs to which other Christians can be committed in a less extreme ways. All the talk of "extremism" in the mass media reflects how deeply the moderate concept of fanaticism is embedded in contemporary western consciousness. Yet it is misleading. For ascribing fanaticism to sect members involves both a *condemnation* and an *explanation* of the behaviour. The latter is a consequence of former (because explaining why a person or group does something wrong is only required on the assumption that something wrong has been done in the first place). Over time, however, the moderate explanation – that such persons are over-committed to their beliefs – tends to hide the normative perspective from which the condemnation is made. So members of a tolerant culture start referring to extremism under the assumption that we are conveying a *neutral description* of events.

This is an illusion created by a piece of viciously circular reasoning. The whole point of the sect's beliefs, after all, is for members to live by them; they are dispositions to action. Persons whose behaviour is unaffected by professed beliefs can uncontroversially be described as *under*-committed or *lacking* in commitment. Yet it is difficult to go further because each community of believers generates its own criteria for assessing commitment. One Christian might feel overcome with sadness since this pure soul will inevitably be besmirched and possibly end up in hell. Another goes beyond that and not only decides against having a child of her own, but engages in missionary work with like-minded Christians to convince others to make the same decision. Are both committed to some degree to the same beliefs? More to the point, if infant-killing Danish Christians are *over*-committed, what criterion is being used to make that determination? From

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[50] Ayer, 168.

Voltaire to the most tolerant of contemporary liberals, anyone identifying the latter Christians as fanatics would be condemning the policy of killing of newly baptized infants for "contradicting basic moral principles." Still, using such a locution to determine *over*-commitment begs the question by making it impossible for sect members to express *serious* commitment. For the sect's belief system includes meta-beliefs and mediating beliefs regarding the moral pre-eminence of the soul's eternal bliss relative to the evils involved in an early death, that make it perfectly rational for believers to kill infants. In sum, fanatics are not extremists to be identified by over-commitment, but rather by the *consistency* with which they follow their beliefs.[51] To condemn a fanatic, therefore, requires taking issue with the substantial content of relevant beliefs—precisely what got Voltaire into trouble in the first place.

Is it possible to adjust the sense in which the moderate concept is neutral regarding content so that it can maintain a tolerance requirement? One attractive option is to identify sect members as fanatics on the grounds that they "pervert" or "distort" Christianity (in line with the familiar claim these days that figures such as Osama Bin Laden have hijacked Islam and done a gross disservice to "true Muslims"). However, this presupposes a clear answer to the question "what is a true Christian?" (and in at least one respect that is no different from the question "what is a properly committed Christian?"), namely both are internal matters to be worked out by Christians. To ascribe fanaticism in the most obvious cases, then, moderates must enter into abstruse theological disputes with competing communities (the Danish sect along with Roman Catholics, Baptists, Methodists, Mormons, etc.) while trying to fly a neutral flag. The impossibility of this task is underlined by the fact that the desire to determine the true faith is part of a narrative that remains incomplete even as the twenty-first century begins. There is historical irony in this. For it was the detailed work of Voltaire's philosophical mentors, such as Pierre Bayle, that helped to create a congenial atmosphere for diverse intellectuals to pursue the truth about Christianity. Using an array of scholarly and scientific methods, in other words, they successfully addressed a myriad of historical, archaeological, linguistic, and hermeneutical difficulties that

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[51] This sets up the meta-ethical paradox confronted by R.M. Hare in his classic treatment of fanaticism in *Freedom and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1965).

form an integral part of the religion. By the nineteenth century, however, Nietzsche could look at the enlightenment produced by the German philologists with mixed emotions because their efforts to uncover "*the truth about Christianity*" through an exact scholarly analysis of the relevant texts had actually undermined the desire to live the life of a "*true Christian*" in the most worthy of aspirants.[52]

Whatever the cogency of this broad claim, Nietzsche does highlight one specific point essential to a defence of Voltaire's radical concept of fanaticism. Even if one takes very seriously the project to sort out the truth about Christianity and even if one tries to use any knowledge acquired to shape what it means to be a true Christian, an increase in positive knowledge regarding some matrix of traditional beliefs can *never* reach a point sufficient to *rule out* certain interpretations of those beliefs. Regarding the belief in "soul," "salvation" and "afterlife," for example, it will never be possible to refute conclusively every interpretation according to which believers will quite consistently kill people. Indeed, for Voltaire it is self-evident that, while those sorts of beliefs remain in play, we should be surprised only if some believers did *not* at some time act in such a way. For a deep affinity holds between the idea of "heaven" (or "paradise") and behaviour of someone a liberal culture labels an extremist, whether the latter is heeding the heaven-on-earth belief of a political revolutionary or the more traditional heaven of a religious martyr. By its very nature, such an idea demands the *unconditional* commitment that is inseparable from a meta-belief in the absolute truth of the idea—Voltaire's intellectual error *par excellence*. In this light, consider Nietzsche's dedication of the first edition of *Human All-Too Human* to Voltaire. Published during the centenary of Voltaire's death, it contains a powerful linguistic pattern of references to fanaticism in Voltaire's sense of the term. With the book's subtitle, *A Book for Free Spirits*, Nietzsche gives another show of allegiance to core Enlightenment values after his youthful intoxication with Wagnerian romanticism. In later works the "free spirit" becomes a major conspirator in the crucial event of modernity. The "death of God," however, amounts to the death of all unconditional beliefs. So it makes sense that this master of the

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[52] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*, trans. Adrian Collins (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1957) chap. 7

strikingly coined slogan should invoke Voltaire to end the penulti-
mate section of his autobiography, *Ecce Homo—écrasez l'infâme*.[53]

Fanaticism and the Paradoxes of Tolerance

Even if a moderate concept cannot be ascribed without contradic-
tion, the Nietzsche connection only seems to emphasize that intol-
erance is the inevitable consequence of ascribing Voltaire's radical
version of fanaticism. So, perhaps we are dealing with a rhetori-
cally powerful but irremediably flawed concept that is best dis-
pensed with. That position cannot be dismissed lightly, but this
section suggests that the paradoxical character of fanaticism is mir-
rored in its antonym, and tolerance is a normative concept we
surely cannot do without. I will move toward the conclusion that
Voltaire does successfully resolve the genuine paradox that binds
the two together, but I begin this final section by clarifying the
relevant intersection between fanaticism and tolerance.[54] Propo-
nents of tolerance, that is, were primarily concerned with protect-
ing liberty of conscience. For instance, Pierre Bayle advocated a
state that "gives the principle of toleration greater importance than
any specific religious creed."[55] R.A. Leigh argues that Bayle "was
trapped by his own logic into admitting that if persecution of Prot-
estants becomes a matter of conscience for a Roman Catholic, then
that person was justified in the act of persecution."[56] And this was
the trap that scared Voltaire when he encountered the sort of reli-
gious beliefs motivating the Danish sect members. For the killing
of people (especially, perhaps, if it resulted in the martyrdom of

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[53] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage,
1969) "Why I Am Destiny," 335. Diderot, interestingly enough, refers to Voltaire as
"dear Anti-Christ," another one of Nietzsche's literary personae. Quoted in Patrick
Riley, "The Tolerant Skepticism of Voltaire and Diderot," *Early Modern Skepticism
and the Origins of Toleration*, ed. Alan Levine (New York: Lexington Books, 1999)
261. I discuss Nietzsche's dedication of *Human All-Too Human* to Voltaire in a
review of recent translations of the work by R.J. Hollingdale and Gary Handwerk,
in *Philosophy in Review* 18.1 (June 1998): 213–16.
[54] There are legitimate distinctions to be made between toleration and tolerance.
But Voltaire uses the terms interchangeably and I can make my argument within
his terms of reference.
[55] Kenneth Weinstein, "Pierre Bayle's Atheistic Politics," in *Early Modern Skepticism*,
ed. Levine, 219.
[56] R.A. Leigh, *Rousseau and the Problem of Tolerance in the 18th Century* (Oxford:
Clarendon Press, 1979) 18.

the killers) could be perceived as proof that believers were seriously committed.

Leigh's argument assumes that for Bayle the practice of "wise tolerance" was inviolable. However, this is implausible given Bayle's religious skepticism. In fact, he advocated the practice in order to secure relief from social strife *despite* his belief that in setting up conditions that allowed religion to survive (and perhaps prosper) the root cause of strife was preserved. Voltaire explicitly used the danger of fanaticism to justify abrogating the practice of tolerance in cases such as the Danish sect: "To deprive government of a right to punish the errors of men, it is necessary that those errors should not be criminal: now they are criminal, when they disturb the peace of society; and they trouble that society, when they inspire fanaticism; it is therefore necessary that men should not be fanatics, to be entitled to the privilege of toleration."[57] As usual, Voltaire links the motivation of fanatics to "errors." He had thoroughly learned the lesson provided by two centuries of violence, namely that any attempt to correct alleged errors directly by legislation and force always backfires. Yet he proposes a preventive measure that, in the long term, will preclude having to abrogate the practice of tolerance: "there is no other remedy against those who would take these follies seriously, than the philosophic spirit which, extending itself through the public mind, at length softens the manners of men and prevents the access of disease."[58] Voltaire's hope was that the practice of tolerance might conspire, as it were, with the widespread exercise of the philosophical spirit (made possible *by* the practice) to eliminate belief in the creedal content of religions which is the root of fanaticism. In sum, he concurred with Bayle that the "vision of tolerance within Christendom is a mere pit stop on the path to a post-Christian society."[59] The influence of both Locke and Rousseau works against such a vision, and by dealing with each in turn I can complete my overall argument.

No less than Bayle and Voltaire, Locke embraced the ingenious Enlightenment policy of "separating church and state." Indeed, Locke popularized the core idea in his *Letter on Toleration*:

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[57] *Treatise on Tolerance*, section 18.

[58] *Philosophical Dictionary*, "fanaticism."

[59] Weinstein, 224. Diana Schaub makes a similar point regarding Montesquieu in "Of Believers and Barbarians: Montesquieu's Enlightened Toleration," in *Early Modern Skepticism*, ed. Levine, 225–47.

"the business of the laws is not to provide for the truth of opinions, but for the safety and security of the commonwealth."[60] The so-called "establishment clause" in the first amendment to United States Constitution, moreover, exemplifies the Lockean prescription that "the authority of ecclesiastics ought to be confined within the bounds of the Church, nor can it in any manner be extended to civil affairs."[61] This ensures public safety and security by upholding freedom of *belief* while limiting the *behaviour* that Voltaire identified with fanaticism. This raises the possibility that one can address the issue of religious violence without having to formulate a concept of fanaticism at all. To explore this possibility, it is helpful to distinguish between the diverse *attitudes* that can underlie the practice of tolerance, and the consensus regarding the *practice* itself.[62] Voltaire's irreligious attitude, for instance, was quite alien to Locke, a devout Christian. Insofar as Locke was willing to give up any right to suppress those who believed "the true faith" was different from his own faith, he can be said to exhibit the *virtue* of tolerance. However, this is a puzzling virtue because it is consistent with Locke condemning the errors and abominations of those committed to religions other than his own (or to those committed to no religion). In other words, if Locke exhibited the virtue of tolerance by exercising self-control in the face of what he perceived to be profound error, then deep disapproval or disgust is a condition of ascribing it. And this entails that a person can only exhibit tolerance in an intolerant manner. The mirror image of Voltaire's paradox appears.

In one sense, however, this is a superficial phenomenon created by the *indifference* that grows up as people lose interest in the religious issues that once provoked violence. This is often the appropriate attitude for those of us who believe that the precise length of a man's beard ought to be a matter of deep spiritual concern only in the universe of *Candide*. Yet tolerance cannot be reducible to it because that would mean characterizing almost any expression of strong disagreement as intolerance. Locke's attitude, by contrast, encourages a willing acceptance of a practice designed to peacefully accommodate rock-bottom disagreements that might

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[60] John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1955) 41.
[61] Locke, 49.
[62] Bernard Williams, "Toleration: An Impossible Virtue," *Toleration: An Exclusive Virtue*, ed. David Heyd (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996) 20.

never be overcome by indifference. Similarly, the practice provided Voltaire (in principle) with the right to exercise his *non*-believing attitude in attacks on the perceived superstitions of religious believers. Since he never advocated the use of political force to entrench something akin to Pierre Bayle's "society of atheists," campaigning to *écrasez l'infâme* was compatible with exhibiting the virtue of tolerance. Still, this virtue remains entangled in a deeper paradox. As Susan Mendus puts it: "normally we count toleration as a virtue ... however, where toleration is based on moral approval, it implies that the thing tolerated is wrong and ought not to exist. The question which then arises is why ... it should be thought good to tolerate."[63] Reconsider my exemplars of this virtue. Voltaire tolerated religious believers even though religion was what was "wrong and ought not to exist," while an enlightened version of Locke would tolerate Catholics or atheists even though he believed their positions were "wrong and ought not to exist." To the question "why is it good to tolerate the latter?" both might answer "to secure a *modus vivendi*." Yet the stability of a *modus vivendi* is always at risk because whenever citizens exercise the self-control essential to tolerance, they will cast longing glances into a future where the "true faith" is flourishing *or* eradicated.

John Rawls provides an attractive way of resolving the Mendus paradox. He argues that Locke's response to the wars of religion has been elaborated and extended over the years to the point where the practice of tolerance accommodates a huge diversity of religions and/or "comprehensive doctrines of the good."[64] A just society achieves an "overlapping consensus" between very different comprehensive doctrines and hence a space is created for "public reason" to operate. Profound disagreement—over abortion, for example—is certainly not eliminated, but citizens learn to distinguish, as Thomas Nagel, says "between the values a person can appeal to in conducting his own life and those he can appeal to in justifying the exercise of political power."[65] It is important to note

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[63] Susan Mendus, *Toleration and the Limits of Liberalism* (London: Macmillan, 1989) 18.

[64] John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1993).

[65] Thomas Nagel, *Equality and Partiality* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991) 156. With a very different philosophical outlook, a self-described "liberal ironist" such as Richard Rorty can also align himself with Rawls through the public/private distinction. The literature dealing with Rawlsian liberalism is, of course, immense.

that in this liberal narrative the nature of Locke and Voltaire's virtue is qualitatively transformed. For an attachment to a public space that affirms diversity as an inevitable and inherently valuable fact of life makes tolerating what one thinks is intolerable straightforwardly *good*. If practicing tolerance becomes far more than an attitude of indifference, then it also goes well beyond the attitude necessary for securing a *modus vivendi* among parties with very different beliefs. Rather, it involves a *respect* for diversity that, insofar as the liberal configuration of attitude and practice is worthy of being considered a permanent state, turns tolerance into an ideal. Rawls consciously acknowledges Locke as the originator of his narrative, yet the view of tolerance that completes it raises questions about the value of Voltaire's concept of fanaticism. In particular, it depends upon a characterization of religious belief as "error" that sits uneasily with the requisite respect for religious believers.

On the face of it, the Lockean spirit of the first amendment to the United States constitution also opposes Voltaire. For even though the "establishment clause" ensures the public life of citizens is not shaped by religious beliefs, the existence of the "free exercise clause" encourages all sorts of religious commitment in private life. In reality, however, liberal tolerance contains a problem that has a family resemblance to the flaw in the moderate concept of fanaticism examined in the previous section. After all, twenty-first century Americans are largely religious believers. To function effectively, therefore, the liberal view of tolerance depends upon a deep-seated belief that diverse believers are living together harmoniously with other believers as well as non-believers in a *neutral* space. As Bernard Williams points out, though, the neutral *procedures* of a liberal society are not necessarily neutral regarding *outcome*.[66] The liberal appeal might be to Locke—there

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[66] Williams, 23. From a legal point of view, for instance, the 1990 *Smith* decision impoverished any guarantee of religion-specific rights for Americans by ruling that freedom to exercise beliefs—to express commitment in one's behaviour—was legally equivalent to not being unfairly discriminated against by laws that explicitly target religions. Neutrally framed laws, in other words, work against many—even mainstream—forms of religious commitment. See Nathan Oman, "Pascal's First Amendment: Taking Religion Seriously as a Justification for Free Exercise," *Humane Studies Review* 13.2 (2001), available at www.theihs.org/libertyguide/hsr/hsr.php/40.html. Locke's Christianity is taken very seriously by Peter Lopston, *Theories of Human Nature* (Peterborough: Broadview, 1995) chap. 4.

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is no reference to the errors or superstitions of believers – but the effect is the marginalization of religion. The undeniable bias against many believers in those outcomes is due to the rules of the game whereby the value of personal autonomy tends to trump all other values. This clarifies the normative perspective from which liberals can affirm tolerance as a virtue without paradox: it is good to tolerate "what is wrong and ought not to exist" because in doing so one affirms autonomy. The political problem with clarifying this is that many religious believers might increasingly resist such an Enlightenment perspective and find no satisfactory answer to the quite reasonable question "why is it good to tolerate what *we* find intolerable?"[67] From a Voltaire perspective, the danger of fanaticism arises. His campaign to eradicate fanaticism root and branch, moreover, lacked any confusing pretence of neutrality from the outset. So, I will re-examine the attitude animating Voltaire's vision of tolerance as a practice that leads to a post-theistic culture with another philosophical contrast.

Rousseau explicitly frames an influential objection to Voltaire's attitude in terms of fanaticism. Consider this florid passage from *Emile*:

> Fanaticism, though cruel and bloodthirsty, is still a great and powerful passion, which stirs the heart of man, teaching him to despise death, and giving him an enormous motive power, while the philosophical spirit, on the other hand, assaults life and enfeebles it, degrades the soul, concentrates all the passions in basest self-interest, undermining unnoticed the very foundations of a virtuous society. The philosophical spirit does not kill men, but by reducing all their affections to a secret selfishness, is as fatal to the population as to virtue; war itself is not more destructive. Thus fanaticism, though its immediate results are more fatal than those of what is now called the philosophical spirit, is much less fatal in its after effects.[68]

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[67] Stanley Fish, for example, claims that liberals place certain religious believers in an "epistemological criminal class," in "Mission Impossible: Settling the Just Bounds Between Church and State," *Columbia Law Review* 97 (1997): 2283.
[68] Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Emile* (New York: Everyman Library, 1974) 276. Nietzsche's

Rousseau, another advocate of tolerance, argues that Voltaire's underlying attitude is more dangerous than fanaticism itself. For the "philosophical spirit" that flourishes within the practice of tolerance, invariably undermines all beliefs that require unconditional commitment. As I have suggested previously, religious beliefs are particularly vulnerable. Yet Rousseau claims that a virtuous action or policy that risks death (and so the annihilation of all narrow self-interest) has to be based on such a belief. Hence Voltaire is accused of making genuine commitment of any sort is psychologically impossible. It is not surprising that Voltaire's habit of using the image of the London stock market to express a vision of diverse human beings working together harmoniously was an anathema to Rousseau. It fuelled his belief that the spread of the philosophical spirit leads to a public motivated by cynical indifference mixed with dangerous nihilism. In general, Rousseau's nightmare is not implausible, although filling in the details creates impossibly diverse scenarios—from Nietzsche's "last men" blinking emptily in the post-God wilderness of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, to Bin Laden's greedy infidels populating New York's Twin Towers. However, it misses the mark as a criticism of humanity shaped by "the philosophical spirit" in Voltaire's post-theistic culture.

The *Philosophical Dictionary*'s entry on tolerance suggests why. It starts off with the statement that "tolerance is the portion of humanity" because "we are all full of weakness and error," and concludes by saying "we ought mutually to tolerate one another because we are all weak, inconsequential, subject to change and error."[69] Contrary to the appeals to fallibility that dominated the toleration debates of the previous century, Voltaire assumed that people believe in religious superstitions and errors *because* they are fallible and weak. Still, to define tolerance as the disposition to "mutually pardon our follies" is not simply a matter of reiterating the lesson that legislation and force tends to backfire.[70] Rather, it evokes an attitude with a rich intellectual and aesthetic (perhaps even a "spiritual") élan that augments and at the same time com-

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frequent condemnation of Rousseau as "a fanatic—a spirit who speaks with the pathological unconditionality of a Robespierre" should be read in the light of this fiery condemnation of a society governed by the "philosophical spirit." See *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968) 173.

[69] *Philosophical Dictionary*, "tolerance."

[70] *Philosophical Dictionary*, "tolerance."

plements the virtue of tolerance he exhibited in common with Locke. Voltaire certainly did not anticipate the Rawlsian move of transforming the virtue of tolerance into a kind of political ideal. Indeed, he thought some things were indeed follies, superstitions or errors, and ought to be condemned as such. Yet he did have a way of resolving the Mendus paradox, namely, it is *good* to tolerate such errors because we are all "ridiculous creatures" who need to find our own way to the truth—a path that usually reflects our weird and farcical character.[71] Roger Pearson points out that Voltaire's "essentially narrative" frame of mind is exceptionally effective in undermining the unconditional beliefs and theories with which people have given meaning to their lives.[72] However, the "therapeutic" value for readers who actively participate in the shifting perspectives that move Voltaire's tales is not simply the deconstruction of illusion. What Voltaire intended was to "breed an attitude of judicious tolerance and a taste for plurality and relativity—in short, to 'former l'esprit et le coeur.'"[73] This attitude is Voltaire's real counterpart to fanaticism.

The more Voltaire resembles a philosophical Salman Rushdie rather than Ayer's cardboard *philosophe* or the sterile Enlightenment rationalist caricatured by Isaiah Berlin, the more his concept of fanaticism gains credibility. For one thing, it means that the condemnation of a fanatic does not depend on the existence of some law of morality that holds universally like Newton's law of gravitation. Such a law, however, is an integral part of the Deism to which Voltaire supposedly adhered. Consider a striking entry in the *Philosophical Dictionary* that seems identical to Rousseau's comments in *Emile*: "it is absolutely necessary that the idea of a Supreme Being shall be deeply engraved in people's minds. Atheism is a pernicious monster that, if it is not so deadly as fanaticism, it is nearly always fatal to virtue."[74] How is one to read this? Despite Voltaire's rhetoric regarding the rationality of Deism, he seems mainly concerned with the fact that without Deism the most fundamental commitment—the commitment to peace and security—could not be maintained in the psyche of the masses. Indeed, his primary

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[71] *Philosophical Dictionary*, "tolerance."

[72] Pearson, 242.

[73] Pearson, 248.

[74] *Philosophical Dictionary*, "atheism II."

justification for Deism is as a pragmatic check against the proliferation of fanaticism. This line of interpretation would suit those who believe Voltaire to be a closet atheist—the position most consistent with the theme of this paper. His Deism, to use Norman Torrey's phrase, might contain several layers of "protective lying."[75] There is, however, a more esoteric explanation. Voltaire was fascinated by the success of *inoculation* as a preventative remedy against smallpox (and outraged by the irrationality of the French to adopt the practice).[76] Perhaps he conceived Deism as the most effective agent with which to inoculate the masses against fanaticism.

[75] Norman L. Torrey, "Voltaire and the English Deists," *Voltaire: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. William F. Bottiglia (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1968) 69–76.

[76] Voltaire, "Inoculation," *Philosophical Letters*, in *Candide and Other Writings*, ed. Block, 332–35.