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Quotes by Voltaire

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François Marie Arouet (who later assumed the name Voltaire) was born in Paris on November 21, 1694. The family was wealthy, his father was a notary and his mother maintained contacts with friends interested in belles-lettres and Deism.

From 1704 - 1711 François Marie was educated by the Jesuits at the College Louis-le-Grand, his later involvement with the writing and staging of plays may have been encouraged by the numerous plays, in Latin as well as French, that were staged at College Louis-le-Grand.

Despite his father's wishes that he train for a career in Law François Marie, after a short period of work in a legal office, chose to attempt to pursue a literary career. He soon began to fall in with questionable company and to cause offense through the power and sarcasm of his wit and poetry. Because of these tendencies, his father, on several occasions, arranged for him to spend time away from Paris.

From about 1715 François Marie increasingly began moving in aristocratic circles including a famous salon-court that was maintained by the Duchesse du Maine at Sceaux. He became recognized in Paris as a brilliant and sarcastic wit - a lampoon of the French regent the Duc d'Orléans and also his being accused, (unjustly), of penning two distinctly libelous poems resulted in

his imprisonment in the Bastille. This imprisonment being imposed following the composition of a lettre de cachet, an administrative order, issued at the request of powerful persons. François Marie was most aggrieved at this unjust sentence to imprisonment being imposed on him.

It was during his subsequent eleven month period of detention that François Marie Arouet / Voltaire completed his first dramatic tragedy, Oedipe. This dramatic work was based upon the play Oedipus Tyrannus attributable to the ancient Greek dramatist Sophocles. (It was during these times that François Marie adopted the pen name Voltaire). Voltaire's Oedipe opened at the Théâtre Français in 1718 and received an enthusiastic response.

During his period of detention in the Bastille he had also begun to craft a poem centered on the life of Henry IV of France. An early edition of this work, which features an eloquent appeal for religious toleration, was printed anonymously in Geneva under the title of Poème de la ligue (Poem of the League, 1723). King Henry IV had been an Huguenot (protestant) claimant to the French throne but was only accepted as King after modifying his approach to religion.

Voltaire was consigned to the Bastille, again by lettre de cachet, after he had given offence to the chevalier de Rohan who was member of one of the most powerful families in France. This time however he was released within two weeks following his promise to actually quit France and to begin a period of exile. Accordingly, he spent almost three years in London where he soon mastered the English language and wrote, in English, two remarkable works,

an "Essay upon Epic Poetry" and an "Essay upon the Civil Wars in France". Whilst in England he regularly attended the theatres and playhouses and saw several performances of Shakespeare's plays.

During his exile in London, he made a serious study of the new philosophical ideas of John Locke that questioned both the Divine Right of Kings and the Authority of the State. He was also impressed by the English Constitutional arrangements:

"We can well believe that a constitution that has established the rights of the Crown, the aristocracy and the people, in which each section finds its own safety, will last as long as human institutions can last".

The scientific discoveries of Sir Isaac Newton also attracted his serious attention. For the rest of his long literary and philosophical career he did a very great deal to popularize the ideas of Locke and to spread knowledge of the discoveries of Newton. It can be suggested that Locke and Newton's ideas tended to encourage people to have faith in their own physical senses and in their powers of reason to the detriment, more often than not, of religious faith.

In 1728 the autocratic French government finally allowed the *Poème de la ligue*, (which was now retitled *La Henriade*) to be published in France. This work achieved a most remarkable acclaim, not only in France but throughout the entire continent of Europe as well.

Voltaire returned to France in 1728 and was to reside in Paris over the

subsequent four years devoting his time to literary activities. The chief work of this period is the *Lettres anglaises ou philosophiques* (English or Philosophical Letters, 1734). This work favourably commented upon the relative ease with which educated commoners in England might take up occupations and professions, it also strongly suggested that there was a degree of press freedom, of equality of taxation, and of respect shown to the individual, and to the law, in England that should be emulated elsewhere. His *Lettres anglaises ou philosophiques* effectively constituted a covert attack upon the political and ecclesiastical institutions of France and thus brought him into conflict with the authorities.

Voltaire was once more forced to quit Paris and found refuge from the French authorities at the Château de Cirey in Lorraine, then an independent Duchy. There he formed an intimate relationship with the learned Marquise du Châtelet, who exerted a strong intellectual influence upon him. In 1735, he was given leave to return to Paris by the French authorities but, in the event, he preferred to continue as he was at Cirey. He did however make visits to Paris, Versailles, and elsewhere.

Several years thereafter and largely through the influence of the Marquise de Pompadour, the famous mistress of Louis XV, Voltaire became a court favorite. He was appointed Royal Historiographer of France, and then a gentleman of the King's bedchamber. In 1746 he was elected to the French Academy.

Following the death of Madame du Châtelet in 1749, he finally accepted a long-standing invitation from Frederick II of Prussia to become resident at the

Prussian court. He journeyed to Berlin in 1750 but did not remain there more than two years due to a series of misunderstandings and scandals. There was at this time something of a fashion for European rulers to style themselves as being enlightened despots. Apart from Frederick II, King of Prussia, Catherine the Empress of the Russias is perhaps the most notable example of this. The Empress used also, in fact, to correspond with him.

Following his departure from Berlin, he was not welcome to return to France and began a series of temporary stays in towns, such as Colmar and Geneva, along her frontiers. During these years, he completed his most ambitious work, the *Essay on General History and on the Customs and the Character of Nations*, 1756. This work sets itself out to be a study of human progress, through its pages he denounced the power of the clergy but made evident his own rationalist-deist belief in the existence of God. From 1758, he established a more enduring home at Ferney, nearby to Geneva but within the frontiers of the French kingdom, where he spent the remaining 20 years of his life. Many European celebrities subsequently included a visit to Ferney in their itineraries - a fact which tended to establish Ferney as the virtual intellectual capital of Europe.

Voltaire is considered to have been a central figure in the emergence of the Enlightenment movement in Europe where people were increasingly encouraged to practice toleration in religion and to look to the practical application of natural laws discovered by science for the material improvement of human life. He also tended to effectively persuade people that superstition was ridiculous.

After settling in Ferney, he wrote several philosophical poems, such as *Le désastre de Lisbonne* (The Lisbon Disaster, 1756), and a number of satirical and philosophical novels, of which the most brilliant is *Candide* (1759).

The publication of the *Dictionnaire philosophique* (1764) met with condemnation in Paris and other European cities. It was considered to encourage people to look to reason rather than to faith. A copy of the *Dictionnaire philosophique* was actually burned at the same time as the unfortunate young Chevalier de la Barre, who had neglected to take off his hat, and kneel, during the passing of a religious procession. Given the furor over the *Dictionnaire* he thought it prudent to deny authorship and to seek exile for a few weeks in Switzerland.

Voltaire contributed to what proved to be perhaps the greatest intellectual project of the times, the great ongoing *Encyclopédie* edited by the Philosophes Denis Diderot and Jean d'Alembert. The *Encyclopédie* was also to become the subject of controversy as it too was considered to challenge faith by encouraging people to look to the power of reason.

Voltaire considered that his own earlier life experiences of imprisonment and exile for exercising his wit at the expense of the powerful were effectively a result of the abuse of power. Individuals should not have to live under the threat of such abuse by the powerful in society. From Ferney his mind and pen sent forth hundreds of literary utterances in defense of freedom of thought and of religious tolerance. He was also very apt to satirize and to expose what

he considered abuses. Those who seemed to have suffered persecution because of their beliefs found in him an eloquent and influential defender.

His championship of freedom of thought and of religious tolerance in several notable cases brought him into a direct conflict with the Catholic Church authorities. He saw the Catholic Church authorities in France as often behaving in a repressive manner and particularly so towards Huguenots. He often used the phrase *écrasons l'infâme* let us crush the infamous one by which he seems to have meant intellectual, religious, and social intolerance generally.

Although initiated late in life, Voltaire was an active Freemason until the end of his life. Dr. Benjamin Franklin was present and participated in Voltaire's initiation into the Masonic Fraternity.

In 1778, Voltaire was given a rapturous welcome on his return to Paris and died there, in his sleep on May 30th, possibly over-excited by his recent journey and welcome. Because of his many unorthodoxies he was refused burial in church ground but eventually found a resting place in the grounds of the Abbey of Sellières, near Romilly-sur-Seine.

From 1789, there was a revolution in France that, amongst many other things, unmistakably upheld "reason" and "virtue". In relation to Voltaire some of the leading revolutionaries considered that the "glorious Revolution has been the fruit of his works". In July 1791, his remains were disinterred and, amidst great ceremony, re-housed in an imposing Sarcophagus in the Panthéon in Paris. The Panthéon being a recently completed building that had been begun as a church of St. Genevieve but which had been finished, by the

revolutionary government, as a monument to those designated by the revolutionaries as "les Grands Hommes." As Voltaire's remains were borne toward the Panthéon, in a hearse designed by the painter David that bore the inscription "He taught us to be free", they were escorted by the National Guard. Perhaps an hundred thousand people followed in the cortege with many more thousands looking on.

At this time Voltaire shared the Panthéon with René Descartes, regarded by the intellectual heirs of the Enlightenment as the patron saint of Reason, and the revolutionary leader Mirabeau.

In 1814, with the French revolutionary and Napoleonic era being ended by a restoration of the Bourbon monarchy a group of persons who tended to hold right-wing, clericalist, political views clandestinely removed his remains from the Panthéon - although their absence was not discovered until 1864.

Voltaire's heart and brain, however, had been removed even before the burial in Champagne - his brain is today preserved in the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris - his heart was in the care of a series of private custodianships for more than one hundred years but eventually disappeared after an auction

To the living we owe respect, but to the dead we owe only the truth.

- Voltaire

You must have the devil in you to succeed in the arts.

- Voltaire

Divorce is probably of nearly the same date as marriage. I believe, however, that marriage is some weeks the more ancient.

- Voltaire

Doctors are men who prescribe medicines of which they know little, to cure diseases of which they know less, in human beings of whom they know nothing.

- Voltaire

Men who are occupied in the restoration of health to other men, by the joint exertion of skill and humanity, are above all the great of the earth. They even partake of divinity, since to preserve and renew is almost as noble as to create.

- Voltaire

I know of nothing more laughable than a doctor who does not die of old age.

- Voltaire

In my life, I have prayed but one prayer: oh Lord, make my enemies ridiculous. And God granted it.

- Voltaire

All people are equal, it is not birth, it is virtue alone that makes the difference.

- Voltaire

As long as people believe in absurdities they will continue to commit atrocities.

- Voltaire

Exaggeration is the inseparable companion of greatness.

- Voltaire

The best is the enemy of the good.

- Voltaire

What a heavy burden is a name that has become famous too soon.

- Voltaire

It is fancy rather than taste which produces so many new fashions.

- Voltaire

Chance is a word void of sense; nothing can exist without a cause.

- Voltaire

We are all full of weakness and errors; let us mutually pardon each other our follies it is the first law of nature.

- Voltaire

The great consolation in life is to say what one thinks.

- Voltaire

It is hard to free fools from the chains they revere.

- Voltaire

Liberty, then, about which so many volumes have been written is, when accurately defined, only the power of acting.

- Voltaire

The true character of liberty is independence, maintained by force.

- Voltaire

I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.

- Voltaire

May God defend me from my friends; I can defend myself from my enemies.

- Voltaire

Every man is the creature of the age in which he lives; very few are able to raise themselves above the ideas of the time.

- Voltaire

Do well and you will have no need for ancestors.

- Voltaire

God is always on the side of the heaviest battalions.

- Voltaire

God is not on the side of the big battalions, but on the side of those who shoot best.

- Voltaire

If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent Him.

- Voltaire

Governments need to have both shepherds and butchers.

- Voltaire

It is dangerous to be right when the government is wrong.

- Voltaire

The best government is a benevolent tyranny tempered by an occasional assassination.

- Voltaire

Men hate the individual whom they call avaricious only because nothing can be gained from him.

- Voltaire

History is nothing but a pack of tricks that we play upon the dead.

- Voltaire

History is just the portrayal of crimes and misfortunes.

- Voltaire

Shun idleness is the rust that attaches itself to the most brilliant metals.

- Voltaire

I believe that there never was a creator of a philosophical system who did not confess at the end of his life that he had wasted his time. It must be admitted that the inventors of the mechanical arts have been much more useful to men than the inventors of syllogisms. He who imagined a ship towers considerably above him who imagined innate ideas.

- Voltaire

I was never ruined but twice; once when I lost a lawsuit and once when I won one.

- Voltaire

I should like to lie at your feet and die in your arms.

- Voltaire

We never live; we are always in the expectation of living.

- Voltaire

My life is a battle.

- Voltaire

It is not known precisely where angels dwell -- whether in the air, the void, or the planets.

It has not been God's pleasure that we should be informed of their abode.

- Voltaire

Animals have these advantages over man: They have no theologians to instruct them, their funerals cost them nothing, and no one starts lawsuits over their wills.

- Voltaire

By appreciation, we make excellence in others our own property.

- Voltaire

A long dispute means that both parties are wrong

- Voltaire

Men argue, nature acts.

- Voltaire

Weakness on both sides is, the motto of all quarrels.

- Voltaire

In this country it's a good thing to kill an admiral now and then to encourage the others.

- Voltaire

Love is a canvas furnished by Nature and embroidered by imagination.

- Voltaire

We cannot always oblige; but we can always speak obligingly.

- Voltaire

Marriage is the only adventure open to the cowardly.

- Voltaire

The art of medicine consists of amusing the patient while nature cures the disease.

- Voltaire

Four thousand volumes of metaphysics will not teach us what the soul is.

- Voltaire

When he to whom a person speaks does not understand, and he who speaks does not understand himself, that is metaphysics.

- Voltaire

When it is a question of money, everybody is of the same religion.

- Voltaire

If there were only one religion in England there would be danger of despotism, if there were two, they would cut each other's throats, but there are thirty, and they live in peace and happiness.

- Voltaire

How I like the boldness of the English, how I like the people who say what they think!

- Voltaire

The superfluous is very necessary.

- Voltaire

In the case of news, we should always wait for the sacrament of confirmation.

- Voltaire

The history of human opinion is scarcely anything more than the history of human errors.

- Voltaire

Originality is nothing but judicious plagiarism.

- Voltaire

Anyone who seeks to destroy the passions instead of controlling them is trying to play the angel.

- Voltaire

Perfection is attained by slow degrees; she requires the hand of time.

- Voltaire

The public is a ferocious beast. One must either chain it up or flee from it.

- Voltaire

The pursuit of what is true and the practice of what is good are the two most important objects of philosophy.

- Voltaire

When he who hears does not know what he who speaks means, and when he who speaks does not know what he himself means, that is philosophy.

- Voltaire

Pleasure is the object, duty and the goal of all rational creatures.

- Voltaire

Work is often the father of pleasure.

- Voltaire

It is as impossible to translate poetry as it is to translate music.

- Voltaire

Verses which do not teach men new and moving truths do not deserve to be read.

- Voltaire

This poem will never reach its destination. [On Rousseau's Ode To Posterity]

- Voltaire

The discover of what is true, and the practice of that which is good, are the two most important objects of philosophy.

- Voltaire

My prayer to God is a very short one: O Lord, make my enemies look ridiculous! God has granted it.

- Voltaire

Prejudices are what fools use for reason.

- Voltaire

The infinitely little have a pride infinitely great.

- Voltaire

No problem can withstand the assault of sustained thinking.

- Voltaire

The punishment of criminals should serve a purpose. When a man is hanged he is useless.

- Voltaire

Judge a person by their questions, rather than their answers.

- Voltaire

He must be very ignorant for he answers every question he is asked.

- Voltaire

Many are destined to reason wrongly; others, not to reason at all; and others, to persecute those who do reason.

- Voltaire

The true triumph of reason is that it enables us to get along with those who do not possess it.

- Voltaire

Every abuse ought to be reformed, unless the reform is more dangerous than the abuse itself.

- Voltaire

We owe respect to the living. To the dead we owe only truth.

- Voltaire

Rest is a good thing, but boredom is its brother.

- Voltaire

I advise you to go on living solely to enrage those who are paying your annuities. It is the only pleasure I have left.

- Voltaire

Independence in the end is the fruit of injustice.

- Voltaire

Self-love is the instrument of our preservation.

- Voltaire

It is not love that should be depicted as blind, but self-love.

- Voltaire

I know of no great man except those who have rendered great services to the human race.

- Voltaire

Anything that is too stupid to be spoken is sung.

- Voltaire

A witty saying proves nothing.

- Voltaire

He who doesn't have the spirit of his time, has all its misery.

- Voltaire

All the known world, excepting only savage nations, is governed by books.

- Voltaire

It is far better to be silent than merely to increase the quantity of bad books.

- Voltaire

All kinds are good except the kind that bores you.

- Voltaire

Doubt is not a pleasant mental state, but certainty is a ridiculous one.

- Voltaire

The only way to compel men to speak good of us is to do it.

- Voltaire

Superstition is to religion what astrology is to astronomy; the mad daughter of a wise mother.

- Voltaire

Superstition sets the whole world in flames; philosophy quenches them.

- Voltaire

The husband who decides to surprise his wife is often very much surprised himself.

- Voltaire

In general, the art of government consists in taking as much money as possible from one party of the citizens to give to the other.

- Voltaire

Tears are the silent language of grief.

- Voltaire

Let us work without theorizing, 'Tis the only way to make life endurable.

- Voltaire

They use thought only to justify their injustices, and speech only to disguise their thoughts.

- Voltaire

It is only through timidity that states are lost.

- Voltaire

Woe to the makers of literal translations, who by rendering every word weaken the meaning! It is indeed by so doing that we can say the letter kills and the spirit gives life.

- Voltaire

To announce truths is an infallible receipt for being persecuted.

- Voltaire

Truth is a fruit which should not be plucked until it is ripe.

- Voltaire

Time, which alone makes the reputation of men, ends by making their defects respectable.

- Voltaire

It is an infantile superstition of the human spirit that virginity would be thought a virtue and not the barrier that separates ignorance from knowledge.

- Voltaire

He is a hard man who is only just, and a sad one who is only wise.

- Voltaire

Work keeps at bay, three great evils -- boredom, vice and need.

- Voltaire

Work banishes those three great evils: boredom, vice and poverty.

- Voltaire

You can never correct your work well until you have forgotten it.

- Voltaire

If we do not find anything very pleasant, at least we shall find something new.

- Voltaire

The Pope is an idol whose hands are tied and whose feet are kissed.

- Voltaire

Common sense is not so common.

- Voltaire

Our wretched species is so made that those who walk on the well-trodden path always throw stones at those who are showing a new road.

- Voltaire

He who dies before many witnesses always does so with courage.

- Voltaire

To succeed in the world it is not enough to be stupid, you must also be well-mannered.

- Voltaire

One of the chief misfortunes of honest people is that they are cowardly.

- Voltaire

The world embarrasses me, and I cannot dream that this watch exists and has no watchmaker.

- Voltaire

Paradise is Where I Am.

- Voltaire



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