

FOREF: The Pen Against the Infamy - Voltaire’s Fight Against Fanaticism, Persecution and the Abuse of Power

Peter Zoehrer
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Voltaire (1694–1778). With his pen, his reputation and an extraordinary European network, he turned individual cases of religious persecution into public causes—and helped make tolerance one of the defining ideals of the Enlightenment.

What Defenders of Religious Liberty and a Free Press Can Still Learn from Voltaire

Watching the two-hour biography *Voltaire | A Full Life Biography* recently, I found myself thinking less about the philosopher we learned about in school than about a much more practical question: How did one writer, armed principally with a pen, become such a formidable opponent of religious persecution, fanaticism and judicial injustice?

It is a question that matters today, perhaps more than we would like to admit.

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François-Marie Arouet—Voltaire—was born in Paris in 1694 and died there in 1778. He lived before our modern vocabulary of human rights, before the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, before international human-rights NGOs, social media and global advocacy campaigns. Yet by the end of his life he had demonstrated something every defender of religious liberty, freedom of conscience and freedom of the press should remember: a well-documented injustice, transformed into a compelling story and relentlessly placed before the public, can eventually become impossible for those in power to ignore.

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The Voltaire Behind the Legend

We should begin by clearing away one persistent myth. ***“I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it”*** is probably the most famous sentence Voltaire never wrote. It was coined in 1906 by his English biographer Evelyn Beatrice Hall, writing under the name S. G. Tallentyre, as a summary of his attitude toward the persecution of the philosopher Claude-Adrien Helvétius. Hall later made clear that the words were her own. But while the quotation is false, the principle behind it comes remarkably close to the man.

Voltaire was not an atheist, nor was he a democrat in our modern sense. He was broadly a deist who believed that the order of the universe pointed toward a creator, while rejecting much of institutional Christianity and especially the alliance of religious authority with coercive political power. His famous ***Écrasez l’infâme—“crush the infamy”***—was directed above all against fanaticism, superstition, persecution and the abuse of religious authority.

Nor was Voltaire a flawless prophet of universal human rights. Some of his writings about Jews are deeply offensive. His ideas about race contained prejudices found among Enlightenment thinkers of his time, and he had financial interests connected with colonial commerce. There is no reason to turn him into a saint. Indeed, doing so would weaken the lesson. What makes him interesting is that an imperfect and sometimes contradictory man discovered how extraordinary the power of writing could become when it was placed at the service of someone else’s freedom.

A Broken Body in Toulouse

That transformation can perhaps best be seen in the case of Jean Calas.

On 10 March 1762, Calas, a Protestant merchant in Toulouse, was executed in one of the most horrifying ways available to eighteenth-century French justice.

He was broken on the wheel, strangled and his body burned. His son Marc-Antoine had been found dead, and a rumor spread that the father had murdered him to prevent his conversion to Catholicism. In a city still marked by deep hostility toward Protestants, religious prejudice helped turn suspicion into certainty.



Jean Calas broken on the wheel in Toulouse, 1762. His execution became one of the great causes of Voltaire's life and helped turn the fight against religious intolerance and judicial injustice into a European debate...

Voltaire did not immediately believe that Calas was innocent. That detail is important. He investigated. He asked questions, corresponded with people familiar with the case and examined its inconsistencies. Only then did he become convinced that a terrible miscarriage of justice had occurred.

Once convinced, however, he went to work with extraordinary persistence.

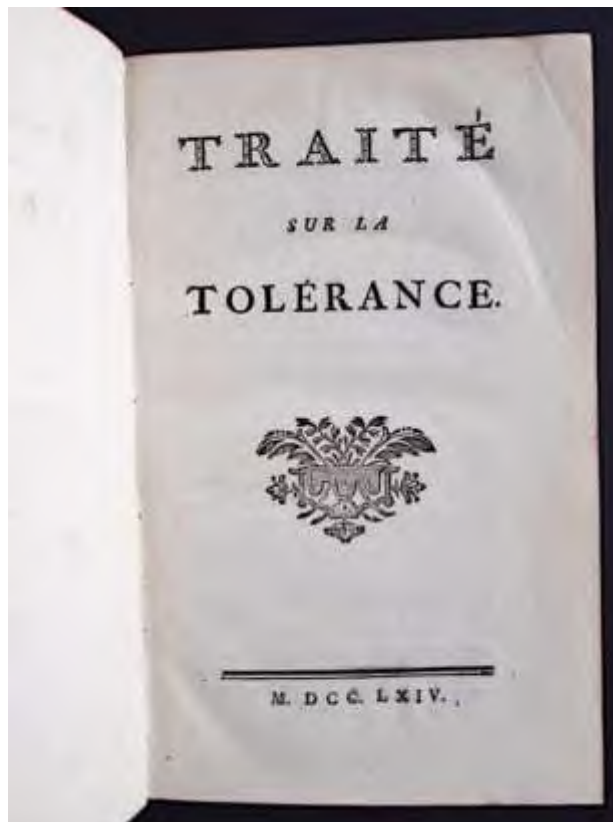
He mobilized friends and influential contacts, spent his own money, wrote letters, memoranda and pamphlets, and transformed the tragedy of an obscure Protestant family in Toulouse into a European cause. In 1763 he published the ***Treatise on Tolerance***, written in the shadow of the Calas affair and destined to become one of the defining texts of the Enlightenment.

Voltaire's *Treatise on Tolerance* (1763), written in the wake of the Calas affair. From one terrible miscarriage of justice, Voltaire fashioned an enduring appeal for religious tolerance and freedom of conscience.

And it worked.

In 1765, three years after Calas had been tortured and killed, the judgment was overturned, his name rehabilitated and his family compensated. The dead man

could not be brought back, but his honor could be restored and the injustice publicly acknowledged.



Voltaire subsequently applied much the same method to the Sirven family, also Protestants, who had been accused after the death of their daughter. They fled France after being condemned in absentia. Again Voltaire investigated, publicized and persisted, and in 1771 the family was finally exonerated.



Voltaire with members of the Calas family. After the execution of Jean Calas in 1762, Voltaire took up the family's cause, investigated the case and mobilized public opinion across Europe. His campaign contributed to the annulment of the judgment and the posthumous rehabilitation of Calas in 1765.

Then there was the horrifying case of the Chevalier de La Barre, only nineteen years old when he was executed in 1766 for alleged acts of blasphemy and sacrilege, including failing to show proper respect to a religious procession. Voltaire could not save him. But he could make Europe remember what had been done to him.

This is where Voltaire becomes more than an interesting Enlightenment philosopher. He became something remarkably close to what we would today call a human-rights campaigner. He gathered evidence, investigated miscarriages of justice, mobilized networks across borders, appealed to influential people, financed campaigns, defended members of a religious minority and understood that public opinion could become a counterweight to institutions that had failed to deliver justice.

Voltaire could not bring Jean Calas back to life. But he could restore his name—and make the injustice that killed him impossible to forget.

When Writing Begins to Change the Real World

We should be careful not to attribute the reforms of an entire age to one famous writer. Voltaire did not single-handedly abolish torture or create religious toleration in France. Enlightenment reform was the work of many thinkers, lawyers, ministers, religious dissenters and campaigners.

But he helped change the moral climate in which institutions operated.

Practices that had once appeared normal began to look barbaric. Religious uniformity increasingly looked less like social order and more like oppression. Judicial torture became more difficult to defend, and the idea that a Protestant or religious dissenter could possess the same civil rights as a Catholic gradually moved from heresy toward law.

In 1780, Louis XVI abolished the *question préparatoire*, torture intended to extract confessions before trial; further judicial torture disappeared in 1788. In 1787, the **Edict of Versailles restored important civil rights to French Protestants, including legal recognition of marriages and births.**

And in 1789, eleven years after Voltaire's death, **Article 10 of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen proclaimed that no one should be disturbed because of his opinions, including his religious opinions, provided their manifestation did not disturb the public order established by law.**

Voltaire did not write those reforms into law. But he was among those who helped make the old intolerance intellectually and morally indefensible.

This distinction is worth remembering for anyone engaged in human-rights advocacy today. We sometimes become discouraged because an article does not immediately change a government decision, a press release does not free a prisoner, or a conference does not overturn a court judgment. Voltaire's life suggests a different measure of effectiveness.

Writing changes the atmosphere in which decisions are made. It gives victims a name and their suffering a public record. It provides journalists with facts, lawyers with arguments and politicians with language. It connects what would otherwise remain isolated cases.

Slowly, sometimes almost invisibly, what was previously accepted begins to become unacceptable.

Ferney: When Tolerance Became Practical

There is another side of Voltaire that deserves much more attention, because he did not merely write about tolerance.

At Ferney, close to the Swiss border, he attempted to put some of his philosophy into practice. When he settled there, Ferney was an impoverished hamlet of only a few hundred inhabitants. Voltaire improved the estate and surrounding community, drained land, built houses, encouraged agriculture and helped develop local industries. Most interestingly, he welcomed Genevan watchmakers, including people disadvantaged by the political structures of Geneva, helped finance workshops and housing, and then used his extraordinary European network to market their products.

Ferney prospered. By the time Voltaire left for Paris in 1778, its population had increased dramatically and the settlement had become known well beyond the region.



The Château de Voltaire at Ferney, near Geneva. From here, Voltaire corresponded with intellectuals and political leaders across Europe while transforming the surrounding village into a thriving community of craftsmen, farmers and refugees. Ferney became, in a very practical sense, his experiment in tolerance, enterprise and freedom.

The philosopher of tolerance had become, in a small but very tangible way, an entrepreneur of tolerance.

He demonstrated something our societies still repeatedly forget: tolerance is not merely an ethical concession we make to people whose beliefs we dislike. It is part of the infrastructure of a peaceful and successful society. When people do not have to fear persecution because of their religion, conscience or ideas, they can work together, trade, invent, write, argue, create businesses and raise families.

Ferney made the philosophical argument visible.

Tolerance was not only a chapter in a book. At Ferney it became houses, workshops, commerce and livelihoods. Freedom proved that it could also be productive.

The Voltaire Method

This is where Voltaire's way of working becomes particularly interesting for those concerned today with religious liberty and freedom of the press.

He started with the human being rather than the ideology. The ***Treatise on Tolerance*** did not begin as an abstract campaign for Protestant rights. Behind it stood a broken body and a devastated family. That remains true today. **"Religious freedom is deteriorating"** may be an accurate statement, but it remains abstract. A Jehovah's Witness sentenced to years in a Russian prison for meeting and praying with fellow believers tells us what those words actually mean. A Christian woman spending years under a death sentence in Pakistan because of a disputed accusation of blasphemy tells us what they mean. A believer who loses his church, livelihood or freedom gives human rights a human face.

Voltaire's method also contains another lesson particularly important in our age of instant outrage: investigate before becoming indignant. He initially doubted the innocence of Calas. Then he examined the evidence and changed his mind. Advocates damage their own causes when they exaggerate, repeat rumors or ignore inconvenient facts. A carefully documented dossier is ultimately more powerful than an angry slogan. Credibility accumulated over years can be lost through one claim that cannot withstand scrutiny.

Perhaps most important of all, Voltaire learned to separate the right from the doctrine. Religious liberty means very little if we defend only religions we respect, just as freedom of expression means little if we defend only opinions with which we agree. The real test comes when the believer is unpopular, the religion strange, the newspaper offensive, the speaker irritating or the doctrine something we consider completely wrong.

You do not have to become a Jehovah's Witness to oppose imprisoning Jehovah's Witnesses. You do not have to agree with Islam to defend Muslims against discrimination. You do not need to share the theology of the Family Federation, Scientology, Shincheonji or any other controversial minority to insist that allegations against their members be tested through individualized evidence and due process rather than collective suspicion. And one certainly did not need to approve of ***Charlie Hebdo*** to understand why cartoonists must not be murdered for drawings.

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Voltaire in the Twenty-First Century

More than two and a half centuries after the Calas affair, the disturbing thing is how contemporary Voltaire still feels.

After the murder of *Charlie Hebdo* journalists in January 2015, something remarkable happened in France: the *Treatise on Tolerance* returned to the bestseller lists. A book written in 1763 in response to the judicial killing of a Protestant was suddenly being bought again by French citizens confronting religiously motivated murder in the twenty-first century.

The historical circumstances were completely different, of course, but the underlying questions remained painfully familiar. **Can someone kill another human being because God has allegedly been insulted? Can the state punish a citizen because his religious beliefs offend the majority? Can public hostility substitute for evidence?**

Pakistan still enforces blasphemy laws. The case of **Asia Bibi**, a Christian farm worker sentenced to death and imprisoned for years before Pakistan’s Supreme Court acquitted her, demonstrated how an accusation of religious insult can become a matter of life and death. Even after an acquittal, accusations of blasphemy can expose defendants to mob violence and force them into hiding.

In Russia, the Supreme Court banned the Jehovah’s Witnesses as an “extremist” organization in 2017, and the consequences continue today, with believers prosecuted and imprisoned for activities connected with peaceful religious practice.

Think for a moment about that word: *extremist*. It is precisely the kind of word Voltaire would have interrogated. What did the individual actually do? Did he commit violence? Did he threaten anyone? Or did he meet other believers, pray, read religious literature and speak about his faith? Those distinctions are not semantic niceties. They are the difference between prosecuting conduct and persecuting belief.

China provides another example, although on a vastly different scale. The government’s policy of “sinicization” requires religious institutions to conform to Communist Party objectives and places extensive state controls over religious life. **Uyghur Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists, Protestant house churches** and other religious communities have experienced serious restrictions.

Different countries, different religions and very different legal systems are involved in these examples. They should not simply be equated. Yet an old temptation runs through many of them: **first redefine an unpopular or uncontrolled belief as a danger to society, and exceptional measures gradually begin to look reasonable.**

The Harder Test: When Democracies Target Unpopular Religions

The more difficult question concerns democratic societies. Religious liberty is relatively easy to defend when the persecutor is an obvious dictatorship. The real test comes when democratic institutions confront unpopular or controversial religious minorities.

Japan provides one of the most important contemporary examples. In June 2026, Japan’s Supreme Court finalized the dissolution of the religious corporation of the **Family Federation for World Peace and Unification**, formerly known as the Unification Church. The case followed years of intense political and media scrutiny after the **2022 assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe**. Japanese courts concluded that the legal criteria for dissolution had been satisfied, while the church argued that the measure violated constitutional protections of religious freedom and association. The Supreme Court rejected its appeal.

Whatever one thinks about the Family Federation—and allegations concerning fundraising practices deserve to be examined carefully on their evidence—the case raises a question extending far beyond one religious movement: how should a democracy distinguish between sanctioning proven misconduct and imposing consequences upon an entire religious institution and its community? The question deserves serious examination without hysteria from either side.

Europe faces its own variations of the problem. Governments unquestionably have a responsibility to investigate fraud, coercion, violence, abuse and exploitation wherever they occur, including inside religious organizations. But labels such as **“cult,” “sect,” “extremist” or “dangerous religion”** can become substitutes for the harder work of proving individual wrongdoing. **France’s MIVILUDES**, for example, officially defines its mission around harmful *dérives sectaires* rather than beliefs themselves. That distinction is important. The danger begins when suspicion of conduct gradually becomes suspicion of identity, when belonging to an unpopular community itself becomes evidence that something must be wrong.

Voltaire would have recognized the mechanism. The Protestants of Toulouse were not formally condemned because a court announced, “We dislike Protestants.” Their religious identity helped create an atmosphere in which accusations against them appeared plausible.

That is precisely why due process matters most when public opinion is already convinced.

The Writer as a Human-Rights Institution

There is another reason Voltaire should interest today’s writers, journalists and human-rights advocates.

He had no NGO, no website, no YouTube channel, no social media, no international human-rights convention and no United Nations Special Rapporteur. He had correspondence, publishers, contacts, money, an extraordinary reputation—and above all, a pen.

From Ferney he wrote thousands of letters across Europe. He contacted ministers, aristocrats, intellectuals and rulers. He published pamphlets, stories, philosophical dictionaries, satires and interventions. He understood instinctively something that

modern advocacy organizations sometimes forget: **you must write for people outside your own circle.**

The converted do not need converting. A religious-freedom article written only for members of the persecuted religion has limited power. The challenge is to make someone who has never heard of that religion—and perhaps dislikes it once he does hear of it—care about the injustice.

That requires facts, but facts alone are rarely enough. They need narrative. Calas was not a statistic. He became a story Europe could understand.

Voltaire also understood that different audiences require different forms. A philosophical treatise could reach one audience, a letter could reach a minister, a satire could reach readers who would never open a legal memorandum, and *Candide* could accomplish something that a learned dissertation could not.

Today we possess infinitely more powerful instruments. An article can travel around the world in minutes. Court documents can be translated almost instantly. A prisoner can become internationally known before a government has finished drafting its explanation. Videos can reach millions, and NGOs on different continents can coordinate campaigns that would have required months of correspondence in Voltaire's time.

Yet the essential method remains surprisingly similar: find the case, verify the facts, tell the story, reach beyond your own circle, find allies who do not necessarily share the victim's beliefs—and keep writing.

The challenge is not to persuade people to like an unpopular religion. It is to persuade them that the rights of people they dislike are also their rights.

Why Are We Still Learning the Same Lesson?

Which brings me to the question I find difficult to escape.

Already in the eighteenth century, Voltaire understood that tolerance was not weakness but one of the foundations of civilization. He understood that persecuting people for their beliefs does not create social peace but poisons it; that religious fanaticism becomes especially dangerous when it joins political power; that courts can be wrong; that public opinion can become a mob; and that censorship rarely defeats an idea.

At Ferney, he demonstrated something even more elementary: people of different backgrounds who are allowed to live and work in relative freedom can create prosperity together.

So why, in the twenty-first century, must we learn these lessons again?

Why do political leaders and dictators still imprison people for their beliefs? Why do religious zealots still believe that killing a supposed blasphemer somehow honors

God? Why do authoritarian governments still fear Bibles, Qur’ans, unauthorized religious meetings, independent newspapers and dissident writers?

And why do supposedly modern societies sometimes replace the medieval “heretic” with the modern “cult member,” as though changing the vocabulary solved the ancient temptation to exclude?

There is a particular irony here for journalism. The freedom of the press and freedom of religion or belief are not competing liberties. They arise from the same deeper principle: **no authority should possess a monopoly on conscience or truth enforced through coercion.**

Journalists rightly demand the freedom to question governments, religions and powerful institutions. But that same freedom carries a responsibility not to allow criticism of misconduct to become collective condemnation of believers. **A press that demands freedom for itself while treating an unpopular minority as though it were outside the normal protections of fairness and evidence risks undermining the very principle on which its own freedom rests.**

There are genuine abuses committed in the name of religion, just as there are genuine abuses committed in politics, business, medicine, education and the family. They should be investigated. Victims should be protected. Crimes should be prosecuted.

But crimes have perpetrators. Allegations require evidence. And guilt should attach to those who committed wrongful acts—not automatically to thousands of people who happen to share a religion or worldview.

That distinction is one of the thin lines separating justice from persecution.

The Pen Still Matters

Perhaps this is the most useful lesson Voltaire left us.

Do not merely denounce intolerance; document it. Do not merely proclaim religious freedom; defend an actual person whose freedom has been taken away. Do not wait for the perfect victim; the real test is often defending the unpopular one. And do not assume that because a government, newspaper or court has spoken, the last word has necessarily been said. Read the judgment. Examine the evidence. Ask questions. Correct yourself when the evidence demands it. And when an injustice remains, continue writing.

Voltaire could not save Jean Calas from the wheel, but three years later he helped restore his name. He could not save the Chevalier de La Barre, but he helped ensure that Europe would not comfortably forget what had been done to him. He did not abolish religious persecution, but he helped make persecution increasingly shameful and intellectually indefensible.

More than 260 years later, the language has changed. We speak of national security, extremism, public order, harmful influence, social cohesion, blasphemy, sects, cults and dangerous organizations. Sometimes those words describe real dangers. Sometimes they disguise old prejudices. The responsibility of the writer, journalist, scholar and human-rights advocate is to discover which is which.

Voltaire understood in the eighteenth century that tolerance was not merely politeness between people who happened to agree. It was the foundation that allowed people who profoundly disagreed about God, religion, philosophy and society nevertheless to live together in peace and, as Ferney demonstrated in its modest way, to prosper together.

Why so many political leaders, despots and dictators—and also religious zealots, apologists for intolerance and professional enemies of unpopular minorities—still fail to understand this in the twenty-first century is one of the great paradoxes of our supposedly enlightened age.

Perhaps that is precisely why Voltaire still matters.

The technology has changed. The vocabulary has changed. The institutions have changed. But the essential task has not:

Find the injustice. Establish the facts. Give the victim a name. Put the story before the public. And keep writing.

#Voltaire #ReligiousFreedom #FreedomOfReligion #FreedomOfSpeech
#HumanRights #Tolerance #FreedomOfConscience

Related Links & Sources

- **Voltaire, *Traité sur la tolérance* (1763) — original French text:** [Wikisource: complete 1763 edition](#)
- **Free downloadable edition:** [Project Gutenberg — Traité sur la tolérance](#)
- **English translation — *A Treatise on Toleration*:** [Project Gutenberg: English text](#)
- **University of Geneva — Voltaire's *Traité sur la Tolérance*:** The ATHENA edition includes the text, contents and images of the title and opening pages held by the Institut et Musée Voltaire in Geneva. [University of Geneva / ATHENA](#)
- **Scholarly critical edition:** [Complete Works of Voltaire — Traité sur la tolérance \(JSTOR\)](#)
- **Historical English edition (1764):** [Wellcome Collection — A Treatise on Religious Toleration](#)
- **Videos**
 - **Voltaire | A Full Life Biography (2 Hour)** — An extended documentary-style biography covering Voltaire's life, ideas, controversies and historical setting. A useful companion for readers who want to go beyond the essay and understand the man behind the campaign for tolerance. [YouTube Watch on YouTube](#)
 - **The Jean Calas Case: Treatise about Tolerance – Voltaire** — A shorter introduction focused specifically on the Calas affair and its connection to

Voltaire’s *Treatise on Tolerance*.

[Watch on YouTube](#)

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