

Voltaire's Satirical Catechisms: Secular Confessionalism

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Abstract

This article is the second in a series, focusing on middle Modern secularist documents entitled “catechism” or “confession”; intending to understand this peculiar phenomenon. Here I am trying to disclose the format and contents of five catechisms published by Voltaire (in the 1760s) and to link this to the idea of catechisms and confessions as discussed in another article. Voltaire apparently initiated the writing of secular catechisms. Catechisms are preparatory confessions of religious commitment to true doctrine and associated lifestyles to be confessed to and lived by. Voltaire chose the format of a catechism for satirical, dialogical attacks on intolerance, superstition, and irrational beliefs; also to express his own faith in a universal supreme being, the god of a rational civil society controlled by a totalitarian philosophical government, a rational soul that is immortal (and will receive reward or punishment in an afterlife), a life of honest work, justice, dignity, under “natural law”—the commandment of love inscribed a priori in the hearts of all humankind. The catechisms expressed a *substitute religion*, a confessional faith in scientific and practical reason, within a liberal, enlightened, totalitarian civil society—a Modern cultic replacement for Christianity combining Classical ideas with a Modern philosophy of power.

Keywords: catechism; church; civil religion; mystic; natural law; neo-Platonism; pantheism; patriotism; philosopher king; Rousseau; secularism; teaching; totalitarian; utility; Vico; virtue; woman



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Quite Curious: Modern Secular Catechisms—Neo-Classical Religion as Substitute for Christianity¹

The present article is part of a series on the issue of “secular catechisms.”² These began to make their appearance shortly before the French Revolution. A shift in religious worldview occurred along the way from Machiavelli to Descartes and Hobbes. This shift came of age during the 18th century; I characterised it thus in a previous article:

The neo-Classicist Rationalism of the 18th century, usually called “deism,” but more often than not a “panto-deism” or a panentheism, was a fervently anti-Christian religion with sometimes own rituals and confessional documents. There were, however, also religious *atheists* who showed similar tendencies. (Venter 2016, 69)

The authors of these quite unusual confessional documents had enough confidence by the 18th century to come up with their doctrinal teachings in such formats. This new religion (in many ways a recovering of Ancient totalitarian pagan civil religions) was no more afraid of the collusion of nobility with (especially) Roman Catholic clergy.

Not only is the phenomenon of such confessional documents curious, but also that so little study has been done of it, although much has been written about the systematic philosophical doctrines of the authors of such documents.

Voltaire has been one of the fiercest critics of religion (as he knew it); today websites like *Positive Atheism* has many quotes from his works. Strangely enough—it appears to have passed unnoticed that Voltaire was not an atheist, and that he wrote *five catechisms* (apart from sermons) in which he satirically demolishes (especially Catholic and Greek Orthodox) doctrines, but also ensures that his own panto-deism comes out on top.

“Catechism” and “confession” or (“catechetical confession”) is a very old type of education that had developed from Rabbinical schooling. It was developed as a way of introducing Christian believers into full participation of the church (cf. Venter 2016, 69ff).

After Rousseau’s brief confessional statement of the articles of a civil religion (DCS, Rousseau 1762, 4, 8; Venter 2016, 84), Voltaire was the first to write extensive catechisms. Even though his were satirical, he did create a tradition still visible in Lyotard’s *Instructions païennes* (1977). Here I shall try to highlight the most important aspects of Voltaire’s intention with his catechisms, their structure and content; regarding the latter both the critical and the positive.

The wider intention is to find a detailed answer as to why Modern secularism has formulated catechisms as confessional documents and how the different authors went about this.

1 Except if stated otherwise, all translations from other languages have been done by the author of this article.

2 When I began to work on this topic, very little had been published about “secular catechisms.” A recent internet search showed that there is a sudden surge in publications about it. My own study is focused on the original texts themselves in line with my previous publications; I do not believe that the contents of my work will change because of the new publications.

- 1) The catechetical practice of churches before and during middle Modernity gave the impression of an easy way to indoctrinate people with the “real truth”—*the secular catechisms were mirror counterparts of church practice*. Unfortunately the intellectualistic mysticism that had entered Christianity from neo-Platonism created an elitism of the clerical versus the dumbness of the lay, with a growing corruption of the powerful elite. The reaction of the upcoming Modern middle class rationalism against this, as we find it in Voltaire, was not without reason. Voltaire, however, swept the role of other power mongers under the carpet: Rousseau said religious wars and political wars were one and the same (DCS, Rousseau 1762, 4.8).
- 2) The middle Modern *philosophes* realised that catechism was an inherently good teaching method, and they *had the certainty of faith in the laws of nature and those of reason* (both scientific and practical), and the push-and-pull of progress between nature (as the new *causa efficiens*) and rational civility (*as the new causa finalis*)—their own religious (often mystical) elitist road.
- 3) Both currents popular in middle Modernity—the scientific and the practicalistic—saw two advantages in “catechisms”: a) it was a direct, purported interactive method of teaching; and b) it allowed for a “straightforward” teaching of true doctrine, often giving harsh swipes at “heterodoxy.” This explains the dry, “scientific” explanation of dogma such as J. B. Say’s *Catéchisme d’ économie politique* and Auguste Comte’s *Catéchisme positiviste*. But it really expresses the trust in the supernatural absoluteness of scientific and practical reason.

Modernity’s “confessions” and “catechisms” on the one hand followed the Luther-Calvin practice of the original direct questions and answers; on the other also emulated the rational philosophical-theological doctrinal confessions that had become practice after Augustine, and again after Luther and Calvin. I analysed traditional catechetical praxis in a previous article (Venter 2016), in which I have shown the characteristics and ways of Christian confessional catechetics in order to outline how Modern secular catechisms fit into this history.

Voltaire’s work is in a category of its own—he was a *literary* writer and grew as a thinker in Paris in the environment of *satirists* in some secret *Temple*—where *initiations* did take place. In the *Dictionnaire Philosophique Portatif* he inserted four catechisms, all satirical prickly pears. Taking these “catechisms” one by one, against the background of his broader oeuvre, I shall show:

- That they really are catechisms in the sense that there is insistence on philosophical religious *doctrines* similar to those of Rousseau.
- That they contain *criticisms* or *rejections* of doctrines considered false or superstitious.
- How Voltaire gives an air of *universality* to his doctrine by satirical locations.
- Also how he hides his *indebtedness to Christianity*.

However, one must immediately qualify these points. In 1763 Voltaire published a first “catechism,” entitled *Catéchisme de l’honnête homme*—a year before the others. It may even have been written after the other four during preparation of the *Dictionnaire*. In content it is like the other four; in style it is more of a Socratic dialogue—a vicious attack on religion, in which one partner in the dialogue, the “Honest Man,” is given the winning card against the other partner, the Greek Orthodox “Venerable.” The rather lengthy answers to the questions are more like Plato’s dialogues (and like some later confessional theological expositions, such as the Reformed “Canons of Dordt”), than like catechisms in the original sense.

In contents it remains near to Voltaire’s youth essay, the *Traité de Métaphysique* (TM, Voltaire 1734). Though not known as a systematic, doctrinal thinker, he had made up his mind very early in his life—his criticisms, now more polite and then again quite vicious, remained very much the same. But his *ontological basis* is mostly hidden. It is necessary to outline it now.

Voltaire’s Ontology

Voltaire produced only one systematic philosophical treatise: the *Traité de Métaphysique* (TM, Voltaire 1734); not for publication, it was written for his companion, Madame Emily du Chatelet. In the catechisms of the 1760s the majority of the themes remain the same, hidden behind his fierce debates with Christianity in general but Catholicism in particular.

Metaphysics

Metaphysics is usually not associated with Voltaire, probably since the TM remained unpublished for long and also because Voltaire’s thought has been twisted by anti-metaphysical thinkers (such as *Positive Atheism*) to suit their purpose.

The TM contains the following themes:

- *What is a human being?* Like Turgot, Voltaire here follows a sensualist interpretation of Locke’s empiricism, even to distinguish the observable types of the “human” from the totally non-human.
- *Is there a God?* Voltaire preferred proof of God’s existence from “nature” rather than faith in a revelation. His arguments approach the *analogia entis* doctrine of Thomas; he also anticipated the moralistic ones of Kant. In reading the Bible, he falls back on an allegorical moralism (in his hermeneutical essays, Voltaire 1767³). He proposes but a “Supreme Being,” a great mechanical Legislator and Architect, whom we shall find in his catechisms too.
- *What is the relationship between God and humankind?* Voltaire wanted to know whether God did in fact establish laws for thinking beings and laws for mechanical beings, and

3 The Reformation tended to move away from allegorical exegesis of the Bible. Roman Catholicism did not; and secularism also kept it alive. Secularism (Voltaire and Kant) argued that the Old Testament was mostly allegorical because the ordinary Jews would not have understood scientific language—so God spoke in allegories. This tendency has sustained itself with the difference that today’s secularists will say: Why should I believe in those allegories—they are but myths?

whether there is a religion established by God himself. Yes there is *a universal religion* of serving God, doing justice according to the law engraved in the heart: *love your neighbour*.

- *How do we know?* The mechanics of the world produce knowledge: all ideas arrive via *sense experience*; these are combined into knowledge (cf. Turgot 1751, 256).
- *Are there external things?* This Cartesian issue is answered positively in a Lockean sense.
- *Does the human being have a soul?* He anticipates Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* (*Kritik der Praktischen Vernunft* [KPV], 1788), saying: Yes, an immortal one; God wants it for just *reward*.
- *Is mankind free?* He is a *liberal*, assuming individual freedom within natural limits.
- *Is the human being social?* Voltaire opts for liberal *self-love* as the basis for a social structure; it is given by the Creator as a passion; man is not born passionless and only afterwards animated by the devil (cf. Voltaire, s. v. *Amour Proper*, AP, 1764).
- *What is virtue?* Virtue is *local utility* (hedonism) and laws are arbitrary constructs for time and place—but they have to be implemented (possibly adopted from Locke).
- *About God and humankind*, as in many other places, Voltaire anticipates existentialists such as Jaspers (and even Sartre): *God does not intervene in our freedom*.

Voltaire pretended to hide behind a Hume-type scepticism and satire. However, the themes put forward in TM recurred consistently in his satirical work; his “homilies” and “catechisms” were but ways of expression of a metaphysically developed, rationalistic *faith*.

Rationalism, Religion, Civility, Enlightenment, Tribal Metaphors

The majority of believers in progress had adopted the Leibnizian idea that evil in the parts (such as conflict or competition) leads to a good whole; Voltaire avoided this holism and simply assumed that controlled self-love is good (cf. AP, Voltaire 1764, 19ff; BTB, Voltaire 1764, 48ff; or the drama, *Candide*). But like all Middle Modern thinkers, he did believe civil society (a cross-breed between Greek city states and Roman Empire) to be the inherent *telos* of history. (This was interwoven with the doctrine of an international peaceful world order—of which Kant gave the first well-rounded expression in *Zum ewigen Frieden*, Kant 1795.)

Platonism

Voltaire's metaphysic was of much the same kind as that of Rousseau; but he was more of an eclectic sensualist while Rousseau was a kind of neo-Platonist patriotic mystic. The strongest difference between Voltaire and Rousseau lies in their social vision: Voltaire was a liberal, accentuating individual freedoms and self-love within the limits of a totalitarian fatherhood state; Rousseau was a socialist, who believed that private property is the root of evil but accepted it within the controls of the general will—the totalitarian elitist state. Clearly both arrived at a totalitarian state—this implied that the state itself becomes a divine entity in control of all religious expression.

It might be helpful to explain that Voltaire, during his stay in England, was not only confronted with the philosophies of Newton, Locke and Hume, but most probably with the aftermath of Cambridge Platonism. And wherever Platonism appeared, so did state absolutism, whether monarchical, liberal or socialist (as for example earlier in Jean Bodin; cf Venter, 2001). When it came to church-state relationships, Voltaire in *The Wise Man and the People* (*Du sage et du peuple*, DSDP, Voltaire 1750) took a state absolutist line, bordering on later Fascist corporatism (Mussolini, 1938, On: *The Corporate State*):

The goodness of every government consists in equally protecting and sustaining all the professions of a state.

A government cannot be good if it is not a unique power.

In the most mixed states, power results from consent of all the orders, and thus it acquires its unity, without which confusion reigns.

In any state, the great calamity is that the legislative authority is rebelled against. (DSDP, Voltaire 1750, 5)

Clearly Voltaire wants to unify all *professional* sections in the sovereign. Like Hobbes and Rousseau, he believed that internal rebellion is evil. From a sensualist utilitarian perspective, he had to take a near positivist view of law, based upon some vague idea of “natural law.” He seems to have proposed that the tri-cameral parliament of his days: nobility, church, middle state, be replaced by the “professions”: mostly middle class groups and Modernised remnants of the guilds. It anticipates Saint-Simon’s elitist working class sovereign in the *Catéchisme des Industriels*, but is even nearer to *Mussolini’s* later idea of the “corporate state.”

Totalitarian State Control

Voltaire’s main target, again, is Christianity—any function within the state’s borders that has an authority beyond the state’s borders, constitutes a threat to the unity of the state and its order. These arguments barely differ from those of Hobbes (in *De Cive*, cf. Venter 1996) and of Rousseau (in DCS, Rousseau 1762, 4.8). Voltaire’s doctrine is metaphorically *tribalist*—the state is a kind of *pater familias*⁴:

There cannot be two powers in one state.

The distinction between spiritual power and temporal power is abused: in my house—does one recognise two powers: myself who is family father, and the teacher of my children, to whom I give a salary?

I want the teacher of my children to be greatly respected, but I do not want at all that he has the least authority in my house. (DSDP, Voltaire 1750, 5)

Voltaire formulates these “axioms” in order to argue against the Roman Catholic Church’s refusal to become a *civil church*, a church as burgher, in spite of all the privileges it enjoys. In France, “reason,” which is perfecting itself by the day, teaches that:

- The church should pay taxes according to its income.
- The corps destined to teach justice should set the example.

4 Voltaire was heavily influenced by the Roman Republic, especially by the actions of the aristocratic, clan-based, senate—as for example worked out in Cicero’s *De officiis*. Tribal aristocracies have always operated by swallowing up tribes around it, and thus empires came into being. The history of the Middle East is one of empire succeeding empire; so also the history of southern Africa.

- It is a government worthy of Hottentots where one group can say: “It is for those who work to pay; we need not pay anything, for we are in leisure.”
- It is outrageous to God and humans, if citizens can say: “The state has given us everything, and we owe it only prayers.”
- Reason disperses the barbarianism of theological subtleties by enlightening all humans; also sorcery, excommunication of kings, misleading of citizens by the learned.
- Ancient abuses need not all be directly abolished, otherwise they will appear in a modern form; abolishing must be by consent of the people, but the church in Rome may have a say.
- “The *prince must be absolute master of every ecclesiastical policy*, without any restriction, since this ecclesiastical policy is a part of all government, and just like the family farther prescribes to the teacher of his children the hours of work, kinds of study, et cetera, equally so can the prince prescribe to all the clerics, without exception, everything that has the tiniest connection to the public order.”
- It is only reasonable that the prince pays pensions and benefits to soldiers and civil servants who sacrifice their lives serving the state; anyone opposing this is an enemy of the state.
- When the prince needs additional soldiers he has the right to prohibit young people to make vows at an immature age, preventing them to follow the law of nature to reproduce citizens.
- Redistribution of income from wealthy monasteries to married people and soldiers is fair.
- The prince may set a minimum age of 25 years before one can take a clerical vow, for “they are born to propagate, and not to recite Latin which they do not understand” and “a woman who feeds two children and who spins, gives more service to the fatherland than all the convents can ever render.” (cf. DSDP, Voltaire 1750, 4–5.)

The important axiom—in the quote above—is *the unity of state power*; Machiavelli argued strongly for this in his republicanist work, *Discorsi* (cf. Venter 2013a&b), where he even approved the fratricide of Remus by Romulus.

Voltaire proposes an apparently *relativistic, localised utilitarian* moral code. Like in Locke, such a moral code cannot easily be sustained in a rationalistic environment—the repeated appeal to the teachings of “reason” in the paragraphs summarised above already indicates a universalism and an absolutism. The powers he wanted to award to the prince were based upon the “axioms” mentioned above; he adduced examples of other countries under Catholicism where “reason” had not only come to the same conclusion, but where (at least some of) these proposals have been implemented.

“Reason” here, purportedly disinterested, actually defends the *interest* of the supposedly *disinterested* philosopher and draws the full Platonist consequence of this:

It is a great [source of] happiness to the prince and for the state, that there are many philosophers to imprint these maxims into the mind of the people. Since philosophers do not

have any particular interest, they cannot but talk in favour of reason and the public interest. (DSDP, Voltaire 1750, 8)

The service rendered by philosophers is to destroy superstition both in the prince and in the people, for this is the greatest enemy of humankind. He claims that:

- There never had been a case on earth “*of philosophers setting themselves in opposition to the laws of their prince.*”
- Neither a single example “*of dissent where the prince was absolute master of ecclesiastical policy.*”

Quite a claim—the consequence being that the “disinterested” philosophers favour the “*public interest.*” Voltaire’s utilitarian social morality was related to that of Hume, who believed “that public utility is the sole origin of justice” (Hume 1777).

Problematic, of course, is the meaning of “utility.” In 18th century liberal circles it indicated a kind of “gentleman’s hedonism” such that individual pleasure and self-interest favour the interests of all (including intellectual interests) within contractual situations—a cross between (Epicurean) hedonism and (Aristotelian-Stoic) eudaimonism (cf. Venter 2012, 29–30). In Voltaire the term “public” must be underlined: the “disinterested” philosopher in his self-love serves the state and the sovereign, over against the church that undermines the state and thus also enlightenment as such (as Kant also argued a little later). Did Voltaire want a large stipend and some advantages from the king?

Why did Voltaire write “Catechisms”?

He claimed to “enlighten” both the princes and the people and sniff out heretics and enemies of the new faith and of his own natural theology.

The pre-Revolutionary *philosophes* did not necessarily propagate democracies. They followed Hobbes and Vico in their belief that a civil order was possible within a pre-arranged agreement between the head-of-state and the subjects, constituting a “general will” expressed in a sovereign. This could be an absolute state with civil liberties under an enlightened prince and an enlightened citizenry, or a republic. But they adhered to a new divine *causa finalis*: a *rational civil state with its own confession*. Plato rises from his grave:

The happiest that can overcome the people, is that the prince be a philosopher.

The philosopher prince knows that the more reason makes progress in his states, the less will be the disputes, the theological quarrels, the warrior mentality,⁵ the superstition: he will therefore encourage reason.

Such progress will suffice to annihilate, for example, in a few years, all the disputes about grace ... (DSDP, Voltaire 1750, 9)⁶

5 The French word here is *enthousiasm*—in this context related to Plato’s term *enthousiasmos*—the characteristic of the guardians of the state in the *Politeia*.

6 Disputes about grace have been around since Augustine’s writings against the Pelagians. One of the “slogans” of the Reformation has been “by grace alone.” In Voltaire’s days the Jansenists stood near the Reformers but were quite “fanatic.”

To say the progress of reason will remove theological disputes implies that a rational state authority will in some way decide over theological disputes—that is, Hobbes’s “reason of state” becomes “the state as reason.” In the 18th century, given the influence of Hobbes and Vico, “rationality” and “civility” (“being a burgher”) became close companions. The middle class was elevating itself, initially tolerating the nobility (observably in decline). Defoe lets the parents of Crusoe argue against his impulse to journey the world: this was “irrational,” not appreciative of his fine situation in the “middle state.” In Lessing’s dramas noble life is portrayed as anxiety about status amidst decline in wealth, while children marry below status.

The ontological counterpart to Humanist “civil rationality” (as final cause) is “nature” and its laws as *causa prima efficiens*. Modern “natural law” was an ambiguous idea, vacillating between the medieval meaning as law for all of creation (primarily for reason), and the Modern reductionist meaning of “mechanical laws” (excluding reason). Voltaire tended to use “nature” and “natural law” in the Modern sense (but bio-mechanical). An enlightened prince would ensure that there is space for “nature” to have its way (with women especially), and that progress towards rationality is enforced through rationality—the Modern *historical ontology* (cf. Venter 1999).

The anti-Christian authors from the 18th and 19th century had all gone through Christianity, and in their new religion they followed practices adopted and adapted from Christianity: catechisms and confessions (and even some doctrines) being among these. In Europe, at the time, there were thousands of secret societies, Masonic lodges and in France also *Temples*.⁷ Voltaire belonged to a well-known *Temple* in Paris, where senior (state stipended!) clergy and nobility (many of them having studied at the Jesuit college Louis le Blanc) came together to read satirical poems and criticise the establishment (but mostly not based upon Christian doctrine). It is here that Voltaire developed his skills in satire and sharpened his enmity towards Roman Catholicism. He seems to have enjoyed the company—even adopting a noble name—of people whose beliefs and lifestyle he despised (as will become clear from his catechisms).

Satirical Theology—Practicalist Simplicity against Theological Logomachie

Voltaire satirised the incomprehensible subtleties of Roman Catholic catechetical writings, including the cultural supremacy of the Catholics (and the Greek Orthodox).

Roman Catholic Theologico-Cultural Supremacy

For example, under the inscription, *Dieu* in the *Dictionnaire Philosophique Portatif* (Voltaire 1764; Dieu 1764, 5) he gives us a dialogue between a rural Scythian, *pater familias*,

⁷ Catholic Churches are known as “églises”; all Protestant churches and the lodges of secret societies are known as “temples” (pagan meeting places). Many of the secret societies of the 18th century were Mason in type, but romantically sought their forebears in the Knight Templar (disbanded by the Roman Catholic Church in the 14th century). These 18th century “Templars” were a mixture of rationalist, Ancient pagan, Modern ideas and a few medieval remnants.

Dondindac, and a “theological”: Logomachos (“Disputer”⁸), who found Dondindac and his whole family praying after supper. Logomachos is arrogant:

L: What are you doing, idolater?

D: I am not an idolater.

L: You surely must be an idolater, for you are a Scythian, and since you are not a Greek, come tell me, what are you singing in your barbarian Scythian jargon?

D: All languages are equal in God’s ears ... we are singing His praises.

L: Look this is exceptional—a Scythian family that prays to God without us having trained them. ... Let us see whether you know your catechism. Why do you pray to God?

D: It is right to pray to the Supreme Being from whom we receive everything.

L: Not bad for a barbarian. And what did you ask from him?

D: I thank him for the good things I receive from him, and even for the bad things by which he tests me. But I am quite careful not to demand anything from him; he knows better than us what we need. Further I am afraid that my neighbour will ask for fair weather when I ask for rain.

L: Aha! I did know that he would express some or other stupidity. (Dieu, Voltaire 1764, 153–4)

Voltaire here tackles the arrogance of the clergy and the totalitarianism of the Roman Catholic Church. What he proposes, though, is further totalitarianism—a civilly religious political god. Even though he situates the dialogue in a marginally Greek environment, the train of thought shows an attack on Roman Catholic catechesis.

Firstly, the theological plays a game of cultural elitism: the Scythian is a barbarian and a not-Greek—he is a non-entity below civilisation and clerical literacy. He speaks some way-out slang; he has no real identity. Being a “not-Greek” here means that he does not speak the language of the clerics—“High Greek” or Latin. Elsewhere, Voltaire admonishes the French for being intolerant to people who pray to God in bad French (the Calvinists) rather than Latin.

Secondly, citizenship, for Voltaire, was more important than clericalism. He would rather have had women follow the law of nature (breeding soldiers) than reciting incomprehensible Latin.

Thirdly, modern emancipatory enlightenment was more important than ritual. Ritualistic recital in a foreign language, of course, provides no enlightening, emancipation, real teaching or catechising. (Voltaire does not admit anything about the Temple’s rituals.)

However, Voltaire was not totally fair to Catholicism: since about 1300 a shift in the direction of the vernacular did take place under the leadership of the Dominicans and

8 In Voltaire’s days monks made money out of debating theological subtleties. One of Voltaire’s stock examples of judicial murder was that of Vannini, who won too many debates; jealousy led to trumped-up charges and Vannini was put to death. Issues such as whether the angels who visited Abraham had stomachs or just pretended to eat, were apparently debated. Such issues had their origin in paradoxes that Medieval logicians debated to test logical systems, but their deeper roots were in Medieval theology. Thus a paradoxical issue, like how many angels can dance on the tip of a needle, was based upon the assumption that angels were pure forms containing no matter at all.

Franciscans. Yet a supposed holy language still endures, with a concomitant self-elevation among those using it.

Nationalism versus Internationalism

Given the tendency to state absolutism, the majority of the *philosophes* were quite patriotic. But the liberals, like Voltaire, followed Turgot—moving towards *internationalism*. Vico has already tried to show that progressive rationality was God’s way of establishing viable societies; Voltaire’s catechisms were also attempts to show the omni-present possibilities of a rational religion. Kant and Bertha von Suttner’s attempts at world peace were born from this belief in a delayed, but progressively maturing peaceful, rational order. Marx started off as a hard internationalist activist, but realities caused him to retreat to a more multi-nationalist approach (cf. Marx 1879.)

Voltaire’s universalistic idea of the Supreme Being, which he supposed to be present in every nation, combined with his appreciation of practical rationality, allowed him some sympathy for cultural differences (especially where he could oppose these to Catholicism). In the introduction to his four dictionary catechisms, *De la Chine* (Voltaire 1764), he argues that though Westerners viewed the Chinese as atheists, they had discovered the Supreme Being long before our own civilisation originated.

Natural Theology and Practicalism—in the Final Sense it is about “God”

When Logomachos asks Dondindac *how he knows there is a god*, the latter does not refer to any revelation or dogmatic teaching—he becomes Voltaire’s ventriloquist:

- *Nature* in its totality told him that there is a God, Creator and Lord, who rewards you for virtue and punishes evil.
- *Reason*, based upon the great works of the *architect of nature*, teaches the practical person how to live rationally (as in the *Catéchisme du Jardinier* below) (Voltaire 1764), anticipating the practicalist approach in Kant’s *Kritik der Praktischen Vernunft* (KPV, Kant 1788).

A further satirical bite is inserted in the quote above: the theologal as fabricator of logomacy believes that only scholars can understand and catechise anything about God, matter and the soul. Logomachos cross-questions and chastises Dondindac about all kinds of scholastic subtleties: whether God is of essence or *secundum quid*, pure spirit or also has a body, in space, above space or a-spatial; and what spirit is. Dondindac returns some of the questions to Logomachos, who, embarrassed, ducks them. Dondindac’s strong answer is that knowing all this will not make him a *better citizen*, a better *husband*, a better *father*, a better *boss*. Rather than getting stuck in subtle Scholastics about God, Voltaire’s metaphysics moves beyond scientific reason and anticipates the practicalist rationality of Kant. For the scholastic metaphoric projections have serious limitations:

D: I have elsewhere seen one of your Temples: why do you paint God with a long beard?

L: It is a very difficult question for which pre-education is also needed.

D: Before I receive such training from you, it is necessary to tell you what once happened to me. I had built a little shed at the end of my garden: I heard a tulip arguing with a cockchafer:

- Look at this beautiful construction, says the tulip—it must be a very powerful tulip who has made this building.
- You must be joking, says the cockchafer—it is a cockchafer, full of genius, that is the architect of this building.

Since then I have decided never to dispute again. (*Dieu*, Voltaire 1764, 156)

Voltaire here plays a game with anthropomorphic representations of God: the medieval metaphors, in for example Anselm of Canterbury's and Thomas's theories of "analogy of being," come to mind. Voltaire (1764) takes this issue further in the *Chinese* and *Japanese Catechisms*. He suggests that everyone makes an architect of the universe *according to his/her own image* for the sake of elevating him/herself above others, instead of moving to the universal level: Something like: "I have more of the image of the divine in me than you have." The Scholastic view of human dignity had in fact been built upon such a hierarchy (cf. Venter 2000a). Voltaire's own proposal is, of course, that it makes rational sense to move to a higher level of abstraction.

In reading Voltaire's ignored writings, one sees a man on a mission—to eliminate Christian teaching in general and Catholicism especially; to propose an alternative natural theology and natural panto-deist religion.

Voltaire's Five Catechisms

What can we expect in Voltaire's catechisms? Certainly that the higher level of abstraction renders a less anthropomorphic idea of God, and that his metaphysics will determine the whole context in which this idea of God is situated and unpacked. Briefly—Voltaire's catechisms *supported* a substitute religion: a rationalist-naturalistic-deterministic; practicalistic; ecumenical; internationalist; state absolutist; panto-deist; but mono-deist, one.

He *rejected* Christianity in all forms—but especially the Roman Catholic format—as elitist (forgetting his own elitism), oppressive (forgetting the oppression inherent in state absolutism), obsessed with detailed doctrinal difference ("pharisaic" in a New Testament sense), corrupt, parasitic, credulous and persecutionist.

A proposition is implied here: *The advent of Modernity basically was a change in religious worldview with a dialectical divinity: the (individual or collective) human god versus-but-fused-with the nature god.*

In Hobbes the opposition between the natural, instinctive, violent human being and the rational, peace-imposing collective (the state) was a-historical. Together with growing knowledge about other worlds and studies of the Ancient Classics, this opposition was changed into a historical one: nature as the origin and rationality (or humanity) as the goal of "nature-history"—this is what we call the faith in progress. It is present in Defoe's novels—especially *Robinson Crusoe* (Defoe 1719)—but really scholarly worked out by Vico (*Nuova*

Scienca 1984) and Turgot's *Plan de deux Discours sur l'Histoire Universelle* (1751)—the elitist doctrine of delayed rationality or delayed mature humanity. It was and is elitist, because it assumed that some are more fully human than others—the famous Enlightenment project of emancipation. Even when Irrationalism became dominant, this idea of the enlightened human above-yet-in history emancipating the brothers did not disappear: one need but listen to the haughtiness with which pro-abortionists treat pro-lifers.

The new divinity/ies—as is to be expected—had its own cults such as the return of occultism (the Academy of Florence notably) and many secret societies that had emerged since the Renaissance, and also distanced itself from the dominant religion of the time: Christianity, especially in its Roman Catholic form. From Machiavelli over Hobbes, Turgot, Rousseau, Voltaire, the French philosophes and Revolution, Mandeville, Condorcet, Robespierre, Feuerbach, Friedrich Engels, Auguste Comte, Nietzsche, Hitler, Mussolini, William James, up to Lyotard—all of these showed a kind of cultic attack on Christianity and a kind of church-like teaching of the alternative.

Neo-Classicist Hermeneutic of Attack

Voltaire did specifically develop a neo-Classicist hermeneutic of attack on Christianity—the idea was to show *the nobility of the Classical era* versus *the barbarity of Christian doctrine* and practice (cf. Venter 2013b). The other side of the coin was his own positive doctrines, hidden behind such attacks.

After Hobbes, Modernity's religious, panto-deist humanism always struggled with the double dialectic of Nature fused-with-versus Reason and individual fused-with-versus collective.

New Catechetical Tradition

Even though Voltaire's catechisms are of a satirical type, he surely helped to evolve a secular tradition of religious teaching, especially in the direction of an enlightened absolute state. The Revolutionaries wrote a secular "constitution" for the clergy and set up a cult of reason (Athena or Minerva) in Nôtre Dame Cathedral. In the United States their constitution was taught to children in catechetical format (Stansbury 1828). We seem to have something similar in the decolonisation movement at universities these days. These doctrines and attacking style will show themselves in the analysis of Voltaire's catechisms below.

Catéchisme de l' Honnête Homme—Setting down the Dogma

A discussion of the *Catechism of the Honest Man* (CHH, Voltaire 1763)—the first one to be published—can serve well as the introduction to the analysis of all Voltaire's catechisms. It is less of satire and more of a plain doctrine than the others: satire and shifting of location and cultural environment requires some "reading-behind" in order to allow the "intended" meaning to emerge.

The *Catéchism de l' Honnête Homme* ends up in a humanistic, universal confession—it differs from the other four in this: the relationship between religion and civil life is not in the forefront, but for the rest the doctrines are quite similar.

It is a discussion between a “Greek” “Venerable” and an “Honest man.” The choice of discussion partners is already significant: the “Venerable,” we can guess, will have to admit that he is actually not-so-venerable, because *what he preaches is actually not what he believes in his rational heart*. He admits to the “Honest” man that he dare not—today’s parlance—speak the truth to power: the doctrinal police on Mount Athos.

Honest Man: And I add, since I am a human being, that I propose to you

- the religion that befits all humankind,
- the one of all patriarchs and wise of the Ancient world,
- the adoration of a God,
- justice,
- neighbourly love,
- penitence for all error,
- beneficence in all occasions of life.
- It is this religion, dignified for God,
- which God has inscribed into all hearts.

But surely he did not inscribe

- that three adds up to one,
- that a piece of bread is eternal, and
- that he ass of Balaam spoke. (CHH, end, Voltaire 1763, 171–2)

It is the “being-human” (i. e. supposedly natural-rational) that determines how religion should look. Even though Voltaire struggles elsewhere to clearly distinguish between humans and brute animals, and also hesitates to draw the full road of *analogia entis*, he still singles out the human being as the dignifying creature—first the human, then the doctrine. In most of his writings Voltaire found the patriarchs despicable and the Classical pagans quite rational; here he relaxes the opposition a bit, but he does not name the patriarchs. The Enlightenment philosophers were moralists (although they were unsure whether to choose for Stoic or Epicurean sobriety) and the divinity that Voltaire here proposes, is a moralistic one: one fashioned after the mode of Enlightenment philosophy. (Kant almost copied this doctrine.)

The expression, God “inscribed into the hearts of men” comes from the Old Testament—where it simply referred to God’s presence through his covenant and commandments as well as the remembrance of human transgression. It is the double marking: Jacob at Bethel and Cain—belonging to God and forgiveness and the conditions thereof. Medieval thinkers reduced this to God’s natural law in human reason for human life. Modernity adopted this and transformed it into a humanistic a priori that was gradually shifted into the instincts. The rationalist content that Voltaire gave to it barely had any reminiscence of its biblical origins. Why then sustain the expression? For no other reason than to validate the Humanistic faith of Modernity by referring it to an authoritative legislator. The catechisms were written for this religion.

A distinct theme here is that of “fittingness for God” or “what conforms to being-God.” This has been there since early Christianity—the question always came up where the thinker wanted to understand God’s thoughts analogically to human logic. Since Tertullian this question has been asked; it was elaborated on in detail by Anselm of Canterbury; it is still vaguely present in Darwin (“Project Gutenberg’s *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin* 2010). When being-human is reduced to be being-rational, this analogy leads to a struggle with the “logic of God”; the thinker despairs or even disparages of “God’s contradictions.” It usually leads to a “depersonalisation” of God into a universal logical subject—this is what happens here—and in Humanism the borderline between the universal logical divine subject and the creative, universalising human subject is wiped away (Kant 1783).

The other four catechisms cover a wider and more detailed scope. I include them here in my analytical overview. *All four of them:*

- 1) “Analyse” the role of religion in the environment of the *state*.
- 2) Are based upon a *natural theology*, but strongly limited (anticipating Kant’s criticism of wrong metaphysics).
- 3) Point to a *Supreme Being* as keystone of reality, to be recognised by universal enlightenment.
- 4) Exhibit a concern for progress in and via *enlightenment*, by promoting both scientific and practical reason and eliminating superstition.
- 5) Point to a concern for *justice, tolerance, dignity*, and a *rational practical life* within civil society.
- 6) Concern Western issues, but are located outside Western Europe: to show the *universality* of Voltaire’s ontology.
- 7) Are in the format of *argumentative dialogue*—thus they presuppose Voltaire’s type of rationalism.
- 8) Set strict *limits to metaphysical investigations* (anticipating Kant).

There are, however, also important differences between the four catechisms, showing the open possibilities in the catechetical tradition, as well as the one-sidedness of specific authors:

- a) The *Catéchisme Chinois* is a typical teaching-before-confession type of catechism.
- b) The *Catéchisme du Japonais* is a catechism of doctrinal strife hiding religious divide-and-rule arrogance.
- c) The *Catéchisme du Curé* is confessional, initiating in its nature—a humble priest confesses to his intentions when he arrives in his rural parish.
- d) The *Catéchisme du Jardinier* is confessional in the sense of sustaining one’s beliefs under [threat of] persecution.

Catéchisme Chinois (CC, 1764)

Voltaire characterises the *Chinese Catechism* (CC, Voltaire 1764) as a catechetical conversation between Ku-Su the Confucian teacher and Kou, son of King Lou, “417 before our popular era,” “translated into Latin by Father Fouquet, former ex-Jesuit” (sic!)

“... manuscript ... Vatican Library nr 42759.” The typical personal interactive (question-answer mode) character of Ancient catechism is sustained. One sees the distance from Catholicism in the dating and the strange wordplay: being a “former ex-Jesuit.” The Jesuits did a lot of missionary work all over the newly discovered worlds.

The characters in this catechism have been purposefully chosen: Cu-Su is a Confucian philosopher and Kou is the crown prince in his father’s kingdom. The Catechism intends precisely what was noted above: a philosopher enlightening and emancipating a prince for future good governance (the enlightened civil head-of-state of the Enlightenment thinkers); a teacher under the authority of the national *pater familias* brings the prince to an understanding of the role of religion in the state, while eliminating the influence of superstitious and divisive religious teachers. From Machiavelli over Hobbes to Rousseau, Voltaire and Condorcet and Kant, the divisiveness of the “priestly class” sowing superstition in the “enlightened” absolute state, has been fiercely attacked by philosophers. The exception was Saint-Simon in his *Nouveau Christianisme* (1825), whose complaint was that Christianity was too co-operative with the political elite.

The Chinese Catechism (CC, Voltaire 1764) is divided into six conversations:

- a) The first is scientific: it ridicules the superstitions of complete pantheism (e. g. astrology) replacing it (in “417 b. C”!) with typical Modern Western astronomy (CC, 82–85).
- b) Next is a kind of panto-deist natural theology (CC, 85–88).
- c) The idea of the immortal soul, based upon the necessity of reward and punishment (CC, 88–93).
- d) Petty theological disputes are swept away to be replaced by tolerance (CC, 94–97).
- e) A moral discourse—a king has to concern himself with the welfare of all his subjects, rather than vain pleasures, executing the Supreme Being’s great commandment to love one’s neighbour and one’s enemies (CC, 98–101).
- f) Finally, the social virtues are given primacy: hospitality on the physical side and humility on the spiritual side (CC, 101–104).

Of the vast number of hints and allusions in this Catechism, I can only cite two prominent ones:

Cu-Su: ... we must adore only the Eternal Author of all the beings.

Kou: But how could one author make the others?

Cu-Su: Look at this star: she is five hundred thousand Lis away from our small globe. From it departs rays that will make two equal angles on the bulge of your eyes: they make the same angles on the eyes of all living beings: does it not show a remarkable design? Does it not show an admirable law? But who makes a work, if not a worker? Who makes Laws, if not a Legislator? There is therefore an eternal Worker, a Legislator?

Kou: But who has made this Worker? And how was he made?

Cu-Su: My prince, I was walking yesterday next to the vast palace that the king, your father, has built. I heard two crickets—the one said to the other: Look what a fearsome building. Yes said the other: as glorious as I myself am, I swear that it is somebody more powerful than

crickets that has made this product; but I have no idea of this particular being; I only know that he is.

Kou: I tell you that you are cricket, more schooled than I am, and what pleases me in you, it is that you do not pretend to know what you do not know. (CC, Voltaire 1764, *1er Entretien*, 84–5)

Voltaire drew on a vast heritage of cultural resources: the Bible (he knew it almost by heart), church history (he knew the worst parts), Greek philosophy, Roman political thought, the church fathers, Scholasticism (from Thomas to Duns Scotus), and of course the literature of his own days (Descartes, Pascal, Leibniz, Newton, Locke, Hume, Rousseau, Montesquieu, Bolingbroke and others). He read them, criticised them and used them. The legislator-designer-God here is an adaptation of Newton, but of course also the five proofs of God's existence in Thomas Aquinas.

Ancient rabbis showed their authority by developing their own parables and in hinting to events in the discourse of scriptures, as Jesus often did. Voltaire's satirical teachings have much of this. One can take CC seriously as a catechism. Compared to the arrogance of Logomachos the Confucian philosopher here teaches a simple doctrine of "natural" insight into the divine and the practice of life. Voltaire catechises authoritatively, using parables and hints to criticise the Pharisees and scribes of his day, using a Confucian mouthpiece to show how catechising really should take place: the parable here of the two crickets and Dondindac's parable of the tulip and the cockchafer allude to the metaphorical playground of the Scholastics (including *analogia entis*):

- In the parable of the tulip and the cockchafer, the two debaters differ in kind; each wants his image to be that of the divine. It alludes to the biblical warnings about image idolatry (the Ten Commandments and Romans 1); hinting too at Xenophanes' ridicule of divinities made according to racial and tribal imagery (Xenophanes von Kolophon. Fragments 10 ff in Diels, H. (hrsgg.) 1903).
- In the second parable the debaters are of the same kind. The conclusion is that the metaphor of a "divine legislator" is fairly safe, but the Platonist metaphor of a "craftsman" falls short: one cannot get further than a single creator, transcending understanding. Voltaire is more Thomist here than Thomas Aquinas himself: taking literally Thomas Aquinas's statement that one can know that God is but not what he is, he breaks off the analogical argumentation much earlier than Thomas did.

The Scholastics, from Anselm of Canterbury onwards, developed an inverted metaphoric: good earthly characteristics were extrapolated into divine characteristics; these were then characterised as the originals and the earthly ones as the derived. The originals were then unpacked extensively: the Scholastic analyses of the "essence of God."

- This latter alludes to the Socratic adage that one ought not pretend to know what one doesn't know; Voltaire distances himself from Scholastic speculations on the essence of God.

- The legislator metaphor also has a Newtonian ring. Newton (a hero in Voltaire’s eyes) was the Modern thinker who insisted on the harmony in divine legislation (cf. Venter 2001, 17ff).
- Typically, in a context where logic and reason takes primary place, the idea of a unitary, abstract, universal God displaces particularity. Firstly, in Western thought, the distinction between the “universal,” the “one” and the “whole” has often been blurred (especially after neo-Platonism). Secondly, Ancient political theology (Babylonia, Egypt) was revived in the Modern abstractions. Ancient “empire theology” was political—the usurper’s supreme divinities were fused with the local hierarchy at the tip: Alexandrian neo-Platonism exactly was an abstraction of the many faces Ra had acquired in this way.

The final paragraphs of the sixth interview highlight the important confessional positions of the whole Chinese Catechism. It attempts to strike a balance between scholarly status and arrogance, underlines the relationship between the Supreme Being and virtuous governance, the elimination of divisive superstitions, and the emancipatory character of catechising an emerging (national) family father after philosophical catechism, *vis-à-vis* his philosopher-teacher-servant:

C: I believe that humility is the modesty of the soul, for the external modesty is only civility. Humility does not consist in denying oneself the superiority that one has reached above another. A good doctor cannot dissimulate himself to make himself more delirious than his patient; he that teaches astronomy, must admit to himself that he is more learned than his disciples—he cannot prevent himself from believing this, but he must not make it into a super-belief. Humility is not self-despising; it is the corrective of self-love, just as modesty is the correction of audacity.

K: Yes true, it is in the exercise of all these virtues and in the cult of a God, simple and universal, that I want to live, far from chimaeras, from sophists, and the illusions of false prophets. Love of the neighbour will be my virtue on the throne, and the love of God my religion. I shall despise the god Fo and Laotze ...

Damned be a people imbecile and barbarous enough to think that there is a God for his province only: this is blasphemy. What? The light of the sun illumines all the eyes, and the light of God enlightens only a small and sickly nation in a corner of the globe! What a horror! What folly! The divinity speaks in the heart of all human beings and the bonds of caring love unite them from one end of the universe to the other.

C: O wise Kou! You have spoken like a man inspired by the Chang-ti himself; you will be a dignified prince. I have been your teacher and you have become mine. (CC, Voltaire 1764, 109–10)

Voltaire’s discourse was carefully chosen to take up certain issues here:

Firstly he knew that his preference for a philosophical religion and advice to the prince would set him open to the charge of arrogance, replacing ecclesiastical with scholarly *elitism*. Socrates was killed for this; Plato had to be bought back from a slave market by his students. Thus he had to defend himself by defining “humility” in such a way that he could cling to status—*he is “enlightened”; the others are not* (cf. Venter 2013a). He really was status conscious. Many of his criticisms were clearly haughty, thus skewed and slanderous.

Secondly, emulating Cambridge Platonism, his hermeneutics was by and large based upon *Alexandrine allegorical exegesis*. He claims illumination directly from God for his elitist insights, but the God that illumines is “the god of the philosophers, who is not the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” as Blaise Pascal had characterised it. It is a universal, abstract, faceless Supreme Being that is extended over many divinities but expresses little of them. In Voltaire it is the *Architect* of the universe, the *Engineer* of the totality-machine, the *Logic* behind reason. It is a projection of physics and rationality as understood since Thomas More and Descartes—the language being very much that of the Free Masons. *Science and reason has become revelatory as such—and therefore a new light had dawned* (cf. Venter 2015).

Thirdly, his formulation here contains an irony he may not have realised himself: the expressions “the divinity speaks in the heart” and “the bonds of caring love” (as well as loving one’s enemy, above), have been adopted from that hateful Christian religion that he, here as always, tries to veil by ascribing the good to some Ancient pre-Christian era. As already noted above, Modernity, following medieval intellectualism, had transformed the Old Testament biblical idea of God inscribing his covenantal law in the hearts of humans, into a universal a priori for reason. It forgot that the Bible also says that Israel’s sins had also been inscribed in their hearts. It progressively relocated the a priori into the Modern arché, “nature,” the sub-rational (usually the sentiments or the instincts). Next, with the exception of Friedrich Engels, the revolutionary catechisms after the French Revolution were all based on middle-Modern (economistic) reading of the biblical love commandment. In spite of Voltaire’s disdain for Blaise Pascal, his idea of the “heart” was sneaked in and twisted into a sub-rational location for the axioms of practical reason.

Practicalism (as we find it in Vico, Rousseau, Hume, Voltaire and Kant’s *Kritik der Praktischen Vernunft* [KPV, Kant 1788]) was a kind of subjectivist rationalism believing that the mind either has innate “axioms” for practical life or intuitively construes them from sense fragments. Note: it is reason that construes, on the basis of sub-rational fragmentary ideas, not practice itself. The biblical idea of a covenantal divine law finally became a piece of pre-evolutionistic naturalism.

Catéchisme du Japonois (CJ, 1764)

A remark by Jean-Jacques Rousseau may help to understand Voltaire’s issue in the *Catechism of the Japanese*:

There is a third religion more bizarre that, by giving the people two legislations, two chefs, two parties, submits them to contradictory duties, and prevents them from being devotees and citizens simultaneously. Such is the religion of the Lamas, which is that of the Japanese; such is Roman [Catholic] Christianity. One can call this the religion of the priest. From it comes a kind of mixed and unsociable right that does not have a name. (DCS, Rousseau 1762, 4.8)

I have noted the similarities between Rousseau’s and Voltaire’s views on the relationship between established religion and the state. Roman Catholicism, with its allegiance to a supreme pontiff in Rome, constituted special dangers for the state’s sovereignty, the

philosophes believed. But since Hobbes the very idea of saying “I must obey God rather than men” (thus all of Christianity) had become anathema (cf. Venter 1999, ff). The dogma of unity from Machiavelli (mentioned above) was very strong (in Descartes’ view of the unity of science too).

Voltaire’s catechetic narrative of the intervention of the Supreme Lama from elsewhere in the catering communities in Japan, his exploitation of them, is *an attack on the Roman pope’s interventions in local affairs*. There is a beautiful allusion in the story of a Lama intervening in catering and menu: the suggestion of the abuse of “spiritual” power over “temporal” power (as noted explicitly in DSDP, Voltaire 1750 above). Here we may have a word play between “chef” as chief cook and “chef” as social leader or boss. The Lama claims universal rationality; the local chef communities a local rationality. When the yoke of the Supreme Lama is discarded, it takes a few centuries for the local catering groups to learn to live in peace with one another, accepting the differences in menus and diets—the one does not eat pork; the other refuses hare; the one loves sausages; the other despises it—before the island of Japan experiences a *unification* (cf. CJ, Voltaire 1764, 104–108). What was needed is a unified view about who God is.

In the *Catéchisme de l’ honnête homme* it is stated that God neither takes offence nor is seduced by the outward form of adoration (the menu); it is all about the relationship to him; the practice of his a priori laws. Notably: the scriptural idea of the divine law inscribed in the human heart is present again, but still devoid of the original family-intimacy of the biblical covenant: here it is but reason seeing the universal.

Voltaire had good reason to locate this *Catechism* on the island of Japan, using the idea of foreign Lamas: it served well to illustrate the struggle of a local state against foreign religious influence, and the chaos that comes about locally when such a foreign yoke is broken: religious and political factionalism. A double allegiance would undermine the authority of the absolute state sovereign, and the divisions caused by it remain long after its departure.

Next, as always, Voltaire preaches nearer to home: England’s (or possibly the British Islands’) religious struggles with the popes (up to Henri VIII) and later among themselves (remember Cromwell and others). He hints in this direction by using English words (such as “pudding”) in the French text; also referring to the Quakers’ stinginess, and by ascribing their natural scientific discoveries (Newtonian astronomy, mathematics) to the Japanese, over against the disdain of a certain “Indian” poet. Then in a final sentence in English, he changes God into a universal god-law who has no particular favourites:

J: Would it be possible that having invented so many admirable or useful things, we would not be but fools? And that a man who has put to verse the dreams of others, be the only wise? That he leaves is to do our catering, and that he makes, if he wants to, verses about subjects more poetical.*

I: What do you want? He has the prejudices of his country, those of his party, and his very own.

J: O look—too many prejudices.

*NB: This Indian, Recina, based on the faith of the dreamers of his country, believed that one could only make good sausages when Brahma, by a totally particular will, himself teaches sausage to his favourites; that there is an infinite number of caterers, for whom it would be impossible to make a ragout with a firm will to succeed in it, and that the Brama deny them the means for it out of pure malice. We do not believe such an impertinence in Japan, and one holds for an incontestable truth this Japanese sentence:

*God never acts by partial will, but by general Laws. (CJ, Voltaire 1764, 109–110)

The last sentence, indicated as “Japanese,” is quoted in English in the original French text. Voltaire admired the English for their constitutional system, their science and literature. The whole catechism is directed at showing the mess caused by the priestly religions when they intervene in “temporal” affairs. The centuries of struggle for peace and tolerance in England serve as a good example. John Locke wrote *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (published in 1689), by and large attacking religious intolerance. So did Voltaire about 70 years later (cf. Voltaire 1763). By 1825, the divisions between the Franks and the Gauls would be taken up in Saint-Simon’s catechisms.

Voltaire adds an issue: the relationship between God’s will and the law in a “footnote” about the malicious Brahma. It is a completely Western Scholastic issue: having originated in Augustine’s writings against the Pelagians, then developed in the 13th century as the *contingentia futura* issue, followed by the subtleties of Duns Scotus in the 14th century and the total arbitrariness of God’s will in Ockham; and finally the purported stone hard predestination idea of John Calvin.

Voltaire probably had the hard predestination idea of the Jansenists in mind. They taught a strict determinism: God decides beforehand who can and will, and who cannot and will not, accept his salvation. Voltaire’s own choice is somewhat Cartesian; it also results in a deterministic view of God (in fact the *contingentia futura* issue is again peeping around the door ...): he refers to prejudices: ethnic, partisan, and personal, vaguely reminiscent of Bacon’s (1620, ch. 13ff) theory of prejudice: the idols besetting men’s minds. He defends the position that God neither has such special prejudices nor is malicious in his gifts, for these have their origin in his laws, thus anticipating the deification of law in Auguste Comte’s positivism (where mystic humanity, nature and law are one).

The deified law vaguely reminds us of the role of the Supreme Living Being in Plato’s *Timaius* and the Unmoved Mover in Aristotle’s *Physics* book 8. From this high-level natural theology Voltaire moves back to the less theoretical, the practicalist rationality of everyday life.

Catechisme du Curé (CdC, 1764)

The *Catechism of the Parish Priest* (CdC, Voltaire 1764) briefly, is an ode to the rural pastor.

The names of the two persons have been chosen carefully: Ariston (“the best” or “high-ranking”) and Theotime (“God-honouring”). *It is the city aristocrat hearing from the God-fearing what really ought to count.* Theotime, who has finished his priestly studies and has

ensured that he knows of rural development, is now headed for a rural parish, small enough to be controllable, away from the pleasures of urban life. He is not interested in teaching all kinds of theological frivolities, or keeping people away from work by the seductiveness of religious festivals: *honour God and work for your keep*, is his motto (CdC, Voltaire 1764, 110–115).

One aspect is important here: “confession.” Asked about his opinion on this, Theotime answers:

- Confession is an excellent idea; it helps prevent crime.
- It was discovered in the remote past; they made confessions celebrating Ancient Mysteries.
- We imitated this wise practice and sanctified it.
- It is quite good to exhort hearts full of hatred to forgive; and to get the small thieves to return that which they have stolen from their neighbours.
- But: there are many indiscreet Confessors, especially among the monks, that often elicit more stupidities from the girls than all the boys of a village could do to them.
- No details in the confession—it is not a legal cross-questioning, it is the acknowledgement of the sins that a sinner does against the Supreme Being, under the hands of another sinner that in turn is going to accuse himself. This healing commitment is not there to satisfy the curiosity of another human being (CdC, Voltaire 1764, 112–3).

Voltaire did understand the role of Roman Catholic confession to a priest—in fact: asking forgiveness, getting rid of hatred, and expected absolution is part of all Christian confession. But again his twisting hermeneutic comes into play: the rural parish priest represents Voltaire’s neo-Classical apologetic interest in *Ancient paganism* (cf. Herrick 1985). He proposed a prejudiced methodological hermeneutic of attack; all goodness comes from the Ancient pagans. Christians, he believed, only did well where they copied paganism. He really misled his readers about the origins of catechism and confession.

The secret societies of Voltaire’s days promoted this kind of neo-Classicism as the only rational way to understand the world and live a moral life. The symbols of the 1789 Revolution (just more than two decades later) showed the enormous influence of a pagan understanding of rationality.

Catéchisme du Jardinier (CJar, 1764)

The *Catechism of the Gardener* (CJar, Voltaire 1764) is a dialogue, set on the Greek island, Samos, ruled by the Turks. It is about human identity under religious differences and its link to commerce. It is humorous yet thorough in its criticism. Tuctan, the Turkish governor, complains about the prices of Karpos’s vegetables. He has to admit, they are good. Imposing his authority, he shifts the dialogue to faith. Karpos responds:

My faith, my Bacha—I am struggling to tell you about it. When our tiny island Samos belonged to the Greeks, I remember that they made me say that the *Hagion Pneuma* was only produced by *Tou Patrou*; they made me pray to God straight up on my legs, the hands crossed; they forbade me to eat milk products during Lent. The Venetians came; then my parish priest made me say that *Hagion Pneuma* came from the *Tou Patrou* and the *Tou Uou*, they allowed me to eat milk products, and they made me pray to God on my knees. The Greeks returned and chased the Venetians, therefore I had to renounce the *Tou Uou* and milk. You finally chased away the Greeks, and I hear you shout *Allah illa Allach* with all your might—I do not know anymore who I am: I love God with all my heart and I sell my vegetables very reasonably. (CJar, Voltaire 1764, 115)

Voltaire assumes that one's religion determines one's identity; enforced changes in religion create identity crises that can be avoided if one keeps to the simple tenets of *loving a universal God, living a moral life and doing an honest job well*.

However, Voltaire has learnt something more from liberal Christianity, which the Moslem governor did not understand. The issue of price and quality is up front here—but for what kind of product? The Turk sees quality in Karpos's daughter and sets a trap: if he cannot put his daughter up to serve Tuctan, then he is disloyal to his government and may possibly conspire with his "papa" against the governor:

Tuctan: They say you also have a beautiful daughter?
Karpos: Yes, my Bacha, but she is not at your service.
Tuctan: Why this, you miserable?
Karpos: It is because I am an honest man: it is permissible for me to sell my figs; not to sell my daughter.
Tuctan: And by what law is it not permitted to sell that fruit?
Karpos: By the law of honest gardeners: the honour of my daughter does not belong to me; it belongs to her; it is not a merchandise. (CJar, Voltaire 1764, 116)

This is the Christian liberal idea of human dignity to be found in the first chapters of Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* (1690, ch. 1–10). Voltaire knew the work of Locke quite well. When confronted by Tuctan as a possible conspirator, Karpos argues that *Tou Patrou* ordains obedience to the incumbent government; if another takes charge, then all oaths to the previous one fall away. Even Voltaire had to moderate loyalty to the state where it might imply blind loyalty at the cost of God-given rights. The Turk recognises a kind of *rationality* here:

Tuctan: You are a reasoned man; you therefore have principles?
Karpos: Yes, in my own way: they are small in number, but they are sufficient for me. And if I had anymore, they would embarrass me.
Tuctan: I would be curious to know your principles.
Karpos: It is for example to be a good husband; a good father; a good neighbour; a good subject; a good gardener; I do not go further than that, and I hope that God will have mercy on me. (CJar, Voltaire 1764, 118)

It is about *practicalist* rationality, but the style is Ockhamist and Cartesian: few principles and good reasoning. Locke suggests that a farmer can be a rational person. This is quite in line with the dominant economic philosophy of the time, Physiocracy, according to which the

agrarian husbandman established civil culture. But when it came to individual rights, Voltaire's belief in the absolute control by the state clearly failed him.

In Conclusion: Voltaire's Philosophy Expressed in the Catechisms

Every Modern "secular" thinker moved between two categories: "nature" and "reason." This because "nature" was viewed as the universal basis of all; "reason" as the upper limit of reality. Once the historicising of the ontology had kicked in, "nature" became the origin and "reason" the final goal or outcome of all. This also goes for Voltaire and his expression in the five catechisms.

Rationality

There are two kinds of rationality at play in Voltaire's work—scientific rationality and practicalistic rationality.

The Chinese Catechism (as well as parts of the Japanese Catechism) is laden with the scientific side of Voltaire's thought; in the Catechism of the parish priest and the Catechism of the vegetable gardener the focus is shifted to the rural area—the living space of the practical person. So, also, in the piece about Dondindac's idea of God (Dieu) in the *Dictionnaire Philosophique Portatif* (Voltaire 1764)

In the two sermons on Bible interpretation Voltaire uses "physics" versus "morals" as the two main categories: "physics" was the focus area of "science"; "morals" that of "rational-practical" life. This is discourse expressing his contemporary intellectual context. The division had its roots in Vico, was sharpened by Quesnay, Turgot and Rousseau—and was an extension of the ambiguous use of "natural law."

Civility itself was construed in terms of these categories: Physiocracy held that socio-economic thought, and civil society, communication, law, were all expressions of natural law as founded in base culture—agri-culture. The parish priest takes learning to the rural areas, but this does not mean that the Dondindacs and vegetable farmers do not have a developed rational world view that grew from a priori rational insight interacting with nature. Physiocracy exactly viewed agriculture as the primary form of culture: the first form of rational mastery, but as culture a moral code emerged: Vico (1984) and the Physiocrats maintained that civil communities had emerged as products of agricultural settlement. Voltaire, like many others in his era, repeatedly refers to the universal natural law engraved by God into the hearts of thinking beings—it is somehow a priori. This is why the first section of TM (Voltaire 1734) is devoted to distinguishing humans from brutes—sensualist naturalism somehow had to produce its opposite: the super-natural: the human being.

"Natural Law" or "Law of Nature"

The real hinge term in the different catechisms is that of "natural law" or "laws of nature." One ought to distinguish at least two meanings of the term:

- Firstly, the Medieval one, according to which the term “nature” includes all that God created (including the “rational”) as opposed to the “supernatural” or sphere of God’s direct intervention after creation. “Natural law” here meant all laws for creatures; the supreme natural law was the law of reason—these included the a priori or self-evident basis of the state.
- Secondly, in the post-Cartesian era, however, “nature” had been reduced to the sub-rational—“reason” now stood above “nature.” Descartes believed that the basic principles of mechanical laws and moral precepts were innate, God-given, in reason. However, in both cases a divine legislator is supposed (cf. Venter 2001; 2002).

Up to the Physiocrat, Quesnay, the two meanings remained in a confused struggle for primacy. The latter, however, initiated a kind of capitalist physicalist moralism, defining the moral law in terms of the physical: the physical laws would be all regularities recognised as advantageous to humankind; the moral would be to act on those regularities for own advantage:

Natural laws are either physical or moral. One understands here by physical law the regulated course of every physical event which is evidently the most advantageous for humankind. One understands here by moral law the rule of every human action conforming to the physical order which is evidently the most advantageous for humankind. These laws form the ensemble of what is called “natural law.” (Quesnay 1965, 374–5)

From then on the a priori had been shifted to the sub-rational in human consciousness, from where it spoke through instincts and sentiments into reason (cf. Turgot 1751, 255ff). However, even in this shift the panto-deists insisted that it is “divine law” that speaks through the sub-rational into the rational. The so-called “historical natural law” was usually an idealistic recovery of “natural law” from the sub-rational—a double game played quite well by Kant (cf. 1786, MAMG, 85ff). Further research into the term “catechism” in Modern secularism depends most seriously on this shift in the meaning of “nature” and “natural law” in Modernity (cf. Venter 2001; 2002).

The so-called “deists” of the 18th century faced a particular problem: they tried to be naturalists in the sense that “natural law” (i. e. mathematical and bio-physical laws) supposedly controlled reality, but apart from disagreements about the meaning of “nature” (is it the Hobbesian brute or the Lockean innocently human?) they also tried to maintain human responsibility (barely possible under deterministic natural law).

Thus a universalistic transcendent God was proposed, to whom we are responsible on the basis of innate natural law (he has the authority of the Legislator). This meant that absolute transcendence was compromised: the God had to be present somehow—in their case it became a panto-deism: a depersonalised universal divinity who is still present in nature and in the human heart as instinctive innate law. This fusion of God-with-law found its summit in Comte’s religion of Humanity.

Summary

When one reads all four these catechisms, keeping especially also the *Traité de Métaphysique* and the *Catéchisme de l' Honnête Homme* in mind, it becomes clear that these are real catechisms that confess to and promote a doctrine and a lifestyle. As in so many other catechisms, deviant doctrines are attacked; the CHH (Voltaire 1763) is almost exclusively devoted to this. The foreign locations of the catechisms do serve a purpose too:

- Firstly, they universalise certain doctrines (scientific and practical rationalism) as doctrines found everywhere in the world, naturally rational and to be committed to. Deviations are “heretic” prejudices and superstitions. Given Voltaire’s own prejudices and superstitions, it was simply impossible for him to admit that he had learnt much from Christianity, or that he was totally Eurocentric in his belief in universal rationality.
- Secondly, Voltaire’s criticism of the powers that be, had landed him in the Bastille before. He tried to cover his tracks. His type of liberalism was unwelcome in France; he lived in Germany but clashed with the “enlightened” emperor Frederick; his friendship with the Russian court did not last either. He tried to make his target not easily identifiable and spent his mature days far from Paris.

It ought to be clear, after the analysis of Voltaire (in his context), that the intention behind middle Modern secular catechism was:

- *Firstly*, to give the state the role of the church.
- *Secondly*, to preach nature’s aim to establish a divine civil rationality among human beings.
- *Thirdly*, to get the individuals to commit to this civil religion, elevating the state (or, somewhat later, international human society) to the position of the new divinity.

For some time, at least, Romanist military patriotism and the Classical Greek city state became the supreme virtue, and science its supreme Hermes.

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