Voltaire

Exchange in London, that place more venerable than many a court, and you will see representatives of all the nations assembled there for the profit of mankind. There the Jew, the Mahometan, and the Christian deal with one another as if they were of the same religion, and reserve the name of infidel for those who go bankrupt."

Legally and historically, England was no bastion of religious toleration: laws against nonconformists and atheists were still in force. Yet in England, and not in France, there was an air of toleration on the street that existed quite apart from the law. Even though both countries had aristocracies, England was not burdened with the unyielding class structure that crippled social and economic mobility in France. As Voltaire wrote in letter nine, "On the Government": "You hear no talk in this country [England] of high, middle, and low justice, nor of the right of hunting over the property of a citizen who himself has not the liberty of firing a shot in his own field."

A key to the difference between England and France lay in the English system of commerce and in the comparatively high regard in which the English held their merchants. (This is not meant to slight the substantial differences between the English and French governments—especially the constitutional ones—upon which Voltaire dwelled.) In France, aristocrats and the other elites of society regarded those in commerce with unalloyed contempt. In letter 10, "On Commerce," Voltaire pointedly commented on the French attitude: "The merchant himself so often hears his profession spoken of disdainfully that he is fool enough to blush." Yet in England, the "merchant justly proud" compares himself "not without some reason, to a Roman citizen." Indeed, the younger sons of nobility often entered commerce or took up a profession. This difference in attitude was a large factor in explaining the extraordinary rise of the English middle class, their wealth deriving from trade. Indeed, the French often derided England as a nation of shopkeepers. Voltaire thought this was a compliment, observing that if the English were able to sell themselves, it proved that they were worth something.

Commerce, or shopkeeping, established an arena within which people dealt with each other solely for economic benefit and, so, ignored extraneous factors such as the other party's religious practices. On the floor of the London Stock Exchange, religious differences disappeared into background noise as people scrambled to make a profit from one another. The economic self-interest of the Christian and the Jew outweighed the prejudice that might otherwise sour personal relations between them. They intersected and cooperated on a point of common interest: "the Presbyterian trusts the Anabaptist, and the Church of England man accepts the promise of the Quaker," Voltaire wrote in "On the Presbyterians."

Voltaire Versus Marx

Ironically, Voltaire singled out for praise precisely the same aspect of commerce—the London Stock Exchange—that Karl Marx later condemned. Both viewed the marketplace as impersonal or, in more negative Marxist terms, dehumanizing. For Marx, people in the marketplace ceased to be individuals expressing their humanity and became interchangeable units who bought and sold. To Voltaire, the impersonal nature of trade was a good thing. It allowed people to disregard the divisive human factors that had historically disrupted society, such as differences

"If there were only one religion in England, there would be danger of tyranny; if there were two, they would cut each other's throats; but there are thirty, and they live happily together in peace."

—VOLTAIRE

"On the Presbyterians"

of religion and class. The very fact that a Christian who wished to profit from a Jew, and vice versa, had to disregard the personal characteristics of the other party and deal with him civilly was what recommended the London Stock Exchange to Voltaire.

In this, Voltaire's voice is reminiscent of Adam Smith in his most popular work, *The Wealth of Nations*. Smith outlined how everyone in a civilized market society is dependent on the cooperation of multitudes even though his friends may number no more than a dozen or so. A marketplace requires the participation of throngs of people, most of whom one never directly encounters. It would be folly for any man to expect multitudes of strangers to benefit him out of sheer benevolence or because they like him. The cooperation of the butcher or the brewer, said Smith, was ensured by their simple self-interest. Thus, those who entered the marketplace did not need the approval or favor of those with whom they dealt. They needed only to pay their bills.

The toleration created by the London Stock Exchange extended far beyond its doors. After conducting business with each other, the Christian and the Jew went their separate ways. As Voltaire phrased it, "On leaving these peaceable and free assemblies, some go to the synagogue, others in search of a drink. . . ." In the end, "all are satisfied."

The *Philosophical Letters*—Voltaire's tribute to the English middle class, their commerce, and their society—created an enormous impact on the European intellectual scene. Calling the work "a declaration of war and a map of campaign," Will and Ariel Durant commented: "Rousseau said of these letters that they played a large part in the awakening of his mind; there must have been thousands of young Frenchmen who owed the book a similar debt. Lafayette said it made him a republican at the age of nine. [Heinrich] Heine thought 'it was not necessary for the censor to condemn this book; it would have been read without that.'"[3]

The French Reaction

Nevertheless, French censors seemed eager to condemn it. The printer was imprisoned in the Bastille. A *lettre de cachet* for the elusive Voltaire's immediate arrest was issued. By a legislative order, all known copies of the work were confiscated and burned in front of the Palais de Justice. Through the intercession of powerful friends, the *lettre de cachet* was withdrawn, again on the promise that he remain safely outside the limits of Paris. In this manner did the French church and state respond to Voltaire's salute to toleration.

But the themes of the *Philosophical Letters* resounded deeply within the consciousness of Europe for many decades to come. One of its themes was that freedom—especially freedom of commerce—was the true wellspring of religious toleration and of a peaceful civil society. The insight was nothing short of revolutionary because it reversed the accepted argument and policies on how to create a harmonious society. Traditionally, France (along with most other European nations) attempted to enforce a homogeneous system of values on its people in the belief that common values were necessary to ensure peace and harmony, the social glue that held