

Voltaire: Religious Tolerance and Free Speech

Francois-Marie Arouet was born in France in 1694. Under the pen name Voltaire, he became one of the most celebrated writers of the Enlightenment.

As a young man, Voltaire attended a Catholic college in Paris. After college, he settled on a career in literature. He soon earned fame as a writer and as a witty participant in Paris salons.

Voltaire believed passionately in reforming society in the name of justice and human happiness. He warred against what he saw as superstition, error, and oppression. With biting humor, he attacked the French court and the power of the Catholic clergy.

One of Voltaire's most popular books was a humorous novel called *Candide*. The novel poked fun at the idea that the world made by God must necessarily be "the best of all possible worlds." Such a belief, Voltaire thought, prevented people from fighting the evils in the world.

Like Montesquieu, Voltaire admired England's constitutional monarchy and separation of powers. In his view, the English were governed by law, not by the arbitrary wishes of a single ruler. To be governed by law, he said, was "man's most cherished right."

Voltaire was especially concerned with freedom of thought and expression. He championed religious tolerance. This meant allowing people to profess religion in their own ways. Religious strife, he thought, was one of the main sources of evil in the world. In reality, no single religion possessed all the truth. At the same time, there was a core of truth in all religions. This core was the "natural religion" that reason made available to everyone.

Voltaire also spoke out for the right of free speech. Once he wrote a letter to a man he strongly disagreed with. He said that he would give his life so that his opponent could continue to write. A later writer expressed Voltaire's feeling in the words, "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it."

Throughout his life, Voltaire criticized intolerance and oppression wherever he saw them. His outspoken ways often led to conflicts with authorities. Twice he spent time in prison. Several times he was forced to flee to another city or country when his opinions made him unwelcome.

Questions

1. Voltaire believed in a right so strongly that he said he would defend it to the death. What was that right?
2. Voltaire was well known for criticizing intolerance wherever he saw it. What happened to him because of his outspoken criticism of authorities?