

Sviatlana Rose

*A Jesuit Voltaire Wishes Not to Be*

**T**he works of François-Marie Arouet, also known as Voltaire, are known for their wit, philosophical playfulness, and mockery of contemporary religious, governmental, and civil matters. In *Candide*, Voltaire satirically skewers representatives of *many* different religions, but the creeds he criticizes most are those of his own religion, Christianity. Voltaire acquired his education in a Jesuit college—that education gave him the means not only to succeed in writing, but also to understand the particulars of politics and economics; as well as the minutiae of Jesuit postulates. Thus, one would not expect him to harbor such enduring animosity toward this particular Christian aggregation. On the contrary, Voltaire later claimed that at his college, aside from Latin, all he learned was stupidities (Morley). In *Candide*, Voltaire criticizes the transgressions of the members of the Jesuit society, first, by aiming directly at their pedophilia and hedonistic way of living, and then by expressing the public’s critical outlook on the Jesuits of the time.

Voltaire condemns the Jesuit contravention of sexual promiscuity because it contradicts a core vow of the Jesuit dogma. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the society, established chastity as one of the most important postulates of Jesuits (Loyola). As a social critic, Voltaire notes the prevalence of sexual relationships among the Jesuits. In *Candide*, Voltaire describes how Pangloss, Candide’s tutor, contracts what appears to be syphilis. After tracing his sickness to a “very learned Franciscan,” the tutor says:

... [the Franciscan] had been given it by an old countess, who in turn had

it from a cavalry captain, who caught it from a page-boy, who contracted it from a Jesuit, who, while a novice, had inherited it in a direct line from one of the shipmates of Cristopher Columbus. (11)

This passage not only illustrates the disorderly sexual relationships of the Jesuits, but also inferences the homosexual and pedophilic tendencies of the Jesuitical priesthood. Moreover, as the satire proceeds, Voltaire gives a clue as to how young men are recruited to the Jesuit army when the young Baron von Thunder-ten-tronkh tells his story. The Baron gives insight into the process by suggesting that his meteoric rise in the Jesuit ranks was based solely on his good looks:

You recall, my dear Candide, how pretty I was: well I became even more so, to the point that the Reverent Father Croust, who was a Superior of the community, conceived the most tender affection for me; he initiated me as a novice; shortly afterwards I was sent to Rome. Our superior General needed to recruit some young German Jesuits. The rulers of Paraguay try to admit as few Spanish Jesuits as they can; they prefer foreigners whom they think they can control more easily. I was judged more suitable by the Reverent Father General to go and labor in this particular vineyard. ... On arrival I was honored with the post of sub-deacon and lieutenant; I am now colonel and a priest. (37)

Voltaire alludes to a homosexual relationship between the Baron and the Reverend by suggesting that the Baron needed only to be found attractive by a Jesuit Superior to become a Jesuit apprentice. As it turns out, the Reverent Father Croust was not merely Voltaire's creation. At the time when Voltaire

wrote *Candide*, Father Croust was a Rector of a Jesuit College in France and despised him for his free-thinking and outspoken philosophical attitude (Voltaire/Cuffe). Thus, these two passages are Voltaire's direct strikes at homosexual relationships in this particularly religious, male society of the time.

Voltaire also attacks the lavish lifestyle of the Jesuit commanding officers, whose troops subsist on very Spartan circumstances. When *Candide* and *Cacambo*, *Candide's* valet, are caught in Paraguay by Jesuit soldiers and led to see the commanding officer, the main character is mesmerized by the extravagancies he observes:

Candide was led into a leafy summer house, decorated with a very pretty colonnade of green marble and gold, and with a trellis-work enclosing parakeets, colibris, humming-birds, guinea fowls and all manner of rare birds. An excellent lunch had been laid out in gold vessels. (Voltaire 35)

*Candide* also notices that Paraguayan Jesuit officers “were eating maize out of wooden bowls in the open fields, under a blazing sun” (36). These short few phrases point out not only the immoderate existence of the commanding Jesuit officers but also the segregation of the eighteenth-century Jesuit army, which is supposed to “approve the religious vows of chastity, poverty, perpetual obedience, as well as ... the other works of perfection,” as Ignatius of Loyola had postulated. Thus, Voltaire directs his readers' attention to the disparity between the way the Jesuit commanders and their subordinates live and stresses the postulates of the Jesuit priesthood which are supposed to govern their lives.

In the middle of the eighteenth-century in France, the above-mentioned discrepancies between Jesuit behavior and the rules of Christian living lead to growing public animosity toward representatives of the Jesuit society. Indica-

tive of these sentiments is the phrase *Mangeons du Jésuite!* (“Let’s eat a Jesuit!”) which became very popular, almost proverbial, among the French of the time (Cuffe 139). Voltaire also expresses his disillusionment by describing how Candide, disguised as a Jesuit, is treated by the Oreillons:

When they awoke, they found out that they were unable to move their limbs . . . They were now surrounded by fifty or so stark-naked Oreillons, armed with arrows, clubs and flint axes: some were bringing a large cauldron to boil; others were preparing spits, and all of them were chanting: ‘It’s a Jesuit! It’s a Jesuit! We will be avenged! And we’ll eat our fill! Let’s eat Jesuit! Let’s eat Jesuit!’ (Voltaire 41)

This excerpt does not explain to readers why the Oreillons dislike Candide to the point that the tribesmen are ready to eat him and Cacambo. The events preceding their capture only imply that they were apprehended because Candide killed two apes that turned out to be the lovers of the Oreillon women. However, the animosity they encounter is likely due to Candide’s Jesuit attire. Furthermore, Candide and Cacambo are set free when they are able to prove that they are not in fact Jesuits. “After all, it seems that the state of nature is a good thing,” says Candide, “since these people, instead of eating me, showed me a thousand civilities just as soon as they knew I was not a Jesuit” (42). Even though Voltaire does not clarify why the natives have such an aversion toward the Jesuits, the author’s own contempt for the Jesuit order is clear.

At the first glance, *Candide* appears to be a lighthearted and amusing read. However, under that veil, Voltaire not only conceals his own disparagement of the Jesuits but also eloquently expresses the public’s general discontent toward them. Throughout the Eighteenth century in Europe, the antipathy toward the

Jesuits grew steadily. The immoralities they were accused of led to the order's expulsion from Portugal, France, and Spain (Saint-Priest). Instead of directly accusing the Jesuits of pedophilia or hedonism, he lets his characters tell their life stories and express their own observations. Thus, the author allows the reader to make his or her own conclusions about the Jesuits. At its core, *Candide* is certainly not a concerted effort by Voltaire to discredit them because he scarcely mentions the order throughout the satire. Nevertheless, in those rare instances, he paints a clear picture of the Jesuits' depravity. ❁

## Works Cited

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