

# VOLTAIRE (Francois-Marie d'Arouet)

Voltaire's beliefs on freedom and reason are what ultimately led to the French Revolution, the United States Bill of Rights, and the decrease in the power of the Catholic Church, which have all affected modern western society

## Biography

- Born 1694 France
  - ↳ Dad was a lawyer; mom was of the lowest rank of French nobility
  - ↳ Historical debate: Voltaire himself claimed his was of a different father, an illegitimate birth. Sparse evidence to verify
- 1702 mom dies
- Born into a cultured and prosperous society
- Dad sent Voltaire to become a lawyer, but all he would do is write poetry! Dad is furious.
- 1713, age 19: he is sent to Netherlands to assist an ambassador
  - ↳ Here Voltaire fell in love with a French Protestant refugee named **Catherine**, age 21. Their affair, considered scandalous, was discovered – his dad and her mom both disapproved – and Voltaire was forced to return to France by the end of the year
- 1717 he was imprisoned in a French prison for a year, due to a poem that powerful people found offensive. (He accused a government official of incest)
- 1718, he adopts the name “Voltaire”. The origins are unknown.
  - ↳ He wrote under 178+ pennames during his lifetime!
- A playwright, one play was banned in 1723 because of its anti-Christian content
- 1726, he was imprisoned because of a quarrel with a nobleman; banished from Paris for 6 years
- His writing defends the liberal government of England, and religious criticism; this upset France (too radical, too daring)
- Anti-Christian, anti-Semitic
- Died 1778 France. Met Benjamin Franklin a month prior.



Voltaire – His Ideas in a Nutshell

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HPSEkvTGK6g> (4 minutes)

## Philosophy (major ideas)

Voltaire believed above all in the **importance of reason**. He believed social progress could be achieved through reason and that no authority—religious or political or otherwise—should be immune to challenge by reason. He emphasized in his work the **importance of tolerance, especially religious tolerance**.

**People should not be punished for their ideas**

He was **strongly against slavery** (but likely owed part of his fortune to colonial-era trade)

**There is a natural basis for ethics and justice.**

**If there were no God, man would have invented one**

**All religions of the supernatural are based on ignorance and superstition**

**The natural and human evils in the world cannot be reconciled with the view that this is the best of all possible worlds**

**The order in the universe indicates that there is a Designer, but not necessarily a moral or immoral one**

**All good: freedom of speech, freedom of expression, and separation of church and state**

He looked favorably on religious tolerance, even though he could be severely critical towards Christianity, Judaism and Islam

On freedom of speech, he says: “I may not agree with what you have to say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.”

Best known for his skepticism of all areas of society and government. He made progress in France by spreading Enlightenment ideas and pushing people to fight for their rights to free will and scientific thinking