

# Denis Diderot and the French Enlightenment

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# Diderot Biography (1713-84)

- Most prominent of the encyclopedists
- □ Educated by the Jesuits
- □ One of the editors of the Dictionnaire de medecine, 1746
- □ Pensees Philosophiques, 1746, attacked both atheism and Christianity and was censored
- □ Made little money from his writings, but was granted a sum of money from Catherine of Russia for his library
- □ He wrote broadly, both plays, poems, philosophy, and social commentary
- □ According to the French critic, Sainte-Beuve's, he was " the first great writer who belonged wholly and undividedly to modern democratic society"

# Famous Quotes

- “If you want me to believe in God, you must make me touch him.” Reflects his materialism that evolved into Atheism
- “Justice is the first virtue of those who command, and stops the complaints of those who obey.” Reflects his democratic idealism
- “Man will never be free until the last king is strangled with the entrails of the last priest.” Foreshadowed the attitude of the French Revolution, which attributed social inequalities to the joint power of the Church and Monarchy
- “The arbitrary rule of a just and enlightened prince is always bad. His virtues are the most dangerous and the surest form of seduction: they lull a people imperceptibly into the habit of loving, respecting, and serving his successor, whoever that successor may be, no matter how wicked or stupid.” In an era of the Enlightened Monarch, this is the best argument against monarchy, even benevolent monarchy.

# Encyclopedia Project

- <http://www.hti.umich.edu/d/did/>
- 1750-72; interrupted periodically by the authorities
- Intended to provide a summary of world knowledge that would demonstrate the harmony and order inherent in the world
- Through Diderot's direction, it became a vehicle for revolutionary ideas
- It also provided the common person with information of a practical nature relating to the trades and skilled occupations.
- It represents the spirit of the French Enlightenment: its ambition and the optimism that knowledge can be assembled in one book

# Citation on America

- Catalogues the historical discovery by Columbus, and its subsequent colonization by European countries
- Geographically situates America
- Identifies the major natural resources and raw goods produced in America
- NB: Nothing about the native inhabitants of America or their culture or the new societies being established in America!

# California

- California. large peninsula in North America, north of the Southern Sea, inhabited by savages who worship the moon. Each family there lives as it pleases, without being subject to any form of government. The Spanish have built a fort there called Our Lady of Loreto.

# Censorship

- Begins with the history of the word in Latin and Roman civilization.
- Discusses the evolution of censorship in France to the current day.
- Ends with this observation on the work of the state censors, appointed by the Chancellor:
- “Their approval signifies the right to publish. Sometimes because of the great number of books they have to examine, or for other reasons, they are put in the disagreeable position of reducing authors and publishers awaiting their decision to the condition of the poor souls who wander on the banks of the Styx and implore Charon to ferry them across.”
- This volume including the citation above led to the temporary censorship of the Encyclopedia

# Versus Intolerance and Religious Persecution

- “Jews” details the history of judaism and directly mentions the persecution from Roman times to the present: “When one considers the horrors that the Jews have experienced since J[esus] C[hrist], the carnage that they suffered under certain Roman emperors, and the slaughters that were repeated against them so many times in all the Christian states, one is astonished that this people still survives;”

# Intolerance

- If an Infidel prince asked missionaries of an intolerant faith how their religion treats those who do not believe in it, they would either have to admit something odious, lie, or keep a shameful silence. What did Christ ask of his disciples upon sending them among the nations? Was it to kill or die? Was it to persecute or suffer? Saint Paul wrote to the Thessalonians: If someone comes to announce another Christ, to recommend another spirit, you will suffer them. Intolerant people, is this how you treat even those who announce nothing, propose nothing, preach nothing? He further wrote: do not treat as an enemy those who do not have the same opinions as you, but warn them as a brother. Intolerant people, is that what you do? If your opinions allow you to hate me, Why wouldn't my opinions allow me to hate you as well? If you exclaim, "I have truth on my side," I would cry just as loudly, "it is I who have truth on my side" while adding, "what does it matter who is wrong so long as there is peace between us! If I am blind, need you strike a blind man across the face?" If an intolerant man clearly explained his position, what corner of the earth would remain open to him and what sensible man would dare set foot in such a country?

**Negroes:** <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=did;cc=did;rgn=main;view=text;idno=did2222.0000.029;sid=3b33eb8ddf989c23469bd9399a7f087>

- Although the encyclopedists advocated religious tolerance, they were not very enlightened about ethnicity.
  - This article on African slaves examines them from the economic point of view but does not seem to acknowledge them as human.
- “The character of negroes in general. If by chance one encounters well-born men among the negroes of Guinea (the majority is always depraved), they are for the most part inclined to libertinage, vengeance, theft and lying. Their stubbornness is such that they never admit having done wrong, no matter what punishment they are made to undergo. Not even the fear of death moves them.”

# Mohammedanism

- Among the incoherent declamations with which this book is filled in accordance with Oriental taste, one can still find morsels that might appear sublime. Mohammed, for example, in speaking of the cessation of the flood, expresses himself thus: «God says: earth, swallow up your waters: sky, draw up the waters that you have poured: the sky and the earth obeyed». His definition of God is of a veritably sublime kind. When asked who was that Allah that he was announcing: « He is the one," he replied, "who takes being from himself and from whom others take it, who engenders nothing and who is in no way engendered, and to whom nothing is similar in the whole realm of beings ». It is true that contradictions, absurdities, and anachronisms are spread thickly in this book. One finds there especially a profound ignorance of the simplest and most well-known Physics. This is the touchstone of books that false religions claim to be written by the Divinity; for God is neither absurd nor ignorant: but the vulgar who do not see these faults, adore them and the Imams employ a deluge of words to palliate them

# Women

- “We have so severely neglected the education of women among all of the refined peoples, that it is surprising that we can identify so many whose erudition and written works have made them renowned.”
- Cites historical examples of women being subjugated by Hebrews, Greeks, Christians, Muslims, and other ancient peoples
- “The rabbis do not believe that woman was created in the image of God; they insist that she was less perfect than man, because God only made her to be his helpmeet. A Christian theologian, (Lambert Danaeus, in *antiquitatibus*, pag. 42.) taught that the image of God was more vibrant in man than in woman.”
- “Perhaps the dark arts, such as superstition and magic, have only been attributed to women because we recognize in them more resources of spirit than we'd like to give them credit for; that seems to be Livy's meaning when he said that woman is an animal both powerless and indomitable.”
- Questions the taboos related to women

# Iroquois

- These barbarians comprise five nations. The closest to the English are the Aniez; twenty leagues from there are the Annegouts; two days farther are the Onontagues, whose neighbors are the Goyagonins; and finally, the last are the Tsonnomonans, one hundred leagues from the English. All of these groups are savage warriors, relatively united amongst themselves; sometimes they are aligned with the English, and at other times with the French, depending on where they believe their interests lie.
- The region they inhabit is just as cold as Quebec. They live off boucaned meat, Indian wheat, [1] and fruits which they find in the forests and mountains. They do not recognize any king or chief; all of their general affairs are handled by assemblies of elders and of young people. They are divided by tribes, the three principle ones being the Bear, Tortoise and Wolf Tribes. Each village includes inhabitants from these three tribes, and each tribe has its own chief. Their principal trade is in beavers, which they barter for brandy, something they love passionately.
- This article was written by Jacourt; Diderot, in a dialogue entitled “Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville,” treats the natives of Tahiti with great respect; he depicts them as “natural” men who are honest, charitable, and brave in contrast to Colonizers and their hypocrisy

# Priests

- Priests. By this noun is meant all those who fulfill the functions of religious cults established by the different peoples of the world. Exterior forms of worship entail ceremonies, the aim of which is to affect men's senses and to create in them a sense of veneration for the divinity to which they pay homage. See Worship. Superstition having multiplied the ceremonies of different religions, the persons who officiated at them were not long in forming a separate order uniquely destined to altar service; It is sweet to dominate over one's peers; the priests knew how to turn the good opinion they had fostered in the mind of their fellow men to their advantage; they claimed that the gods revealed themselves to them; they announced their decrees; they taught their dogma; they prescribed what should be believed and what rejected; they fixed what pleased or displeased the divinity; they pronounced oracles; they predicted the future to fearful and anxious man, they made him tremble with fear of the chastisements with which the irritated gods menaced those who dared to doubt their mission or dispute their doctrine. Mankind would have been more than happy, if the priests of deception had abused only the power over men given by their ministry; in spite of the humility and meekness so recommended by the Gospel, in the centuries of darkness the priests of the God of peace were seen bearing the standard of revolt; arming the hands of subjects against their sovereigns; insolently ordering kings to descend from the throne; ...These vain pretensions were sometimes cemented by rivers of blood;...in countries where the terrible inquisition is established, it provides frequent examples of human sacrifices lacking none of the barbarism of those of the Mexican priests. This is not the case in countries enlightened by the light of reason and philosophy; here, the priest never forgets that he is man, subject and citizen.

# Nobility

- “Democracies have no need for nobility, they are even more peaceful when there are no noble families; for then one considers the thing proposed and not the individual proposing it; or when it happens that the individual is taken into account, it is only to the extent that he might be useful to the business at hand, and not because of his coat of arms and genealogy. The Swiss republic, for example, maintains itself very well despite the diversity of its religions and cantons, because utility and not respect hold it together. The government of the United Provinces possesses the advantage that equality among persons produces equality in the counsels, and thus taxes and contributions are paid with a better will.”
- Although they were not enlightened about ethnicity, this statement about nobility and democracy reveals a sensitivity to the ideals of the Revolution

# Summary

- The French Encyclopedia is one of the most significant intellectual accomplishments of the Enlightenment
- The attempt to systematically assemble the sum of human learning is emblematic of the Enlightenment
- It was a spur to the French Revolution
- Also reveals the failings of the Enlightenment Project: The Encyclopedists, while enlightened about many things including religion, social class, women, were still blind to the inhumanity of European colonization and slavery. It may have had offered some stimulus to the Industrial Revolution, but limited, as most of the arts depicted were outdated by new inventions and machinery