

Voltaire and Newton's God

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Abstract. Voltaire was converted to Newtonianism while in England (1726-28). He gave an account of Newton in the *Letters Concerning the English Nation* (1733) a.k.a. *Lettres philosophiques* (1734). In 1738 he published *Elémens de la Philosophie de Neuton*, a text which played a major part in introducing Newton's physics to the francophone world. This was followed by *La Métaphysique de Neuton* (first unauthorised edition, 1740; first authorised edition 1741). This presents itself as a comparison of the views of Newton and Leibniz, and thus forms part of Voltaire's private discussions with Mme. Du Châtelet, who was in key respects a Leibnizian.

Voltaire's *La Métaphysique de Neuton* is the only published text in which he provides a sustained argument for deism, and it is thus the foundation of the generally established view that Voltaire was throughout his life a deist. Recent scholarly work, particularly by Gerhardt Stenger, has demonstrated that by the end of his life Voltaire was a sort of modified Spinozist.

In this lecture I want to identify the following:

- i) The respects in which Voltaire is already, in *La Métaphysique de Neuton*, providing not an exposition of Newton but a critique.
- ii) The respects in which Voltaire's unpublished *Traité de Métaphysique* (1734) implies further criticisms of Newtonian deism that he was not prepared to put in print in 1740/1.
- iii) The steps by which Voltaire continued to move away from the "Newtonian" deism of *La Métaphysique de Neuton* until he ended up much closer to pantheism than to deism.
- iv) The consequence that Voltaire accepted, as part of his move away from a theistic natural religion, that philosophers must adopt a measure of self-censorship when discussing key metaphysical doctrines, such as the immortality of the soul, since belief in a providential God was (he accepted) crucial to social order.

The account I will give of the evolution of Voltaire's views will differ from that of Stenger and will lay particular emphasis on the importance, not just for Voltaire but for French *philosophes* in general, of William Warburton's *Divine Legation of Moses* (1738-41), particularly in its translation/adaption by Étienne de Silhouette (1742).

I thus offer a new account of the evolution of Voltaire's religious views, one which has significant consequences for our understanding of the crisis of deism and rational Christianity in mid-century, the reception of Spinozism in France, and the rise of materialism, topics of particular interest in the light of recent work by Jonathan Israel.

Selected References

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