

## ***"Fanaticism"***

**Source:** Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, ed. Peter Gay, 2 vols. (New York: Basic Books, 1962), pp. 267-269. See also: <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/273/>

Fanaticism is to superstition what delirium is to fever and rage to anger. The man visited by ecstasies and visions, who takes dreams for realities and his fancies for prophecies, is an enthusiast; the man who supports his madness with murder is a fanatic. Jean Diaz, in retreat at Nuremberg, was firmly convinced that the pope was the Antichrist of the Apocalypse, and that he bore the sign of the beast; he was merely an enthusiast; his brother, Bartholomew Diaz, who came from Rome to assassinate his brother out of piety, and who did in fact kill him for the love of God, was one of the most abominable fanatics ever raised up by superstition.<sup>1</sup>

Polyeucte, who goes to the temple on a solemn holiday to knock over and smash the statues and ornaments, is a less dreadful but no less ridiculous fanatic than Diaz.<sup>2</sup> The assassins of the duke François de Guise, of William, prince of Orange, of King Henri III, of King Henri IV, and of so many others, were fanatics sick with the same mania as Diaz.

The most detestable example of fanaticism was that of the burghers of Paris who on St. Bartholomew's Night [in 1572] went about assassinating and butchering all their fellow citizens who did not go to mass, throwing them out of windows, cutting them in pieces.<sup>3</sup>

There are cold-blooded fanatics: such as judges who condemn to death those who have committed no other crime than failing to think like them; and these judges are all the more guilty, all the more deserving of the execration of mankind, since, unlike Clément, Châtel, Ravailac, Damiens, they were not suffering from an attack of insanity; surely they should have been able to listen to reason.

Once fanaticism has corrupted a mind, the malady is almost incurable. I have seen convulsionaries who, speaking of the miracles of St. Pâris, gradually grew impassioned despite themselves: their eyes got inflamed, their limbs trembled, madness disfigured their faces, and they would have killed anyone who contradicted them.

The only remedy for this epidemic malady is the philosophical spirit which, spread gradually, at last tames men's habits and prevents the disease from starting; for, once the disease has made any

---

<sup>1</sup> Voltaire is referring to the case of the Spaniard Alfonso Diaz, who incensed that his brother Juan Diaz had converted to be a Protestant, visited him in the town of Neuburg in 1546 and, with an accomplice, killed him with an axe. Voltaire mixes up some names (Bartholomew Diaz should be Alfonso Diaz while Jean Diaz should be Juan Diaz).

<sup>2</sup> This is a reference to St. Polyeuctus, a third century Roman Saint, who converted to Christianity. His religious zeal was such that he immediately went to the city square and destroyed idols of idol-worshippers.

<sup>3</sup> This is a reference to the massacre of French Huguenots (Protestants) in Paris carried out by Roman Catholic nobles and other citizens. The massacre occurred as part of a series of conflicts between Roman Catholics and Huguenots in France in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. Historians estimate that as many as 30,000 Huguenots were killed. The massacre occurred on the eve of the feast of Bartholomew the Apostle (one of the 12 apostles of Jesus).

progress, one must flee and wait for the air to clear itself. Laws and religion are not strong enough against the spiritual pest; religion, far from being healthy food for infected brains, turns to poison in them. These miserable men have forever in their minds the example of Ehud, who assassinated king Eglon; of Judith, who cut off Holofernes' head while she was sleeping with him; of Samuel, who chopped king Agag in pieces. They cannot see that these examples which were respectable in antiquity are abominable in the present; they borrow their frenzies from the very religion that condemns them.

Even the law is impotent against these attacks of rage; it is like reading a court decree to a raving maniac. These fellows are certain that the holy spirit with which they are filled is above the law, that their enthusiasm is the only law they must obey.

What can we say to a man who tells you that he would rather obey God than men, and that therefore he is sure to go to heaven for butchering you?

Ordinarily fanatics are guided by rascals, who put the dagger into their hands; these latter resemble that Old Man of the Mountain who is supposed to have made imbeciles taste the joys of paradise and who promised them an eternity of the pleasures of which he had given them a foretaste, on condition that they assassinated all those he would name to them. There is only one religion in the world that has never been sullied by fanaticism, that of the Chinese men of letters. The schools of philosophers were not only free from this pest, they were its remedy; for the effect of philosophy is to make the soul tranquil, and fanaticism is incompatible with tranquility. If our holy religion has so often been corrupted by this infernal delirium, it is the madness of men which is at fault.