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## **VOLTAIRE ON HISTORY AND CIVILIZATIONS**

A French historian and philosopher of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Voltaire considered the study of history as a way of gaining wisdom through it. In his major historical work “An Essay on Universal History, the Manners, and Spirit of Nations: From the Reign of Charlemaign to the Age of Lewis XIV”, the writer seems to refute the historical views of J.-B. Bossuet [3]. According to Bossuet, the history of the Jewish people was the center of the world history. In the brief overview of the ancient history, Voltaire presented Jews as barbarians who were not known to civilized nations. If Bossuet did not pay much attention to the Chinese and Indian civilizations, since they did not intersect with the Jewish people, Voltaire emphasized these civilizations and the exalted morality of their Holy Scripture. He especially honored China as the only country in which the higher strata of society were completely unaware of prejudice and where there was no organized clergy. The book reveals a disguised, rather restrained controversy with Christianity: the writer compares the relative tolerance of the followers of the other religions and the intolerance of Christians. Voltaire worked on his book until his death. His new understanding of history contributed to the emergence of a new school, especially in England: E. Gibbon, D. Hume, W. Robertson were his followers.

For Voltaire, not only to describe the political events is the main task of a historian, but to a larger extent is to focus on the national spirit, the peoples’ attitudes. He changed the historical consciousness of his time. He opposed the narratives about the rulers to the history of civilizations, the true story, which told about the original spiritual and social life

of the peoples. Voltaire understood civilization as a process and result of the modern and future development of people, which leads them out of their natural state. The possibility of this kind of development he linked to the existence of the World Reason that manifests itself in each of us [2]. Civilization (Voltaire himself, like J.-J. Rousseau, did not use the word “civilization”) appears as a convergence with the World Reason as a result of the constant efforts of people [1]. Civilization is not a definite period of human history that comes after barbarism – it is just its objection. Civilization is a state of society that all peoples and all countries will long for. It primarily refers to morale. For Voltaire, there are customs that determine the general level of civilization. The meaning of the concept of civilization is not limited to the ability to “behave well”. It also embraces the idea of high morale and courage. The most civilized society is a society in which there is a fine balance between good manners and courage.

Voltaire stated that civilization was a moral, as well as socio-economic ideal. Not only was associated the process of civilization with the development of morality, arts, and sciences, but it was deeply linked to economic activity, especially to industrial production, which creates a new artificial nature. All these prerequisites became a background of any sophisticated culture. This new ideal was contrary to the ideal of the Christian world. The thinker emphasized that God is clearly manifested in nature, but has little effect on historical events; and the activities of the church basically slows the process of civilization down. However, the very idea of God must be preserved.

Not only can civilization move forward, but it can also recede. Voltaire saw in its reverse cycle the process of continuous updating: the decline of a civilization does not bring it to an end, but it rather reopens it; the human spirit fades away, then reborn with renewed vigor. The writer did not recognize the existence of many civilizations (though he did recognize differences between the European and non-European peoples). This concept was based on the idea of the unity of human nature, as well as on the idea of the moral principle as the basis of any society, namely compassion and justice [2]. It was the belief in the existence of the universal civilization that forced Voltaire to evaluate the lives of all

peoples from the standpoint of Eurocentricism. Thus, his theory of the universal civilization has become Eurocentric in nature.

### **References:**

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