

VOLTAIRE AND THE JEWS

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Introduction

The idea of religious tolerance engendered by The Enlightenment led to a change in the legal and economic status of the Jews. Given civil rights and allowed a freedom of movement denied to them for centuries, Western European Jews in the nineteenth century rose to high levels in the professions, the arts, business and even government. Yet beneath the new external acceptance of the Jews, there existed in European society a virulent undercurrent of anti-Semitism. This anti-Semitism was different than the one that had plagued the Jews in the Middle-Ages or during the Inquisition for it was based not on theological, but secular grounds. It was racial, rooted in bogus-biology. Paradoxically, this racial anti-Semitism was given authority and first popularized by a self-confessed proponent of religious tolerance, the celebrated philosopher of the Enlightenment, Voltaire.

My paper discusses Voltaire's anti-Semitism: the historical developments that influenced it and, in turn, its influence on modern history.

Attitudes Toward the Jews Prior to The Enlightenment.

Throughout the Middle Ages the position of the Jews in Europe was dependent merely upon the good graces of some secular or ecclesiastical authority. Yet these authorities were prejudiced by the theory that the Jews were Christ killers, condemned to eternal wandering and damnation. This theory, stemming from Christian theology, was pervasive throughout Europe for centuries and influenced how the Jews were treated. Jews in the medieval period were never free from overt acts of hostility and violence and after the First Crusade of 1096 their position grew even worse. The religious fanaticism of the Crusaders caused not merely murderous attacks, but initiated a period of deterioration in the economic and legal standing of the Jews, exacerbating the embittered relations between Jews and their Christian neighbors.

From the time of the Crusades, the economic opportunities for Jews were drastically reduced. In the majority of European countries Jews were no longer allowed to compete in international commerce. Agriculture and crafts were barred. As the range of available livelihoods narrowed and the Church's campaign against usury intensified a need for credit, the Jews became dependent upon the only occupation left to them—granting loans. After the Crusades, lending money on interest emerged as the main Jewish occupation in the cities of England, France, Germany and Northern Italy. Money lending created a vicious cycle in regard to the Jews' public image. The popular perception was that the Jew's stubborn rejection of Christianity explained his moral inferiority and thus his deplorable social conduct—usury. Yet usury itself came to prove theological rationalization for persecution. This rationalization was popularized by joining it with medieval Christian mythology in which the Jews were not human at all, but cohorts of the devil. According to the myth, Jews required Christian blood for ritual use and murdered children to obtain pure, innocent blood. The Jews in Europe were regarded as social deviants who, because they rejected Christ, were contemptuous of humanity, thus dealing in socially unwholesome practices such as usury. Completely marginalized by society, the Jews were often blamed for social ills and physical disasters.

The New Idea of Religious Tolerance

Only a revolutionary break with powerful and pervading medieval beliefs could have brought about a change in Europe's treatment of the Jews. The eighteenth-century idea of religious liberty ignited just this revolutionary break and, in the political discourse of Europe, made possible a new consideration of the Jews' legal status.

By the 18th century, the idea of religious tolerance had gained acceptance by all the major thinkers of the West. In England, for example, John Locke argued that freedom of

religion demanded a separation of Church and State and the Jews were no exception to this theory. In France, the philosopher Montesquieu expressed a new cosmopolitan outlook that urged the “objective study of foreign civilizations.” Montesquieu stressed that one must regard other peoples not in a spirit of fear, but of curiosity.¹

To the philosophers of the time, religious freedom was closely tied to their contempt for the far-reaching authority of the established Christian religions—in France, the Catholic Church—in England, the Anglican Church. The English went so far as to create a new religion, Deism. Deism developed among those disenchanted with the Anglican Church. The English Deists believed that religion should be anti-authoritarian, reasonable, and lead to moral behavior. They viewed their religion as natural and rational, without any mystical or supernatural elements. Two major points of the Deist’s creed was a belief in the existence of God, and that the belief could be deduced empirically from the contemplation of nature. The Deists proclaimed themselves tolerant for they viewed a person’s religious belief as less important than his moral character. Deism was believed to be empirical, tolerant, reasonable, and capable of encouraging virtuous living.

Several of the French philosophers were influenced by English Deism, including Voltaire.

Taking up the creed of Deism, Voltaire declared:

The great name of Deist, which is not sufficiently revered, is the only name one ought to take. The only gospel one ought to read is the great book of Nature,

¹ Havens, George R., The Age of Ideas, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1955, “Montesquieu: Spirit of Laws,” page 129.

written by the hand of God and sealed with his seal. The only religion that ought to be professed is the religion of worshiping God and being a good man.²

The chief complaint of both the French and English philosophers against Christianity was that it bred a fanaticism that led people to commit crimes in the name of religion. France and England were both weary of religious wars and Voltaire, in his Philosophical Dictionary reminded his readers of the intolerance of the Reformation as well as referring to examples of contemporary religious excesses.

For the French philosophers, religious tolerance was not an end in itself. One could say they had a “hidden agenda” for they saw that with the decline of feudal power, France would give rise to a modern state in which free enterprise would be crucial to its strength. The French were astute enough to realize that such a state could come about only if all people, regardless of religion, were allowed rights—to interact easily in commerce and thus be freed to “grow” the economy. Religious tolerance was viewed then not merely as benefitting humanity, but as benefitting the nation.

Voltaire, in his Letters on England, wrote admiringly of the multitude of religious groups in London who despite their differences, easily interact with each other successfully in business:

Go into the London Stock Exchange—a more respectable place than many a court—and you will see representatives from all nations gathered together for the utility of men.³

The Pervasive Belief About Jews During The Enlightenment

During the eighteenth century, Christianity was viewed more skeptically than ever before. This new skepticism dealt a blow to theological anti-Semitism that viewed Jews as

² Wade, Ira, O., The Intellectual Development of Voltaire, Princeton University Press, 1969, page 212.

³ Voltaire, Letters on England, Penguin Books, London, 1980, page 41.

rejecters of Christ. Thoughtful observers became aware of the absurdities which had survived from the past: the evils of serfdom, guild restrictions, privileged classes and religious prejudices. The philosophers of The Enlightenment attacked the old regime, maintaining that progress was dependent on ridding society of outworn institutions as well as hateful bigotry.

Many great thinkers of The Enlightenment thus championed the long-victimized Jews. In Germany, the writer Gotthold Lessing courageously advocated Jewish rights. His drama, “Nathan the Wise” spoke of Jews as morally upright, even blessed. After a pogrom in Alsace in 1781, the Prussian Councillor of State, Christian William von Dohm, prepared a two-volume vindication of the Jews, *Upon the Civil Amelioration of the Condition of the Jews*, in which he wrote that the inferior status of the Jews in Europe was due to Christian prejudices and urged that they be given equal rights. Dohm’s book was the first specific plea for Jewish emancipation and aroused great interest in its day.

Yet the majority of thinkers in the eighteenth century believed that making Jews full citizens was problematic. They argued that the Jews’ numerous ritual laws would get in the way of civic duties. The most pervasive belief was that if Jews were to throw off their old customs, they could be socially improved. They would undergo what the French called “regeneration.” Most of the debates on the Jewish question from the 1780s to the middle of the nineteenth century, sought to determine whether the Jewish religion was an impediment to full regeneration. Advocates of Jewish emancipation, such as Montesquieu, maintained that despite their religion, Jews should be granted civil rights. Montesquieu argued that emancipation **itself** would make the Jew a better person. He believed that within several generations after gaining full civil rights, Jews would practice an enlightened, purified form of Judaism, not unlike Deism.

Montesquieu wrote:

It happens that slavery debases, burdens and destroys the mind whereas liberty forms it, elevates it and fortifies it . . . We make for ourselves the mind we want and we are the true artisans of it.⁴

Emancipation, then, in the eighteenth century, was conceived of not only as freedom from restrictions imposed by society but also as an internal process of liberation from the traditional behaviors that society, now found objectionable.

Voltaire's Views on the Jews

Despite the aura of religious tolerance surrounding the philosophers of The Enlightenment, there were those who had nothing but the utmost contempt for the Jews. In France, Diderot, a Deist, declared that the Jews were capable of any villainy. Diderot wrote of the Jews:

there is to be found among them only a confused mixture of the principles of reason and of revelation, an affected and often impenetrable obscurity, principles that lead to fanaticism, a blind respect for the authority of the doctors and of antiquity—in a word, all the defects indicative of an ignorant and superstitious nation.⁵

Another French philosopher, Baron D'Holbach, called the Jews the “vilest people on earth.”⁶ It was Voltaire, however, who most consistently and passionately argued against the Jews. Voltaire wrote about the Jews more than any other great personage of his time. Indeed,

⁴ Loy, Robert Jamal., Montesquieu, Twayne Publishers Inc., New York, 1968, page 99.

⁵ Wilson, Arthur, Diderot, Oxford University Press, New York, 1972, page 237.

⁶ Wistrich, Robert S., Anti-Semitism: The Longest Hatred, Pantheon Books, New York, 1991, page 45.

Voltaire wrote of the Jews in hundreds of letters and essays to the point of obsession. Yet unlike Montesquieu, Voltaire held out no “regeneration” hope for the Jews, for as much as he may have professed to possess the rational tolerance and empirical approach of a Deist, Voltaire was intolerant and irrational in regard to the Jews.

Voltaire believed that Western Europe should emulate the greatness and reasonableness of Classical Greece and Rome. Yet, in his view, the Jews were outside this tradition, entirely alien, for they were what he called “Asiatic.” According to Voltaire, the beliefs of the Jews were absurd, stemming from a people who were slaves to the Egyptians and had slavishly copied the evil practices of their masters.

In Voltaire’s view, Christians could ultimately be transformed into good citizens for Christianity was no more than a “Jewish-imposed belief” on a European people whose cultural and ethnic inheritance should have rightly stemmed from Classical Rome. According to Voltaire, though Christians were steeped in narrow-minded superstitious nonsense, they could still be saved, for after all, they were **racially** Europeans. Christianity was merely an overlay on their basic noble character. But as the Jews were “Asiatic,” they never could be good citizens as their corrupt nature was a racial component. It was part of their physical essence and thus could not be abandoned.

That the Jews were Asiatic, entirely alien to European ethnicity, was a refrain repeated by Voltaire again and again. It became a refrain he used to rationalize a great number of disparate negative judgements. For example, he wrote that the plays of the English tragic writers are:

almost all BARBAROUS . . . The style is too bombastic, too far removed from nature, too much copied from Hebrew writers who are themselves so full of Asiatic hot air.⁷

Not being Christian, Voltaire rejected the theological anti-Jew rhetoric. Whether Jews were “Christ killers” or “Christ rejecters” was of no concern to him. Voltaire hated them not for their refusal to accept Jesus, but for their innate, degraded character. Voltaire saw their character as ultimately dangerous to society. In his, “Lettre de Memmius a Ciceron,” Voltaire adopted the pose of a classic Roman, Memmius, who praises Cicero for an anti-Semitic oration and adds:

They are all of them born with raging fanaticism in their hearts, just as the Bretons and the Germans are born with blonde hair. I would not be in the least bit surprised if these people would not some day become deadly to the human race.⁸

And to the Jews themselves Voltaire wrote boldly:

You seem to be the maddest of the lot. The Kaffirs, the Hottentots, the Negroes of Guinea are much more reasonable and more honest people than your ancestors, the Jews. You have surpassed all nations in impertinent fables, in bad conduct, and in barbarism. You deserved to be punished, for this is your destiny.⁹

Ironically, Voltaire, the philosopher of The Enlightenment, never enlightened himself about Judaism or Jewish history. He often misquoted texts and rather than apply strategies of empirical scholarship to the question of the Jews, he fell back on emotional, narrow-minded

⁷ Voltaire, Letters on England, Penguin Books, London, 1980, page 95.

⁸ “Lettre de Memmius a Ciceron from The Complete Works of Voltaire,” as quoted in Hertzberg, Arthur, The French Enlightenment and the Jews, Columbia University Press, New York, 1968, page 303.

⁹ Hertzberg, Arthur, The French Enlightenment and the Jews, Columbia University Press, New York and London, 1968, page 90.

stereotypes. Voltaire went so far as to deny their very history. Again and again, Voltaire insisted that the Jews borrowed everything from other cultures, were ignorant of the arts and sciences, and were morally inferior to the Greeks. “The Jews were inveterate plagiarizers and there is not a single page of the Jewish books that was not stolen mostly from Homer.”¹⁰

In an article he wrote on Abraham in his Philosophical Dictionary, Voltaire defined the Jews as “a small, new, ignorant, crude people.” and declared:

The only thing that properly belongs to the Jews is their stubbornness, their superstitions and their hallowed usury.¹¹

Voltaire’s history was so ill-founded that he contradicted his own beliefs. On the one hand, he called Christianity a Jewish religion, but then to deny the Jews, any creativity at all, he developed an elaborate idea to reject the fact that Jews authored the Old Testament:

The Israelites in the wilderness, for want of bread lived on manna; therefore they had lost the art of baking; they were deficient in leather and stuffs; therefore they had neither shoemakers nor tailors; therefore they had lost their engravers and the art of engraving; therefore Moses is not the author of the Pentateuch.¹²

Another charge that Voltaire repeated obsessively was that the Jews hate all other men. In his “Traite sur la Tolerance a l’occasion de la Mort de Jean Calas,” he wrote that the Jews were an intolerant people and that:

¹⁰ ibid, page 363.

¹¹ ibid, page 303.

¹² Moore, G.G., “Letters of Certain Portuguese Jews to M. Voltaire” from Letters of Certain Jews to Monsieur Voltaire, Paris, Kentucky, 1845, page 34.

The supreme expression of the Jewish hatred of all men is that they, unlike all others, refuse to eat at the same table with other men.¹³

The Source of Voltaire's Anti-Jewish Writings

Some historians have seen Voltaire's rabid anti-Semitism as stemming from his negative personal encounters with Jews, in particular a Jew who was said to have owed him a great sum of money but never repaid it. This charge was made in Voltaire's own time but he denied it, maintaining that, after all, he was owed even more money by his Christian debtors:

I have forgotten about much larger bankruptcies by good Christians without complaining.¹⁴

Voltaire should be taken at his word. His anti-Jewish writings were in no way personal nor original. By the time he had become famous, all of his anti-Jewish ideas had been set down by others. Paradoxically one of the major anti-Jewish writers before Voltaire was himself a Jew: Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677). Spinoza's Theological, Political Tractate was the first book to analyze the Bible as a secular text. Spinoza denied the miracles of the Bible and declared that the Pentateuch was written for a people recently slaves with all the superstitions of the Egyptians. Spinoza downgraded the morality of the Bible and the status of the Jews in history. Spinoza wrote:

the Jews were entirely unfit to frame a wise code of laws and to keep the sovereign power vested in the community; they were all uncultivated and sunk in a wretched slavery.¹⁵

¹³ Herzberg, Arthur, "The Complete Works of Voltaire, XXVI," as quoted in The French Enlightenment and the Jews, Columbia University Press, New York, 1968, page 305.

¹⁴ *ibid*, page 284.

Spinoza saw himself as lifted above the narrow prejudices of his tribe. Attacked by both Christians and Jews, Spinoza gave the eighteenth-century philosophers, a contempt for the Biblical Jew. Moreover, his idea that Jews had slavishly followed the Egyptian and were outside Greek culture became an important rallying point to counter the European respect for Judea-Christian roots. To discredit these roots was a goal of the Deists, and in much of Voltaire's writing, he copied (sometimes literally) the far-fetched arguments of the most extreme English Deists, most notably the anti-Jewish Matthew Tindal. The animosity of certain extreme Deists against the Jews was a method to attack the divine inspiration of the revelation of Christianity. In his book, Rights of the Christian Church, Matthew Tindal wrote a savage attack on the Jews, explaining how the enslavement of the Jews in Egypt led to their love of idolatry. Voltaire had a copy of Tindal's book in his library and though Voltaire did not copy Tindal's words exactly, he copied Tindal's ideas on the Jews for his own criticism of the Old Testament. Voltaire's wholesale borrowing of Tindal's anti-Jewish rhetoric bordered so much on plagiarism that in 1764 he was attacked by the French clergy through L'Abbe Guenee. L'Abbee Guenee had made a careful study of both Tindal's and Voltaire's descriptions of the obscene immorality of characters in the Old Testament and wrote:

Monsieur de Voltaire only repeats the English Deists words. In his petty criticism he is so far from having the honor of invention, that he has not even that of applying them properly. Could he think that no one would ever read Tindal, or be acquainted with the learned answers given to him? What a part do these oracles of

¹⁵ Spinoza, Benedict, Philosophy of Benedict Spinoza, Tudor Publishing Company, New York, 1933, page 70.

philosophy act, these mighty geniuses, who think themselves born to give light to the universe, when they become the poor copiers of a poor writer!¹⁶

Another important influence on Voltaire's philosophy of the Jews was Jean Baptiste de Mirabaud who in the 1769 published a collection of the views of Greek and Roman writers on the Jews. Mirabaud's *Opinions des Anciens sur les Juifs* is a compendium of anti-Jewish beliefs by pagan writers, arguing that the misery of the Jews was not because of their rejection of Jesus for the Jews were despised in antiquity, long before Jesus was born. The Jews were despised in Roman times because they haughtily believed their god above all others, and because they hated the whole human race. Mirabaud quoted Horace and Juvenal among other writers who had mocked the Jewish customs of fasting and circumcision. Mirabaud held the view, however, that Jews could be freed if they freed themselves their ridiculous religion, whereas Voltaire affirmed the unchanging character of the Jews was beyond improvement.

The Reaction of the Jews to Voltaire's Writings

In Voltaire's time, the Jews of France were fighting for the right to abandon usury and enter the guilds. Yet Voltaire said nothing in their defense. Voltaire's writings were widely read both in Europe and America, and it can be surmised that his anti-Semitism was not only popularized through his writings, but given a credence because of his fame and stature. His anti-Semitism was an influence on his friend, King Frederick II of Prussia who it is said, "devoured Voltaire." Begging him to come stay with him in Cirey, he wrote to Voltaire, "Cirey henceforth will be my Delphi, and your letters, which I beg you to continue, my oracles."¹⁷ Voltaire was a

¹⁶ Torrey, Norman L., *Voltaire and the English Deists*, Archon Books, 1967, page 121.

¹⁷ Asprey, Robert B., *Frederick the Great: The Magnificent Enigma*, Ticknor and Fields, New York, 1986, page 117.

major influence on Frederick, exchanging more than one thousand letters with him. The “enlightened” emperor absorbed Voltaire’s ideas and though he protected the wealthy Jews who were useful to him, he shackled the vast majority of impoverished Jews with restrictions throughout his reign (1740–1786). He forced them to wear a humiliating badge, excluded them from public office, enclosed them in a ghetto in Palermo, and in 1772, banished 4,000 itinerant Jews to Poland whom he accused of begging and robbing the peasants.¹⁸ Moreover Emperor Frederick II burdened the Jews with numerous taxes, limited their freedom of movement by making them pay passage money, (geleit), and dictated that offenses committed by individual Jews were the collective responsibility of the Jewish community. Frederick the Great’s treatment of the Jews was so demeaning that when Mirabeau visited Berlin he remarked that some of the emperor’s regulations against the Jews were “worthy of a cannibal.”¹⁹

Although there were several distinguished Jewish men of letters in France and throughout Europe, Voltaire entirely ignored them as he ignored even Moses Mendelssohn, “the enlightened Jew of Berlin,” famous for his philosophical dialogues with Lessing.

Jews in Voltaire’s time were outraged by his extreme anti-Semitic writings. They were in a precarious position however, and knew they had to defend themselves cautiously. Entirely dependent on the larger Christian society in which they lived, the Jews now teetered on the brink of a long-awaited emancipation. Prominent Jews wrote to Voltaire defending their religion against his vitriolic charges. Yet all the letters written to Voltaire were polite, sometimes even obsequious. The writers argued rationally, attempting to counter specific attacks on their religion by means of logical argument. One letter sent from Amsterdam in 1762 by the French-Sephardic Jew, Isaac de Pinto, a well-known essayist, countered Voltaire’s assertion that the whole Jewish

¹⁸ *ibid*, page 592.

¹⁹ Low, Alfred D., Jews in the Eyes of the Germans, Institute for the Study of Human Issues Inc., 1979, page 6.

nation was degenerate. He responded to Voltaire with reason. Using his observation of nature as evidence, Isaac de Pinto wrote:

If in a wood there are not two leaves which bear a strict resemblance, in the world there are not two faces perfectly alike, nor two men exactly of the same way of thinking on every subject, how is it possible to give the moral picture of a nation with one dash of a pen? The morality of a nation may be compared to that of individuals; nations never are perfectly virtuous or vicious; and besides they never are for a long time stationary: inconstancy is the lot of humanity.²⁰

Another letter to Voltaire, in 1771, came from three congregants of the German synagogue in Amsterdam. The congregants countered specific attacks by correctly explaining Jewish rituals and customs. Their letter concludes:

What has been our object, Sir, in all these observations? Was it to humble M. Voltaire and to enjoy an insolent triumph over a great man? Far be from us such thoughts! We have been attacked and abused in our patriarchs, our kings, and prophets, our laws and manners etc. and we thought that we might justly defend ourselves; that we might instruct those who are dazzled with your style and sallies of wit that we might convince them, chiefly in this case of the Jews, that they must examine before they believe; that, although you are a great man and a great philosopher, yet you have your absences of mind, your prejudices and errors; that your quotations are sometimes false, your translations, unfaithful, your assertions rash, your decisions unfair . . .

²⁰ Moore, G.G., "Letters of Certain Portuguese Jews to M. Voltaire" from Letters of Certain Jews to Monsieur Voltaire, Paris, Kentucky, 1845, page 34.

Then, to reaffirm their respect for Voltaire, the congregants wrote:

We affirm it with satisfaction, no writer of this age has run so splendid a career as you have done. Enjoy the glory you have acquired; rule over the empire of letters by your talents, and over the country you inhabit by your benevolence. And since, through a blessing which few writers have experienced, the icy hand of age has not yet extinguished the fire of genius, consecrate you last labors to a useful and honorable purpose—to that of overturning the pernicious and foolish systems of your sophists—despise their secret murmurs, and endeavor to wipe off that shameful stain which they have cast on philosophy Whilst you are preaching up toleration, exclude not men from it who worship the same God as you do, who are brethren by nature, your fathers in the faith, a people who deserve to be pitied on account of their misfortunes ; and, if we dare say it, to be respected on account of their antiquity, religion and laws.

We are and always shall be, with the highest esteem, and the most profound respect, Sir, your most obedient, humble servants,

Joseph Ben Janathan

Aaron Mathtai

David Wincker²¹

²¹ *ibid*, page 171.

Another Jew writing to Voltaire is more blunt:

But above all things, meddle not with the Jews, or learn their history better. Both your countrymen and strangers have several times charged you with having but a superficial knowledge of it. Learn it better, Sir, or never speak of it.²²

Though hundreds of Jews sent letters to Voltaire in protest against his writings, we only know of one to which he replied. On July 21, 1762, he wrote back apologetically:

The lines of which you complain are violent and unjust. Your letter alone convinces me that there are highly cultivated and very respectable men among you. I shall take care to insert a cancel in the new edition. When one has done a wrong, one should put it right, and I was wrong to attribute to a whole nation the vices of some individuals.²³

However, Voltaire did not change his views in later writings, nor did he delete the offensive words as he had promised.

The Legacy of Voltaire's Anti-Semitism

The attitude of religious tolerance introduced during The Enlightenment ultimately fostered the French Revolution and the Emancipation which freed Jews both economically and legally in Western Europe. Yet, by de-valuing the “foreignness” of Jewish culture, The Enlightenment encouraged assimilation into the majority culture. Even among Jews themselves, assimilation was seen as the means of achieving full citizenship. Thus The Enlightenment sent out a dubious message that there was an advantage to homogenous conformity. Worse yet, the

²² *ibid*, page 262.

²³ Besterman, Theodore, Voltaire, Harcourt, Brace and World Inc. New York, NY, 1969, page 86.

ideas of The Enlightenment fragmented the Jewish community itself, often creating a self-hatred and pitting family members against each other (as depicted in the writings of Isaac Bashevis Singer).

Yet though the Jews did shed many of their rituals, customs, ways of dress and language, they were still viewed collectively as a separate nation. Voltaire's pseudo-scientific view of the Jews as a racially debased people was to prove far more dangerous than the older, theological anti-Semitism, for whereas debased religious belief was thought to be cured by conversion, debased blood could never be cured. Voltaire had championed the idea of the Jew as **irrevocably** degenerate.

Voltaire's ideas did not die with him. They were resurrected throughout Europe for the next one hundred and fifty years. After his death, anti-Semites quoted Voltaire to prove that not merely the Jew's **religion** but the Jew's essential **character** was evil. In France in 1840, for example, Alphonse Toussenel made a comprehensive attack The Jews, Kings of Epoch. Toussenel took up Voltaire's attack on the Old Testament, describing Jews as "the people of Hell" and proposed economic penalties against them.²⁴ In the 1850's, the influential French scholar, Ernest Renan, popularized the racial concept of "Semites." Echoing Voltaire, Renan argued that:

The Jews have no mythology, epic, no science, no philosophy, no fiction, no plastic arts, no civic life . . .²⁵

Rationalist anti-Semitism was taken up by the left by such philosophers as Karl Marx (a Jew himself) and by the anti-democratic Right. The German philosophers such as Fichte and

²⁴ Flannery, H. Edward, The Anguish of the Jews, Paulist Press, New York, 1985, page 177.

²⁵ Wistrich, Roberts S., Anti-Semitism: The Longest Hatred, Pantheon Books, New York, 1991, page 47.

Hegel all took up the views expressed by Bruno Bauer in his polemical tract, The Jewish Question. Bauer, using Voltaire as a source, wrote from a radical anti-Christian stance. Like Voltaire, Bauer depicted Judaism as based on superstition and the Jews as fanatical haters of humanity—a race lacking in basic ethics.

Racial anti-Semitism broke out in Germany and spread to Austria-Hungary, France and Russia. In the closing years of the century, a host of philosophers, pseudo-scientists and demagogues played on the theme of the Jews as a racially corrupt element of society. By the close of the nineteenth century, racial anti-Semitism was flourishing and pervasive. In France, the Dreyfus trial became symbolic of this new anti-Semitism in which the celebrated journalist Maurice Barres could write “That Dreyfus is capable of treason, I deduce from his race.”²⁶ The Dreyfus case exposed an anti-Semitism that saw the Jew as an archetype, eternally debased.

Perhaps, it is no accident that in our own century, Voltaire’s racial anti-Semitism ultimately gained ascendancy in the very country in which the Jews were most emancipated: Germany. With the rise of the Nazi party in Germany, racial anti-Semitism became political ideology. The Nazi philosophy was built on uplifting German society through purification. Because the Nazis viewed Jews as inherently, that is **racially** evil, only extermination could cure society from their damaging influence. By separating Jews from Judea-Christian history, Hitler, as Voltaire had done, supported the idea that Europeans, and in particular Germans were racially and culturally separate from Jews who had in fact, no culture of their own. Hitler admitted to studying the Emperor Frederick-Voltaire discussions as he formulated his theories.²⁷ Hitler’s rhetoric is uncannily identical to Voltaire’s:

²⁶ Bredin Jean-Denis, The Affair: The Case of Alfred Dreyfus, George Braziller, Inc., New York, 1983, page 28.

²⁷ Hitler, Adolph, Secret Conversations, Farrar, Straus and Young, New York, NY 1953, page 84.

The Jewish people, with all its apparent intellectual qualities is nevertheless without any true culture of its own. For the sham culture which the Jew possesses today is the property of other peoples, and is mostly spoiled in his hands. What he achieves in the field of art is either bowdlerization or intellectual theft. With this, the Jew lacks those qualities which distinguish creatively the culturally blessed races.²⁸

In his own time, Voltaire's work encouraged anti-Semitism and was an obstacle to the full freedom of the Jews in France. But far worse, for the next century, he provided the rhetoric for, and gave authority to secular anti-Semitism.

²⁸ Hitler, Adolph, The Speeches of Adolph Hitler 1922-1939, translated by Norman H. Baynes, Oxford University Press, New York, 1942.

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