Francois-Marie Arouet (1694–1778), better known by his pen name, Voltaire, combined wit, literary elegance, and a passionate social conscience in a long literary career that best represents the values and spirit of the Age of Enlightenment. Born into a well-to-do Parisian bourgeois family, Voltaire published his first work, the tragic drama *Oedipus*, in 1717. In the next sixty-one years he wrote thousands of poems, histories, satires, novels, short stories, essays, and reviews. The European reading public avidly bought his works, making him one of the first authors to make a large fortune through the sale of his writings.

Although Voltaire’s enormous output and popularity ensured his influence on the Enlightenment at many different levels, one particular contribution stands out: his devotion to the principles of toleration and freedom of thought. Voltaire was convinced that throughout history, the intolerance of organized religions, not just Christianity, had caused much of the world’s suffering. He was angered that even in the “enlightened” eighteenth century, Protestant-Catholic enmity still resulted in episodes such as the torture and execution of Jean Calas, a French Protestant convicted unjustly of murdering his son, supposedly after learning of the son’s intent to become a Catholic. Voltaire’s devotion to toleration is revealed in the following selection, taken from his *Treatise on Toleration*, written in 1763 in response to the execution of Calas.

**QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS**

1. Does Voltaire believe that intolerance is a special trait of Christianity or that it characterizes other organized religions as well?
2. What point is Voltaire trying to make in his reference to the various dialects of the Italian language?
3. What does Voltaire suggest as the essence of a truly religious person?
4. What attitude toward humankind does Voltaire express in the “Prayer to God”?
5. What does the excerpt tell us about Voltaire’s views of the nature of God?

**OF UNIVERSAL TOLERANCE**

No great art or studied eloquence is needed to prove that Christians should tolerate one another. I go even further and declare that we must look upon all men as our brothers. But the Turk, my brother? the Chinese, the Jew, the Siamese? Yes, of course; are we not all the children of one father and creatures of the same God? But these people despise us; they call us idolaters! Then I’ll tell them they are quite wrong. I think I could at least shock the proud obstinacy...
of an imam\(^1\) if I said to them something like this:

This little globe, nothing more than a point, rolls in space like so many other globes; we are lost in this immensity. Man, some five feet tall, is surely a very small part of the universe. One of these imperceptible beings says to some of his neighbors in Arabia or Africa: "Listen to me, for the God of all these worlds has enlightened me: there are nine hundred million little ants like us on the earth, but only my anthill is beloved of God; He will hold all others in horror through all eternity; only mine will be blessed, the others will be eternally wretched."

At that, they would cut me short and ask what fool made that stupid remark. I would be obliged to reply, "You yourselves." Then I would try to mollify them; but that would not be easy.

I would speak now to the Christians and dare say, for example, to a Dominican Inquisitor,\(^2\) "My brother, you know that every province in Italy has its dialect, and people in Venice and Bergamo speak differently from those in Florence. The Academy della Crusca\(^3\) has standardized the language; its dictionary is an inescapable authority, and Buonmattei's\(^4\) grammar is an absolute and infallible guide; but do you believe that the head of the Academy and in his absence, Buonmattei, would have been able in all good conscience to cut out the tongues of all those from Venice and Bergamo who persisted in using their own dialect?"

The Inquisitor replies: "There is a great difference; here it's a question of your salvation. It's for your own good the Director of the Inquisition orders that you be seized on the testimony of a single person, no matter how infamous or criminal he may be; that you have no lawyer to defend you; that the very name of your accuser be unknown to you; that the Inquisitor promise you grace and then condemn you; that you undergo five different degrees of torture and then be whipped or sent to the galleys, or ceremoniously burned at the stake. . . ."

I would take the liberty of replying: "My brother, perhaps you are right: I am convinced that you wish me well, but couldn't I be saved without all that?"

To be sure, these horrible absurdities do not soil the face of the earth everyday, but they are frequent enough, and a whole volume could easily be written about them much longer than the Gospels which condemn them. Not only is it very cruel to persecute in this brief existence of ours those who differ from us in opinion, but I am afraid it is being bold indeed to pronounce their eternal damnation. It hardly seems fitting for us atoms of the moment, for that is all we are, to presume to know in advance the decrees of our own Creator. . . .

Oh, sectarians of a merciful God, if you had a cruel heart, if, while adoring Him whose only law consists in the words: "Love God and thy neighbor as thyself (Luke X, 27)," you had overloaded this pure and holy law with sophisms and incomprehensible disputations; if you had lighted the torch of discord either over a new word or a single letter of the alphabet; if you had made eternal punishment the penalty for the omission of a few words or ceremonies which other nations could not know about, I would say to you, as I wept in compassion for mankind: "Transport yourselves with me to the day when all men will be judged and when God will do unto each man according to his works."

"I see all the dead of all centuries, past and present, appear before His presence. Are you quite sure that our Creator and Father will say to the wise and virtuous Confucius, to Solon the law-giver, to Pythagoras, Zaleucus, Socrates, and Plato, to the divine Antoninus, good Trajan, and

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\(^1\) In this context, a Muslim prayer leader at a mosque.
\(^2\) A Catholic official responsible for uncovering and punishing erroneous belief, or heresy.
\(^3\) The Florentine Academy of Letters, founded in 1582.
\(^4\) A seventeenth-century Italian grammarian.
Titus, the flowering of mankind, to Epicurus
and so many other model men: "Go, you mon­
sters; go and suffer punishment, limitless in

time and intensity, eternal as I am eternal. And
you, my beloved, Jean Chatel, Ravailiac, Dami­
ens, Cartouche, etc., who died according to the

prescribed formulas, share forever at my right
hand my empire and my felicity."

You draw back in horror from these words,
and since they escaped me, I have no more to say.

PRAYER TO GOD

I no longer address myself to men, but to thee,
God of all beings, all worlds, and all ages. If
indeed it is allowable for feeble creatures, lost in
immensity and imperceptible to the rest of the
universe, to dare ask anything of Thee who hast
given all things, whose decrees are as immut­
able as they are eternal, deign to look with compas­
sion upon the failings inherent in our nature, and
grant that these failings lead us not into Siam
calamity.

These were moralists, enlightened political leaders, and
philosophers who had lived before the coming of Chris­
tianity.

37 v Marquis de Condorcet,
SKETCH OF THE PROGRESS
OF THE HUMAN MIND

Throughout history most human beings have valued tradition and resisted
change. Reform of governments and religious institutions was deemed possible,
but it typically did not mean going forward to institute something new but going
back to recapture features of a lost golden age. Thinkers who studied the past and
contemplated the future concluded that the human condition had always been
more or less the same, or that history ran in cycles, or that it was the story of grad­
ual decline from a mythological state of perfection. Only in the West in the eight­
eenth and nineteenth centuries did intellectuals and much of the general
populace come to believe that the past was a burden and that human beings could
bring about changes in their condition that were beneficial, not destructive. In a
word, people began to believe in progress.