**Voltaire: *A Treatise on Toleration* (1763)**

**Whether it is Useful to Maintain People in their Superstition:**

Such is the feebleness of humanity, such is its perversity, that doubtless it is better for it to be subject to all possible superstitions, as long as they are not murderous, than to live without religion. Man always needs a rein, and even if it might be ridiculous to sacrifice to fauns, or sylvans, or naiads, it is much more reasonable and more useful to venerate these fantastic images of the Divine than to sink into atheism. An atheist, who is rational, violent, and powerful, would be as great a pestilence as a blood-mad, superstitious man.

When men do not have healthy notions of the Divinity, false ideas supplant them, just as in bad times one uses counterfeit money when there is no good money. The pagan feared to commit any crime, out of fear of punishment by his false gods; the Malabarian fears to be punished by his pagoda. Wherever there is a settled society, religion is necessary; the laws cover manifest crimes, and religion covers secret crimes.

But whenever human faith comes to embrace a pure and holy religion, superstition not only becomes useless, but very dangerous. We should not seek to nourish ourselves on acorns when God gives us bread.

Superstition is to religion what astrology is to astronomy: the foolish daughter of a very wise mother. These two daughters, superstition and astrology, have subjugated the world for a long time.

**Chapter 21: Virtue is Better than Science**

The fewer dogmas, the fewer disputes; the fewer disputes, the fewer miseries: if this is not true, then I'm wrong.

Religion was instituted to make us happy in this life and in the other. What must we do to be happy in the life to come? Be just.

What must we do in order to be happy in this life, as far as the misery of our nature permits? Be indulgent.

It would be the height of folly to pretend to improve all men to the point that they think in a uniform manner about metaphysics. it would be easier to subjugate the entire universe through force of arms than to subjugate the minds of a single village. . . .

**Chapter 22: On Universal Tolerance**

It does not require great art, or magnificently trained eloquence, to prove that Christians should tolerate each other. I, however, am going further: I say that we should regard all men as our brothers. What? The Turk my brother? The Chinaman my brother? The Jew? The Siam? Yes, without doubt; are we not all children of the same father and creatures of the same God?

But these people despise us; they treat us as idolaters! Very well! I will tell them that they are grievously wrong. It seems to me that I would at least astonish the proud, dogmatic Islam imam or Buddhist priest, if I spoke to them as follows:

"This little globe, which is but a point, rolls through space, as do many other globes; we are lost in the immensity of the universe. Man, only five feet high, is assuredly only a small thing in creation. One of these imperceptible beings says to another one of his neighbors, in Arabia or South Africa: 'Listen to me, because God of all these worlds has enlightened me: there are nine hundred million little ants like us on the earth, but my ant-hole is the only one dear to God; all the other are cast off by Him for eternity; mine alone will be happy, and all the others will be eternally damned."

I would take the liberty to respond, "My brother, perhaps you are reasonable; I am convinced that you wish to do me good; but could I not be saved without all that?"

… It is true that these absurd horrors do not stain the face of the earth every day; but they are frequent, and they could easily fill a volume much greater than the gospels that condemn them. Not only is it extremely cruel to persecute in this brief life those who do not think the way we do, but I do not know if it might be too presumptuous to declare their eternal damnation. It seems to me that it does not pertain to the atoms of the moment, such as we are, to anticipate the decrees of the Creator.

**Analysis Questions:**

1. What reasons does Voltaire give that humans should all tolerate each other?
2. What is Voltaire’s view on God? Justify your answer.
3. What is Voltaire’s view on religion? Justify your answer.