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Voltaire's Candide  
Review Essay

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Voltaire's Candide was written in the eighteenth century, at a time when enlightenment thinking began to reform and reshape the ways that the more prosperous thought about monarchy and absolutism. Indeed, Voltaire's work contains within it an abundance of themes that challenge the authorities (i.e. the church and the justice system) of the time, but yet he is also very sympathetic with the current establishments as are. Voltaire is the man of duality. He shows us the dichotomy of the Catholic church and its stances toward prostitution and religious tolerance. He also shows his contempt for war and the greater institutions of state, but yet he tends to dismiss any sort of pluralism as a basis for government, because the natural state of man seems to be self-interested--as was thought by Hobbes. Voltaire's biggest theme in Candide relates to philosophy and practicality. His criticisms of Leibniz and "the principal of sufficient reason" are embodied within Candide's tutor Dr. Pangloss. Although Pangloss is removed from the story after the first few chapters, Candide continuously spouts out the rhetoric of sufficient reason as he is challenged with Voltaire's vision of a cruel reality overseen by--or rather not overseen by--a non-omniscient God. Refuting Leibnitz' metaphysical theories occur on nearly every other page as Candide wavers back and forth between his tutelage from Pangloss and his observations along his journeys. Voltaire's Candide is a reflection of the challenges and problems that Voltaire dealt with during his lifetime. His take on metaphysics, religion, sexuality, and legal institutions give us a good idea of Voltaire's life and the how his criticisms made way for reforms necessary to a modern state.

The most prominent theme in Candide is the nonsensical reasoning of Leibniz, as embodied by Dr. Pangloss. Well known for his theories in calculus, Leibniz also did a bit of metaphysical philosophizing (18). His "principal of sufficient reason" theorized that

everything happens for the greater good, because God oversees all that happens; thus all the bad in the world is part of some greater good that is known to God but not apparent to common man (19). Dr. Pangloss immediately spews out his "metaphysico-theologico-cosmolo-boobology" when he says, "It has been proven that things cannot be other than what they are, for since everything is made for an end, everything is necessarily for the best end. Observe that noses were made to wear spectacles, hence we have spectacles...all is for the best" (42). This is not only an allusion to Leibniz, but its positive outlook on human nature alludes to the common man's ability to reason. Examining the first part of the quotation, Pangloss relates how glasses fit on the nose, because the nose was designed to fit glasses. This sort of logic plagues every moment in which Pangloss gives an explanation. For example, when Pangloss explains that he received syphilis from Paquette, who got it from another, and so forth until it is traced back to natives in the New World, he says that it is right so, because the Europeans brought small-pox to them. Therefore, the reason he has syphilis is because the natives received small-pox (49). Through this reasoning, Candide comes to the New World with the understanding that it is a place without sin, because if the Old World is corrupt, the New World must be the anti-thesis. Yet it all comes down to El Dorado, the paradise of the world. This was the only place that Candide found no corruption. However, Candide chooses to leave El Dorado in order to pursue his love, Cunégonde. Ironically, she ends up ugly at the end, and he only marries her to prove to her brother how much the marriage means (116). So what was it all for? Why did Candide leave El Dorado? Candide left for two reasons. Firstly, he would be richer than all the kings in the world, and secondly he would get back his Cunégonde (81). Of course on the following page he loses most of his

money and concludes that money is not important, only finding that Cunégonde is important. We find this same sort of stubborn logic inherent in Pangloss, who after all his tribulations maintains that, "I am a philosopher, and it is not appropriate for me to take back my word" (115). Here Voltaire is really poking fun at Leibniz, but some would say he is being a bit too cruel, for even Leibniz recognized that even some contingencies could not be explained (22).

As a humanitarian, Voltaire depicts the harshness of war and religion to deride the notion that there exists some "sufficient reason" for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. At the same time, these scenes exemplify the harshness of war and the church. In chapter 3, after battling for the Bulgars (an allusion to the Prussians as homosexuals) against the French, Candide observes the casualties of war, pillaged, raped, and murdered (46). Incidentally, Prussia and France were fighting against each other while Candide was being written (26). One would ask why this war should occur? Why the pointless suffering described here? Candide simply repeats what Pangloss tells him: "There is no effect without cause. Everything is linked by necessity and arranged for the best" (46). This stark logic diminishes the tragedy that occurred on the battlefield, and the reader is left to roll his eyes at Candide for being so naive. It is precisely in this fashion that Voltaire turns his audience against "sufficient reason." The sailor who loots Lisbon and steals up women shortly after the tragic earthquake, defies every sense of sufficient reason. Candide says to him, "You are ignoring the principles of universal reason; this is not the time or the place" (51). Voltaire uses this to show precisely how sufficient reason cannot explain time and place.

Jacques the Anabaptist is another prime example of how Voltaire turns the reader

off to "sufficient reason." Voltaire was not all too fond of theorizing after a certain point in his life, because one can theorize on and on without ever reaching a conclusion on how to act (3). This is where the story of Jacques and the earthquake in Lisbon come into play. The earthquake, based on a real one that took place in 1755 refers to a point in Voltaire's life when he decided that God simply was not everywhere at all times, because if he were, such a tragedy would not have befallen innocent people (20). It served no greater good. Here we have Jacques who is nothing but nice to those that come into his care. He restores Candide and Pangloss back to health, and he even gives his life trying to rescue a selfish sailor (50). As Jacques drowns, Pangloss tells Candide not to rescue him, because it was meant to be: "Lisbon harbor was designed expressly for this Anabaptist to drown in" (50). After they come to land and Candide becomes trapped under some rubble, Pangloss takes his sweet time philosophizing over the uniqueness of such an earthquake. Meanwhile Candide is trapped under rubble asking for oil and wine. Finally after Candide loses consciousness, Pangloss hands him some water (51). Voltaire expresses here how precious time is wasted theorizing when it would be better to take action to fix the problem. This portrays Voltaire's humane sensibility to problems that many philosophers (i.e. Leibniz) would take a more theoretical approach towards.

It is most important to look at Voltaire's opinion of human nature, because therein lies the root of his logic. Pangloss, an optimist, exhibits the true form of an individual to be altruistic. In his mind, humans choose to do evil, but they are inherently good. Voltaire mocks this notion by satirizing as best as possible. The native Oreillons who nearly ate Candide and Cacambo for being Jesuits represent man in his natural state. Candide says, "What men! What morals! If I hadn't been lucky enough to stick a sword through the body

of Miss Cunégonde's brother, I would have been eaten without mercy. But it turns out the pure state of nature is good, because I only had to show these people I wasn't a Jesuit, and they treated me with enormous kindness" (75). One notes the sarcastic tone of voice Voltaire chooses to use. It is highly unlikely to Voltaire that natives would abort their ritual to go find out if their two captives were innocent or not. More ironic is the mixed up logic, that Candide had to kill a man to prove his innocence. The elements of pessimism, or the evil state of man are largely exhibited by the character Martin: "I think that God has abandoned it all to some evil being...Very rarely have I seen a town that did not wish for the destruction of the next town, or a family that did not seek to exterminate some other family" (87). Here we see Voltaire's most pessimistic side coming out. The pessimism was directed at church, state, and mankind. This would explain why Voltaire believed in the monarchy. He distrusted pluralism, because he believed man to be selfish.

Voltaire's attack on religion and the Catholic church's stance on sexuality is among the other overriding themes of the book. It seems Voltaire himself was very tolerant of sexual practices. In his many letters to Frederick the Great of Prussia, he proclaims an attraction to him, and he may even had sexual relations while at court in Prussia (24). Voltaire shows that the Oreillon women practice bestiality, and he describes it as a truth, and a fact of life--he never condemns it (73). Voltaire sympathizes with Paquette's life as a prostitute and on page 101 explains in length the ambiguity of the love hate relationship between men and their prostitutes, especially the church's ambivalence.

Throughout Candide we see countless incidents involving a monk, a Jesuit, and an Ábbe and their promiscuous sexual affairs. The oath of celibacy is taken as a given, and yet we see it broken when the inquisitor extorts Cunégonde from the Jew, when the Franciscan

monk copulates with the old woman, and when the brother takes the unhappy Paquette as his mistress (56, 59, 100). When Candide asks the ábbe how to treat the Queen of England in Paris, referring to the actress he saw on stage, the ábbe replies, "In the provinces you take them to a hotel. In Paris, you show them more respect if they are attractive, and then you throw them into the public dump when they are dead" (91). This refers to how actors received no burial rites, but one should also notice how the ábbe is making a sexual joke. Voltaire despised this ambiguity in the church, and it is likely it stemmed from his childhood. The introduction to the book suggests that he had been molested as an alter boy when he was younger.

Religion had a more violent side to it, and as a humanitarian, this upset Voltaire more than anything. After the earthquake in Lisbon, the Inquisition selects a Basque, several Jews, Pangloss and Candide to pay for the disaster. The Jews had pretended to be Christian to avoid punishment, and the Basque had tried to marry his grandchild's godmother (53). The needless execution is described in detail. When Candide and Martin enter Paris and are tricked by the ábbe, they end up in the hands of soldiers who are to imprison all foreigners. In addition, the ábbe is driven by greed to remain by the side of Candide throughout his recovery (96). At every turn, Voltaire seems to depict any member of the church as the worst of men. In contrast, the people of El Dorado practice a religion without clergy. Candide remarks, "What! You have no monks who lecture, debate, govern, conspire, and burn people who don't agree with them?", to which the elder replies, "We would be crazy if we did" (79). This is likely an allusion to protestant and reformed churches who attempted to make a more direct connection with God. The Introduction suggests that Candide was greatly moved by the needless suffering caused by the purges

and expelling of the Huguenots after the Edict of Nantes was revoked in 1685 (11). We also observe that as Candide lies sick in bed in Paris, a priest wants him to sign a *billet de confession*, which would determine if he was a real catholic or a Jansenist. Voltaire derides this notion of having to sign a paper telling what faith you are in order to receive proper burial rites (90). Religion plays a large role as a very powerful institution in that day despite its own divisions, and even though Voltaire received a Jesuit education, he ended up using it against them. In 1764 Louis XV even signed an edict to repress the Jesuits in France (13).

Lastly, the theme of government can be tackled with all the aforementioned material. Voltaire as a believer in man's darker nature believed that pluralism would be a great error, but at the same time, he consistently bashes the absolutist monarchy for inhumane and unfair practices, namely slavery (7). The situation of the slave in Surinam not only exemplifies the harshness of slavery, but it also shows again the ambiguity of the church. The slave says, "The Dutch sorcerers who converted me tell me every Sunday that we are all children of Adam, whites and blacks. I'm no genealogist, but if these preachers are right, we're all cousins...you can't treat your relatives more horribly than this!" (83). Indeed, slavery was a part of trade, and according to the introduction, French trade played a large part in this practice in the New World (7). The distrust of authorities is just as apparent when Candide goes to the Dutch judge for help when the pirate takes his loot. "The judge began by fining him ten thousand piastres for the noise he had made. Then he listened patiently, promised to review the case as soon as the merchant returned, and charged him another ten thousand piastres for the consultation" (85). The state collected/extorted money from the peasantry, and it did not seem to render them any useful

services.

Voltaire bombards the reader with his opinions of eighteenth century Europe all throughout this text. In most cases, we see a bit of Voltaire in the narrator and several of the characters. In other characters we see bits of his rival contemporaries. Although most of what happens to Candide is based on history, it is very unlikely (at least in the order it is presented) that all of this would occur--the necessity of its reality is not so important as the conclusions the reader should draw from Voltaire. Although Voltaire would not have intended his works to be used to overthrow the then dominant form of government, his ideas inspired many to do so, as in the French Revolution of 1789. It is even evident that much of Voltaire's rejection of metaphysics and his embracing of enlightened scientific thinking has pushed through even to the modern day world.