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Le Testament by Jean Meslier: the Pioneering Work of the Militant Atheism in France

The ongoing debate of the ‘laicization’ of the Western intellectual production during the Enlightenment seems to be far from being closed. Still, we cannot deny that the attitudes towards both the ecclesiastical institutions and Christian beliefs in Western Europe started to change in the end of the 17th c. In France, one of the centers of the intellectual life of the West, the process called ‘dechristianization’ was manifest at many levels – beginning from the peasants becoming less generous in paying for masses when losing a relative, up to the disputes of intellectuals about delicate questions of theology.

Paradoxically, the most radical thinker of the epoch, Jean Meslier (1664–1729), remains relatively little known even to the historians of ideas. His life remains rather obscure, for he was just a modest priest working all his life in a village; his work seems to have been far too radical to be printed in an unabridged version till mid-19th c., but also simply too long to be read by more than a handful of students. And yet, Meslier’s *Testament* deserves to be studied closely. It is the first known treaty about the non-existence of God in the French language, and a classic of materialist philosophy as well; and an uncompromising attack on religious institutions followed by a radically new vision of an egalitarian society which made Meslier a pioneer of both atheist and communist thought.

Jean Meslier, curate of Etrépygny

Little is known about Meslier’s life from sources other than his own words in his book, where he only mentions his personal life a few times, giving very little information. Apart from that, there are only a few documents of the Reims curia. The short biography Voltaire composed for the 1761–1762 editions is not

a credible source of data (however, it is usually in books on Voltaire that most readers see Meslier's name for the first time).

Meslier was born in a small village called Mazerny in the Ardennes in 1664, his father was a relatively well-to-do peasant busy in wool trade. On the first pages of *Le Testament*, written during the last decade of his life, Meslier claimed that he had never been pious or interested in privileges enjoyed by Catholic priests, and became a priest 'to please his family'¹. He was admitted to the seminary at Reims. Tonsured and made an acolyte in April 1685, he became sub-deacon in March 1687 and then deacon in April 1688. In December 1688 he was finally made a priest². In January 1689 he was appointed to a small (inhabited by just 165 people at that time) village of Etrépigny³, situated close to his native Mazerny. He spent the rest of his life working there as a priest. The reports of his work made for his ecclesiastical superior Charles Maurice Le Tellier, the archbishop of Reims until 1710, during the first years of his work sound perfect⁴. Still, as an old man he claimed he had always hated teaching his parishioners what he did not believe himself, as well as other aspects of his work⁵. Yet he remained a priest for forty years, that is, till his death, enjoying a generally good opinion⁶. It seems that he was on very good terms with the villagers, for whom he had deep sympathy and as much respect for their work as repugnance for his colleagues who were not only hypocritical, but also derided the naive faith of the simple folk, while living comfortably thanks to the work of these poor people⁷.

¹ '[...] je n'ai jamais été si sot, que de faire aucun état des mystérieuses folies de la religion [...] quoique je me suis laissé assez facilement conduire dans ma jeunesse à l'état ecclésiastique, pour complaire à mes parents, qui étoient bien aisés de m'y voir [...] cependant je puis dire avec vérité que jamais la vûë d'aucun avantage temporel na m'a porté à aimer l'exercice d'une profession si pleine d'erreurs et d'impostures' – Jean Meslier, *Le Testament de Jean Meslier*, vol. 1 (Amsterdam: R.C. Meijer, 1864), 21.

² Michel Bertrand, "Voltaire et le curé Meslier", in *Mélanges*, ed. Frédéric Lachèvre (Genève: Slatkine Reprints, 1968), 227–246, 232.

³ Michel Onfray, "Jean Meslier and «The Gentle Inclination of Nature»", transl. Marvin Mandell, *New Politics* 4 (2006): 53.

⁴ Bertrand, "Voltaire", 234.

⁵ 'J'étois néanmoins obligé de vous instruire de votre religion [...] j'avois le déplaisir de me voir dans cette facheuse nécessité d'agir et de parler contre mes propres sentimens, d'avoir le déplaisir de vous entretenir moi-même dans de sotes erreurs et dans de vaines superstitions, que je haïssois, que je condamnois et que je detestois dans le coeur [...] j'ai été cent et cent fois sur le point de faire éclater publiquement et indiscrètement mon indignation [...], j'ai cependant fait en sorte de retenir, et je tâcherai de la retenir jusqu'à la fin de mes jours, ne voulant pas m'exposer durant ma vie à l'indignation des prêtres, ni à la cruauté des tyrans [...]' – Meslier, *Le Testament*, vol. 1, 24–25.

⁶ '[...] dans l'ensemble, le curé avait la reputation de bien gérer sa paroisse, de faire son travail consciemment, d'être sobre, et d'avoir de bonnes moeurs, ce qui n'était pas le cas de beaucoup de ses collègues' – Geneviève Moëne, "Jean Meslier, prêtre athée et révolutionnaire", *The French Review* 1 (2003): 114–125, 115.

⁷ Meslier, *Le Testament*, vol. 1, 22.

In 1783, the curate of Meslier's native village wrote a letter in response to abbé Hillet, a canon of Reims, asking him (just like all the other country priests of the diocese) about economy and history of his parish. The curate's letter relates a story about Meslier refusing to command the faithful of his parish to pray for the soul of the recently deceased seigneur of Etrépigny, who had treated the peasants very badly. As the archbishop of Reims François de Mailly ordered Meslier to pray for the feudal lord, he summoned the parishioners to ask God to make it possible for the deceased lord to atone in the other world for the abuses he had committed in his lifetime when treating unjustly the poor and orphans⁸.

We also know about two conflicts with his superiors, which were of a more banal nature; namely, Meslier kept young servants at his vicarage. The first time was in 1696, when Meslier was 32 and the young woman 23; rebuked by the Church authorities, Meslier refused to send her away, claiming that she was his niece (or a cousin)⁹. The other time he was 55 and the girl just 18; Meslier was condemned to spend one month at a monastery in Reims¹⁰. It was at this time that he started to write his book, which was to take ten years of work, till 1729: ten years, during which he kept his secret, well aware of the fact that discussing religious beliefs was a risky activity in the Catholic France.

In the spring of 1728, the priest Guillaume, curé of Fresnes, was placed in the Bastille as "an atheist". The abbé Couet, *grand vicaire* and canon of Notre Dame, examined Guillaume's papers for the police and found in his writings "several false principles contrary to sound theology," above all touching on what virtually all theologians took to be the thorny issue of the nature of God's ideas of the creatures. As Couet noted, however, "one could not accuse someone of impiety who has lost his way in matters so abstract, unless one found other proofs of his corrupted sentiments". In fact, Couet concluded, what makes Guillaume's writings so suspect is "the manifest debauchery and libertinism of his morals... and [his] jokes on [the subject of] religion". Guillaume was sentenced to ten months in Bastille, after which he was sent into monastic seclusion¹¹.

Ten months in Bastille and monastic seclusion would have probably been not all, had Guillaume been an overt atheist (and an author of an anti-monarchical manifesto as well). Meslier decided that it would be far too dangerous to express his ideas in his lifetime, believing that keeping them secret would be a sign of prudence; wise men, he declared, pretend to comply to the laws and religious institutions and do not take risks by calling them in question¹². Meslier spent

⁸ "Un rapport du curé de Mazerny (1783)", *Revue d'Ardennes&d'Argonne*, mai-juin (1895): 109-112, 110. Unfortunately the journal does not give the name of the author of the letter.

⁹ Bertrand, "Voltaire", 234.

¹⁰ Onfray, "Jean Meslier", 54.

¹¹ Alan Charles Kors, *Atheism in France, 1650-1729*, vol. 1: *The Orthodox Sources of Disbelief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 11-12.

¹² 'Et comme la force de ces sortes de gouvernemens tyranniques ne subsistent que par les mêmes moïens et les mêmes principes qui les ont établis, et qu'il est dangereux de vouloir combattre

most of his life under the reign of Louis XIV, whose ambition was to shape and to control the religious life of his subjects, and most probably he knew men who had to keep their religious views secret in order to avoid persecutions. He was a young man when in 1685 Louis XIV, having renounced the Edict of Nantes, declared Protestantism illegal in his kingdom (the Edict of Fontainebleau of October 1685), which made thousands of Huguenots flee to the neighbouring Protestant states. Those who stayed in France had to convert to Catholicism, henceforth the only legal religion of the kingdom; no doubt many of the conversions were far from sincere.

But France became almost a religiously homogeneous country, and French Catholics *en masse* behaved as they were expected to. The enormous work the Catholic church had done in order to discipline her faithful during the Catholic Reformation yielded its fruit in Meslier's lifetime. Unlike in the first half of the seventeenth century, French Catholics regularly performed their duties, at least those which were done in public and were a visible proof of their obedience to the Church:

As pastoral visits during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries attest, those who failed to perform their Easter duties had become very few, usually making up less than 1 percent of their communities. [...] Attendance at Sunday Mass was high as well, favored by the enforcement of laws that closed taverns during Mass and prohibited work on the obligatory day of rest¹³.

Paradoxically, the next – after the Huguenots – target of Louis XIV's religious persecutions were pious Catholics, namely followers of Jansenism, a theological movement which gained certain popularity in France in mid-17th c. Jansenism accentuated a pessimistic vision of the human nature, its propensity to sin and human helplessness in efforts to obtain deliverance of soul without God's grace. Its followers, who were till the turn of the century mainly members of social elites, distinguished themselves by their serious piety, asceticism and charity – so once Louis XIV decided to extirpate the movement from his Catholic kingdom, these virtuous Christians became object of police and sometimes persecutions. In the Diocese of Reims there were many Jansenists. Meslier's archbishop Monseigneur Le Tellier (died in 1710) was 'fondamentalement favorable au jansénisme', while

les maximes fondamentales d'une religion, aussi bien que d'ébranler les loix fondamentales d'un état ou république; il ne faut pas s'étonner, si les personnes sages et éclairées se conforment aux loix générales de l'état et se conforment, si injustes qu'elles puissent être, ou s'ils se conforment, au moins en apparence, à l'usage et à la politique d'une religion qu'ils trouvent établie, quoiqu'ils en reconnoissent suffisamment les erreurs et vanité, parce que telle répugnance qu'ils puissent à s'y soumettre, il leur est néanmoins beaucoup plus utile et avantageux de vivre tranquillement en conservant ce qu'ils peuvent avoir, que de s'exposer volontairement à se perdre eux-mêmes, en voulant s'opposer au torrent des erreurs communes, ou en voulant résister à l'autorité d'un souverain qui veut se rendre maître absolu de tout [...] – Meslier, *Le Testament*, vol. 1, 10–11.

¹³ Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), transl. Lydia G. Cochrane, 94.

his successor Monseigneur de Mailly was hostile to the movement¹⁴. The change in policies of the curia of Reims thus meant for many fervent Catholics a necessity to hide their opinions on the questions both strictly theological and political.

Meslier had no intention to become a martyr and he believed that his parishioners would not be happy to see him persecuted¹⁵, so his book was intended to be found after his death¹⁶. As a staunch atheist, he did not care what would happen to his corpse once his anti-Christian writing discovered¹⁷. What he cared about was the fate of his manuscript, so he prepared three copies in order to make sure his text would be found and read after his death.

Meslier died in June 1729. As his fellow churchmen unsealed his papers and read *Le Testament*, he was denied a Christian funeral. He was buried in the garden of the vicarage and given no tomb at all¹⁸. His book, however, survived; soon its clandestine copies started to circulate in Paris and other centres of freethinking.

The evolution of his ideas might well have been like that of the great reformers of the Church in the beginning: it started with indignation at the men of the Church who behaved in an improper way, then Meslier rejected the rules set by the Church for her members to obey, and then he dared to question the Catholic doctrine itself. But Meslier went on to examine critically the Scriptures; he noticed contradictions in the texts of the Gospels, and came to the conclusion that Jesus and his first followers were madmen rather than people enlightened by divine revelation. He went on to examine the essential dogmas of Christianity and decided they were absurd. As to the Christian ethics, it was, according to Meslier, contrary to nature. If Meslier compared unfavourably Christianity to pagan cults, it did not mean that he was inclined to see any value in pagan doctrines and practices. For his stance was uncompromising: all religions were false, as well as the 'natural religion' of the deists, as there was no God and no gods, no supernatural forces and no life after death whatsoever. Religions were fabricated as tools to obtain power and authority by ambitious liars and now they supported tyrannical rulers and parasite elites which made life of working masses miserable. What the people needed to do was to overthrow the present political

¹⁴ Dominique Julia, David McKee, „Les confrères de Jean Meslier. Culture et spiritualité du clergé champenois au XVIIIe siècle”, *Revue d'histoire de l'Église de France* 182 (1983): 61–86, 82–83.

¹⁵ Meslier, *Le Testament*, vol. 1, 25–26: 'D'ailleurs, ne vous aiant jamais donné sujet de me souhaiter du mal, ni de vous réjouir s'il m'en arrivoit aucun, je en crois pas que vous seriez bien aise de me voir persécuté et tyrannisé pour ce sujet: c'est pourquoi j'ai résolu de garder le silence'.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, 3: '[...] comme il ne m'auroit été permis, et qu'il auroit été d'une trop dangereuse et trop facheuse conséquence de dire ouvertement, pendant ma vie, ce que je pensois de la conduite et du gouvernement des hommes, de leurs religions et de leurs moeurs, j'ai résolu de vous le dire après ma mort.'

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, 28–29: '[...] que tous les prêtres s'en fâchent tant qu'ils voudront après ma mort, qu'ils me traitent d'athée [...] cela ne me donnera pas la moindre inquiétude du monde [...] qu'ils fassent de mon corps tout ce qu'ils voudront.'

¹⁸ Onfray, 57.

regime, abolish religions, monarchical rule and private property, and start to live in communities where everybody would work and nobody would have any privileges – and where there would be no private property and no religion whatsoever.

The inspirations

Meslier's erudition was impressive, if we keep in mind that he spent his life in a poor province. In his book, he demonstrated his profound knowledge of the *Bible* and ancient history, quoting works by Roman historians (Livy, Tacitus, Flavius Josephus, Macrobius, Aelius Spartianus, Plutarch, Scрабо and Diodor of Sicily). He also referred to the works by Pliny, Varro, Seneca, Juvenal, Philostratus, and of course Cicero, as well as Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and several times mentioned 'le divin Platon' and *The Republic*. Of French historians, he quoted the brilliant Philippe de Commynes.

As a young man, Meslier was attracted to Cartesianism, which he eventually declared a false doctrine, preferring uncompromising materialism. Still, his vision of the material universe and physical processes was Cartesian – he clearly did not read Isaac Newton. It is difficult to say whether he had any of Spinoza's writings in hand, for he never quoted any of his texts and believed wrongly that Spinoza was an atheist¹⁹. Another philosopher, whose name but not words we find on the pages of Meslier's book, is Lucilio Vanini, condemned to death for atheism and executed in 1619.

The author he especially liked quoting was Michel de Montaigne. It seems that he also knew the brilliant text by Montaigne's friend Étienne de La Boétie *Discours de la servitude volontaire*, written probably ca. 1549. He also appreciated historical criticism of Gabriel Naudé's *Apologie pour tous les grands personnages faussement soupçonnés de magie* (first published in 1625)²⁰ and social criticism (or what he thought to be such) of Jean de La Bruyère's *Les caractères* (first published in 1688). He certainly read Rabelais, 'curé de Meudon, auprès de Paris, qui se moquoit de toute les Religions du monde'²¹.

The political and theological works by churchmen that Meslier referred to in his book were mainly those widely read at the time: Cardinal Richelieu's *Testament politique*²², Malebranche's *De la recherche de la Vérité* (first published in 1674–1675), and Fénelon's *Télémaque* and *Démonstration de l'Existence de Dieu*;

¹⁹ Meslier, *Le Testament*, vol. 2, 291: 'Spinosa, qui ne reconnoissoit aucune Divinité'.

²⁰ Meslier did not give the title of the work, not even the author's name, calling him 'un auteur judicieux' and a Roman Catholic – *idem*, *Le Testament*, vol. 1, 164–167.

²¹ *Idem*, *Le Testament*, vol. 2, 291.

²² Meslier had a very high opinion of Cardinal Richelieu's skills, calling him 'le génie le plus élevé de son tems' – *ibidem*, 260, while his opinion of Richelieu's morality was low – *ibidem*, 280.

while he appreciated the moral message of *Télémaque*²³, he wrote dozens of pages to show that what the archbishop of Cambrai had to say about God was completely wrong. Meslier also knew works by the controversial Pasquier Quesnel and other Jansenist writings.

Interestingly, Meslier quoted many times an author he used to call 'judicieux' without ever mentioning his surname. The fragments Meslier used came from a book entitled *L'Espion du Grand Seigneur*. The Italian adventurer Giovanni Paolo Marana, who first published it in 1684, had pretended to be only the translator of genuine letters written by an Arab working in Paris as a secret agent for the Ottoman authorities. The success of the book, the first spy story in the history of European literature, was so great that Marana published its longer version, and after his death many other writers added anonymously successive letters; if the version published by Marana (who died in 1693) in 1688 contained 102 letters, the 1716 edition that Meslier used to quote was six times bigger.

Marana's 'spy', a Muslim living among Catholics, started to reconsider religious dogmas he had believed in and, asking more and more boldly philosophical questions about morality and faith, gradually turned into a deist. The writers who added stuff to the original novel, kept the protagonist musing about religions, touching sometimes thorny questions, because their anonymity and the enormous popularity of the novel in Western Europe made the French ecclesiastical censorship unable to make the fictive 'Muslim spy' hold his tongue. The 1716 edition of the pseudo-Oriental spy story became a capital source of inspiration for Meslier (and, at the same time, Montesquieu writing his *Persian Letters*).

On the other hand, it seems that Meslier had no access to the serious scholarly works by pioneers of comparative religious studies, like Richard Simon's *Histoire critique du Vieux Testament* (published in 1689), or René Joseph Tournemine's *Projet d'un ouvrage sur l'origine des fables* (1702). Obviously, Meslier knew the immensely popular *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique* by Pierre Bayle (first published in 1697) and Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle's *History of oracles*.

Meslier spent his life in a modest village in Champagne, far away from the intellectual salons of Paris, and did not even participate in activities of a provincial Academy. He participated, however, in *conférences ecclésiastiques* – meetings of local priests, organized by the curia several times a year in order to broaden their professional knowledge. The participants were not only expected to come and discuss the theological topics chosen by their ecclesiastical superiors, but also to prepare essays on these matters. Some of the topics discussed during the 'conferences' are to be found in *Le Testament*²⁴.

²³ *Ibidem*, 278.

²⁴ Julia, McKee, „Les confrères de Jean Meslier”, 79–81.

The Work

Meslier's book is not easy to read. It is not only very long (1150 pages in the 1864 edition, from which all the quotations used in this paper come), and full of extremely long phrases; but also its structure is not really coherent, and it contains lots of repetitions. It is a work by a preacher who knows that repeating makes his flock, not always attentively listening to the sermon, pay attention to the most important parts of it and remember what the priest wants them to think. The way Meslier addresses his readers resembles that of a sermon: his very first words are 'my dear friends' ('Mes très-chers amis'²⁵).

Meslier begins with expressing his intention to enlighten his readers, who are victims of the present unjust political system legitimized and supported by the Catholic church. Religion (any religion) is just a tool used by the powerful to oppress and exploit the people, and the churchmen are only impostors who deprive the people of their goods under the pretext of offering them access to some imaginary 'spiritual goods'²⁶. The state and the ecclesiastical authorities support each other to the disadvantage of the their subjects; priests preach necessity to obey the authorities, and rulers do their best to keep false religions²⁷.

Religions, according to Meslier, are all equally false ('Les idées de païens et les votres ne sont différentes que de nom et de figure'²⁸). They are all human-invented lies which serve as tools for monarchs and ruling elites who need legitimization of their power in order to do whatever they want with their subjects²⁹. Hence

²⁵ Meslier, *Le Testament*, vol. 1, 3.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, 10: 'sous prétexte de vous conférer les biens spirituels vous ravissent des biens plus réels'.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, 14–15. 'La religion soutient le gouvernement politique si méchant qu'il puisse être, le gouvernement soutient la religion si sote et vaine qu'ell puisse être [...] et les princes de leur côté, font respecter les prêtres [...] les maintiennent dans les fonctions vaines et abusives de leur faux ministère'.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, 16.

²⁹ '[...] tout ce que vos docteurs et prêtres prêchent [...] ne sont que des illusions, erreurs, mensonges, fictions et impostures inventées prémièrement par des fins et rusés politiques [...] maintenues par l'autorité des grands et souverains qui les ont autorisés par leurs loix afin de tenir par là le commun des hommes en bride et faire d'eux tout ce qu'ils voudroient' – *Ibidem*, 16. He was not the first to write it explicitly. Cristóvão Ferreira (d. 1650), a Portuguese Jesuit who renounced Christian faith when tortured by the Japanese and then converted to Buddhism, stated in his book, written in 1636 and entitled *The Deception Revealed*, that religion was 'an invention by men to ensure power over their brethren' – Onfray, *Atheist Manifesto: The Case Against Christianity, Judaism, and Islam*, transl. Jeremy Leggatt (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2007), 28. Meslier never mentioned Ferreira and most probably had not even heard about him, as the former Jesuit's Japanese text was only translated into French in 1998 – Henrique Leitão, Review: Jacques Proust, 'La Supercherie Dévoilée: une refutation du Catholicisme au Japon au XVIIe siècle, Paris: Editions Chandeigne, 1998', *Bulletin of Portuguese-Japanese Studies* 1 (2000), 131–134, 131. In theory, Meslier could have read works by French authors of his own generation who expressed the idea that deities had been originally men, deified for their extraordinary deeds, or deified rulers, like Joseph François Lafitau,

the necessity to expose the lies of religions which allow the powerful to abuse the weak and are the roots of misery of the poor, which is the declared aim of Meslier's work ('c'est dans ce dessein que je commence à écrire ici, pour vous désabuser [...] de toutes les erreurs et de toutes les superstitions dans lesquelles vous avez été élevés et nourris'³⁰). If he declared explicitly that he was writing for his parishioners, he hoped that the book would be read by more people, including educated individuals able fully to appreciate its content³¹. And that – as we realize a thousand pages later, in the final part of the third volume where Meslier calls to destroy the existing political system and social order – could be the first step towards a great revolution which would break people free not only from superstitions and false ideas, but also from subjugation to the ruling classes whose usurpation of power and prestige is supported by the Church.

Religions are tools in the hands of those who rule, claims Meslier, arguing that it is known that certain historical rulers and other leaders falsely claimed that their authority or law is of divine origin in order to make people obey (here Meslier mentions the legendary Numa Pompilius, Minos of Candia and 'Trismegiste roi des Egyptiens' along with Solon, Lycurgus, Dracon, Moses, Jesus and 'this famous false prophet Muhammad'³²); other rulers were deified ('il y a apparence que le premier commencement de la croïance des Dieux, ne vient que de ce que les hommes vains et présomptueux, se sont voulu aussi attribuer la qualité de Dieu'³³) – here Meslier points to Alexander the Great who believed he was a god and to the cases of deification of Roman emperors³⁴. All that means that the sources of religions were human lies, and followers of none of them are able to demonstrate that it is otherwise³⁵. Blind faith is required where no positive proofs are given:

les Religions en donnent et ne sauroient même donner aucune preuve claire, sure et convaincante de la vérité de leurs prétendus saints mistères, ni de leurs prétendues révélations divines. Elles veulent que l'on croïe absolument et simplement

abbé Antoine Banier, Etienne Fourmont – see Marian Skrzypek, *Oświecenie francuskie a początki religioznawstwa* (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1989).

³⁰ Meslier, *Le Testament*, vol. 1, 26.

³¹ *Ibidem*, 30: '[...] je pourois même me flatter que si cet écrit passoit plus loin que vos mains, que l'on y examinoit bien tous les raisons, j'auoi peut-être, au moins parmi les gens d'esprit et de probité autant d'aprobateurs que j'aurai ailleurs de mauvais censeurs [...] et je puis dire que plusieurs de ceux qui seroient obligés de me condamner extérieurement devant les hommes, m'approuveroient intérieurement dans leur coeur'.

³² *Ibidem*, 35–37.

³³ *Ibidem*, 42.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, 42–44. The rulers in question are: Romulus, Claudius II, Lucius Antoninus Verus, Trajan, Moesa – grandmother of Severus Alexander, Antoninus, Antinous, and Augustus.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, 63: 'si aucun de ceux qui disent que leur Religion est d'institution divine, ne sait en donner des preuves claires, c'est une preuve claire qu'il n'y en a aucune qui soit véritablement d'institution divine'.

tout ce qu'elles en disent, non seulement sans en avoir aucune doute, mais aussi sans rechercher, même sans désirer d'en connoître les raisons³⁶.

As religions contradict each other³⁷, this lack of free discussion in turn leads to conflicts among people: beliefs which are not to be discussed but espoused uncritically make people believe that those who do not share theirs are wrong, and this eventually causes cruel religious wars³⁸. Only that freedom to discuss religious beliefs would not bring about any constructive conclusions and certainly would not result in finding out which religion is true – because the believers do not possess proofs of credibility of their sacred texts, dogmas and activity of their founders. As Christians claim that their proofs are the miracles described in the *Bible*, along with the prophecies as well as promises given by God and Jesus to the believers, Meslier's first step in attacking Christianity is examination of the *Bible* in order to show that it offers proofs of human error rather than of divine inspiration.

Against miracles

Miracles in themselves are no proof at all that a certain religion is true, Meslier claims. They are easy to ridicule (like the sock of St. Honoré which resuscitated a dead man, or St. Fercolas who was able to speak after his tongue had been cut off³⁹), but Meslier does not content himself with deriding incredible stories being part of the lives of the saints. He offers a serious discussion of the credibility of the stories of miracles we found in the *Bible*, before he comes to the conclusion that these stories are by no means reliable.

First of all, he is well aware of how fallible human memory is ('on en sauroit presque ajouter foi aux relations que l'on fait des choses mêmes qui se sont passées dans nos jours et presque sous nos propres yeux, de 20 personnes qui en feront le recit, il n'y aura pas quelque fois deux qui les réciteront fidèlement comme elles se sont passées⁴⁰). Another problem is honesty and intelligence of those who relate past events: how can we know that they were unbiased and willing to report objectively what they have seen? And how can we be sure that they

³⁶ *Ibidem*, 68. See also vol. 2, 27–29.

³⁷ *Idem*, *Le Testament*, vol. 1, 34: 'elles sont contraires et oposées les unes aux autres, contraires dans leurs principes et maximes [...]'.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, 70–71: 'cette croiance aveugle les oblige de regarder toutes les autres comme fausses et à maintenir chacun la leur au péril de leurs vies&fortunes – c'est ce qui fait qu'ils ne peuvent s'accorder entr'eux sur le fait de leur Religion [...] on voit tous les jours qu'ils se persécutent les uns les autres à feu et à sang pour le maintient de leurs folles croiances et Religions... on ne voit point de guerres si cruelles que celles qui se font par un motif&prétexte de Religion [...]'.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, 159.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, 98.

also had a closer look at the circumstances of the so-called miracles and were not deceived by tricksters posing as wonder-workers? Can we also exclude the possibility that these stories are just fakes, and their authors used the names of famous historians, as well as the possibility that these texts were distorted in the course of time?⁴¹ Meslier's answer is 'no' to each of these questions:

Or il est constant qu'il n'y a aucune certitude que ces prétendus miracles aient été véritablement faits, il n'y a aucune certitude de la probité et de la sincérité de ceux qui les rapportent, ou disent les avoir vûs; il n'y a aucune certitude qu'ils en aient bien connu et bien remarqué toutes les circonstances; il n'y a point de certitude que les histoires que l'on en voit soient véritablement de ceux-là mêmes à qui on les attribue; et enfin il n'y a point de certitude que ces histoires n'aient point été falsifiées et corrompues comme on en voit tant d'autres qui l'ont été⁴².

Meslier does not claim that the Biblical stories of miracles were altogether false, but suggests they were not examples of any supernatural forces influencing the normal state of things and natural processes; the wonder-workers were in reality smart individuals who knew more than the others about science and therefore were able to present some effective tricks. The *Bible* relates that the magicians of the Pharaoh did work wonders, as much as Moses did⁴³ – and yet they do not inspire anybody to believe that the religion of the ancient Egyptians was the only true one. Ancient historians described numerous extraordinary events: Tacitus assured that Vespasian had healed a blind man, Philostratus described the miracles made by Apollonius of Tyana⁴⁴, and Ovide's *Metamorphoses* are full of wonderful stories. These are no worse than the miracles we read about in the *Bible*, especially that

ceux du Paganisme sont pour la plûpart rapportés par plusieurs graves Historiens qui ont été connu et estimés dans leur tems; au lieu que ceux du commencement du Christianisme ne sont rapportés que par des gens ignorans, gens de bas aloi, et qui n'étoient ni connus ni estimés dans leur tems et dont on en connoit encore maintenant que des noms: encore n'est il pas sûr qu'ils portoient pour lors les noms qu'on leur donne⁴⁵.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, 92–94.

⁴² *Ibidem*, 94–95.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, 82.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, 77–79.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, 84. In another place Meslier writes that 'il est facile de voir, que ces prétendus miracles n'ont été inventés qu'à l'imitation des fables et des fictions des Poètes Païens; c'est ce qui paroît assez visiblement par la conformité qu'il y a des uns aux autres' – *ibidem*, 167. The examples chosen to prove it are: the daughters of Anius who thanks to Bacchus were able to transform water into wine, Esculape son of Apollo who resuscitated the dead, Remus and Remulus being sons of a virgin etc. – *ibidem*, 167–169.

While Philostratus was known to be intelligent and well-educated, the evangelists were ‘des ignorans, des gens de la lie du peuple, de pauvres mercenaires et de pauvres pécheurs qui n’avoient pas seulement l’esprit de raconter de suite et par ordre les faits dont ils parlent, et qui se contradisent même assez souvent dans le recit qu’ils en font’⁴⁶. They are not to be trusted. There is no certainty that the Gospels were written by honest and trustworthy men (for it is known that they were rude and ignorant), and to make things worse, stories about past events often get distorted, which cannot be excluded here⁴⁷.

The questionable authority of the New Testament

If the New Testament was really of divine inspiration, it would not contain errors and contradictions. But it does: St. Matthew claims that Joseph was a descendant of king David’s son Solomon, while according to St. Luke it was not Solomon but another son of king David, namely Nathan, whose descendant was Joseph. St. Matthew relates Joseph and Mary’s flight to Egypt, while there’s no word of it in St. Luke etc.⁴⁸

These fragments of the New Testament were known to theologians and those Christians who used to read them (and the Christian scholars knew that St. Jerome, whom Meslier extensively quoted, complained about the imperfection of redaction of the Scriptures)⁴⁹. But problematic as they were, they did not make Christian believers who read them reject the whole New Testament as imposture, and Meslier himself commented that these contradictions were not really important in themselves⁵⁰; they only served as a proof that the holy scriptures

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, 84–85.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, 98. ‘Quelle assurance par exemple et quelle certitude a t’on que ces quatre Evangiles qui raportent les prétendus Miracles de Jesus Christ soient véritablement de la composition de ceux à qui on les attribue? Et quand ils seroient véritablement de leur composition quelle certitude a t’on qu’ils étoient des hommes de probité et dignes de foi? [...] il y a lieu de se défier tout à fait de leur témoignage, puisqu’on convient que ce n’étoient que des hommes grossiers et ignorans, auxquels par conséquent il auroit été facile d’en imposer. Et enfin quelle certitude a t’on que ces quatre Evangiles que paroissent sous leurs noms n’ont pas été corrompus et falsifiés, comme nous voions que tant d’autres histoires l’ont été et qu’elles le sont encore tous les jours [...]’

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, 117–126.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, 101–107.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, 118: ‘D’ailleurs de quoi sert à ces Evangelistes de faire la Généalogie de ce Joseph et de le faire descendre de ce David, puisque leur Christ n’est véritablement fils de Joseph qui pourroit être descendu de David? [...] Mais quoi que se soit, c’est sans doute de la vanité de ces généalogies-là même que parle leur S. Paul lorsqu’il dit à son disciple Timothée qu’il ne faut point s’arrêter à des fables et à des généalogies qui n’ont point de fin et qui sont plutôt un sujet d’une dispute que d’édification, et lorsqu’il dit à son autre disciple Tite qu’il faut fuir les questions impertinentes et vaines généalogies, les disputes et les contestations sur la loi comme étant vaines et inutiles.’ Meslier refers here to Timothy 1:4 and Titus 3:9.

of Christians were imperfect and as such they certainly were not of divine inspiration⁵¹. Written in an inelegant style, chaotic, full of contradictions, the Gospels were not even credible as a historical source, which Meslier demonstrates by confronting the story of the slaughter of innocents, told by St. Matthew, with the historians' work: as Roman historians including Joseph Flavius wrote no word of such an incident, so it must have been a lie⁵².

Jesus as a madman

Even if he points to little value of the *Evangiles* as a historical source, Meslier does not express his doubts on what they say about Jesus. He does not deny the historical existence of Jesus, but doubts the miracles ascribed to him by the evangelists. Anyway, these miracles were not impressive not only when compared to the 'fables of the pagan poets', but also when compared to what God (in theory) could have done. Healing several ill people does not impress if we know the author of that miracle was able to heal all the humankind. The greatest miracle done by Jesus was the Redemption – but we cannot see any practical effects of it, because people have not committed fewer sins since his death, and those who worship Jesus do not seem to be any better than the others. There is no ground, therefore, to believe that the stories of miracles worked by Jesus and Christian saints are true⁵³.

If Jesus had worked all the miracles they wrote he had, he would have become famous and adored by peoples; yet he was regarded as a mad and despicable fanatic, adds Meslier⁵⁴. What we learn from the *Evangiles* about Jesus is that he was of low birth, despised by others and uneducated, persecuted and killed in the end⁵⁵. It seems that Jesus is the only victim of poverty and persecution with whom Meslier does not sympathize. But it was Jesus who said that there is no need to worry about one's livelihood and keep, to which Meslier answered snappishly:

Il feroit certainement beau, de voir les hommes se fier à une telle promesse, que celle-là. Que deviendroient-ils, s'ils étoient seulement un an sans travailler, sans labourer, sans moissonner et sans faire de gréniers, voulant en cela imiter les oiseaux du ciel [...] ce père celeste pourvoieroit-il pour cela plus particulièrement à leurs besoins? Viendroient-il leur apporter miraculeusement à boire et à manger, lorsqu'ils auroient faim, et viendroient-il leur apporter des linges et des habits, lorsqu'ils en auroient besoin? [...] s'il y a parmi les peuples quelques particuliers,

⁵¹ Meslier, *Le Testament*, vol. 1, 134. See also *ibidem*, 123: 's'ils eussent été inspirées de Dieu, ils ne se seroient pas contredit les uns et les autres'.

⁵² *Ibidem*, 117–119.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, 178–186.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, 85. See also *ibidem*, 40–41, and vol. 2, 66–67.

⁵⁵ Meslier, *Le Testament*, vol. 2, 42: 'il n'étoit qu'un homme vil et méprisable dans le monde: venu au monde dans un étable, né de pauvres parens, fils d'un charpentier, passé pour un fou, moqué, persécuté, fouetté et pendu à une croix'. See also *ibidem*, 66.

quelques familles, ou même quelques communautés de Prêtres, de Moines et de Moineses qui ne travaillent point, et qui ne s'occupent qu'au vain culte de leurs fausses Divinités, c'est qu'ils savent bien qu'il y a en a d'autres, qui travaillent plus utilement qu'eux, sans quoi il faudroit bien, qu'ils missent la main à l'oeuvre, comme les autres⁵⁶.

Jesus also said: 'Ask, and it will be given you' – and yet there are so many poor people who do ask and do not receive what they need, and the Church has been asking God for extirpation of heresies for more than thousand years – in vain⁵⁷. Jesus used to say that those who believed in him would never die ('il n'y a donc personne qui ait véritablement cru en lui', quips Meslier⁵⁸); he predicted that people would rise from the dead soon (after almost 2000 years, still not true)⁵⁹; he also promised that people ('this generation') would soon see stars fall from heaven, the Sun darken and himself coming from the Heaven with trumpeting angels – but all the men who lived on earth in that time have been long dead, and nobody has seen the Second Coming yet⁶⁰. Jesus, according to Meslier, used to behave in an improper way: he irritated the people of Nazareth and provoked their anger ('il ne leur disoit que des sotises et des impertinences, qui les choquoient'), as well as offended Jewish scholars⁶¹. Invited to dine at a Pharisee's house, he demonstrated bad manners⁶². He shocked Jews by saying that he would give them his body to eat and his blood to drink, while their God had explicitly forbidden any consumption of blood and human flesh. Such talk was too absurd even for some of his disciples who decided to abandon him, starting to believe that he was insane⁶³. Jesus also predicted that he would create a new earth and a new heaven, where his apostles would sit on twelve thrones, that the dead soon would hear his voice, and those who 'keep his word' would never see death⁶⁴. If anybody did and talked like this now, commented Meslier, he would be treated as a madman – just like Jesus was treated in his lifetime⁶⁵.

⁵⁶ Meslier, *Le Testament*, vol. 1, 305. Meslier refers to Matthew 6:25–33.

⁵⁷ *Idem*, *Le Testament*, vol. 1, 306–307. Meslier refers to Matthew 7.7, Mark 11:24, and Luke 11:9–10.

⁵⁸ *Idem*, *Le Testament*, vol. 1, 321. Meslier refers to John 11:25–26.

⁵⁹ *Idem*, *Le Testament*, vol. 1, 319. Meslier refers to John 5:25–29.

⁶⁰ *Idem*, *Le Testament*, vol. 1, 322–323. Meslier refers to Matthew 24:29–34 and 16:27–28.

⁶¹ *Idem*, *Le Testament*, vol. 2, 43–44. Meslier refers to Luke 4:28–29, John 8:48–59, and Luke 11:45–42, respectively.

⁶² *Idem*, *Le Testament*, vol. 2, 61–62. Meslier refers to St Luke 11.37–44 and expresses vivid indignation when commenting this incident: 'Peut-on s'imaginer qu'un home de bon-sense puisse jamais faire un tel discours à une personne, qui l'auroit invité honnêtement à venir manger chez-elle et qui seroit actuellement à sa table? Cela ne se peut, il n'y a assurément qu'un fol, qu'un insensé et un imprudent fanatique, qui puisse venir à un tel excès d'impertinence et de folie.'

⁶³ *Ibidem*, 44. Meslier refers to John 6:48–66. See also *ibidem*, 108.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, 46–47. Meslier refers to Matthew 19:28, John 5:28 and 8:51, respectively.

⁶⁵ *Idem*, *Le Testament*, vol. 2, 48.

Christians are right when they accuse pagans of attributing divinity to mortal humans and worshipping them after their death. But pagans at least worship great men, while Jesus worshipped by Christians as their God was anything but great⁶⁶. All that we read in the *Bible* about Jesus, concludes Meslier, shows ‘qu’il n’ étoit qu’un homme de néant, un homme vil et méprisable, qui étoit sans esprit, sans talens, sans science, et enfin qui n’ étoit qu’un fol, qu’un insensé, qu’un misérable fanatique et un malheureux pendart’⁶⁷.

No wonder that the promises Jesus made have never been fulfilled. What is more, the prophecies of the *Bible* have not come true⁶⁸. God promised Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as stars in the sky, and their state powerful and prosperous; in reality, the Jews have suffered a lot of defeats at the hands of their enemies since then, they are neither numerous nor prosperous and lost their state centuries ago⁶⁹.

But why, actually, were these promises made to Jews?

Or seroit-il par exemple convenable à une souveraine bonté, à une souveraine sagesse et à une souveraine justice de [...] vouloir faire une injuste et odieuse acception des personnes ni même aucune injuste et odieuse acception des peuples? [...] détruire les uns et les accabler de misères pour favoriser les autres sans aucun mérite et les accabler heureusement de tous biens? [...] En effet si Dieu étoit Dieu, c’est à dire, s’il y avoit véritablement un Dieu, comme nos Christicoles l’entendent et le disent, il seroit également l’auteur de toutes les créatures, également l’auteur de tous les Hommes et de tous les Peuples; il ne seroit pas seulement le Dieu des Juifs ou des Grecs, mais aussi le Dieu de tous les Peuples et de toutes les Nations de la Terre, et partout il seroit également le Protecteur de tous et leur Bienfaiteur⁷⁰.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, 38–41: ‘Nos Deichristicoles ou Christideicoles blâment et condamnent les païens, de ce qu’ils attribuoient la Divinité à des hommes mortels, comme aussi de ce qu’ils les adoroient comme des Dieux, après leur mort. Ils ont certainement raison de les blâmer et de les condamner en cela [...] ils devoient donc bien se condamner aussi eux-mêmes, puisqu’ils sont dans la même erreur, que ces Païens étoient, et qu’ils adorent comme leur Dieu un homme qui étoit mortel, et qui étoit même si bien mortel, qu’il mourut honteusement sur une croix [...]. Mais ce qu’il y a en cela de plus ridicule dans le Christianisme, que dans le Paganisme, c’est que les Païens n’ont ordinairement attribué la Divinité, qu’à de grands hommes et à de grands personnages, comme à des Empereurs, à des Rois, à de puissans Princes, ou à des personnes, qui ont excellé en quelques vertus, en quelques belles et rares perfections, qui ont, par exemple, inventé les sciences et les arts, qui ont rendu quelques signalés services au public, ou qui ont fait quelques grandes et généreuses actions mais nos Christicoles, à qui attribuent-ils la Divinité? A un homme de néant, qui n’avoit ni talent, ni esprit, ni science, ni adresse et qui étoit méprisé dans le monde [...] à un fou, à un insensé, à un miserable fanatique et à un malheureux pendart.’ See also *ibidem*, 66–67.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁸ Meslier writes, however, about one exception: the prophecy made by Samuel concerning the monarchy being introduced in Israel (1 Sam. 8.11). Samuel predicted numerous abuses kings will do to the people. ‘Jamais Prophetie, si Prophetie est, ne fut plus véritablement accomplice, que celle que fit pour lors ce Prophète, car on en a vû malheureusement pour les Pauvres l’accomplissement dans tous les Roiaumes et dans tous les Siècles qui se sont passés depuis ce tems-là (...)’ – *ibidem*, 240.

⁶⁹ *Idem*, *Le Testament*, vol. 1, 227–230. See also *ibidem*, 245–274.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*, 138–140. See also 144–146.

What we learn about God from the Old Testament suggests that he is anything but just; not only is he biased, granting some special favors to some particular persons and to the Jewish nation (and harming others) instead of loving all human beings equally, but also the punishment he inflicted on mankind for such a small sin like eating an apple in the Garden of Eden is incredibly harsh – especially that, being almighty, God had been able to prevent that sin⁷¹. The enormity of the punishment, compared to the size of the sin, suggests that God is not merciful at all; furthermore, according to the *Bible*, God enjoyed animal sacrifices – which were, according to Meslier, simply cruel slaughter of innocent animals, who should have been protected by their Creator. Why should a perfectly good and almighty God, loving all his creatures, let so many of them suffer, if he might have made them all perfectly happy? The cruel animal sacrifices of the ancient Judaism are incompatible with the idea of God loving all his creatures; just like the very suffering of humans and animals in this world is incompatible with the idea of God being both infinitely good and almighty. The injustice of existing political systems, the oppression of the weak and the poor, the meanness of so many people also suggest that there is no almighty goodness able to take effectively care of the world (and it makes no sense to argue that God created a perfect world which was later corrupted by wicked people, because it would mean that men are stronger than God, ‘et par conséquent que ce que l’on appelle Dieu, n’est pas Dieu’⁷²). And this contradiction cannot be reasonably explained by the Christian theory stating that God tolerates evil because it is always followed by good.

The irrational Christian ethics

Christian morality, just like Christian mythology, is less reasonable than that of the pagans, according to Meslier. It promotes unnatural and harmful behaviors, praising pursuit of suffering (‘fait consister la perfection de la vertu et le plus grand bien et avantage de l’homme dans l’amour et recherche des douleurs et souffrances’⁷³). It condemns as sins ‘not only deeds, but also thoughts, desires and affections of the flesh, which are most natural, and most necessary for the preservation and the multiplication of humankind’ in all cases but marital intercourse⁷⁴. The third fault of Christian morality is that it promotes attitudes which

⁷¹ *Idem, Le Testament*, vol. 2, 152: ‘Est-il croiable, qu’un Dieu infiniment bon, infiniment sage, auroit voulu s’offenser si grièvement pour une si légère faute et même pour une faute, qu’il auroit bien voulu permettre et qu’il n’auroit pas voulu empêcher?’

⁷² *Idem, Le Testament*, vol. 3, 51–52.

⁷³ *Idem, Le Testament*, vol. 2, 155.

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*, 156: ‘La deuxième erreur de sa morale consiste en ce qu’elle condamne comme des vices et comme des crimes dignes des punitions éternelles, non seulement les oeuvres, mais aussi les pensées, les désirs et les affections de la chair qui sont les plus naturelles et qui sont les plus

are harmful to the honest people as they are beneficial to villains: by urging the faithful to love their enemies, and to suffer quietly wrongs and oppression, it helps tyrants keep people enslaved⁷⁵.

The latter made Meslier believe that it was high time to put an end to false religious beliefs which legitimized unjust political systems:

Mais comme tous ces abus-là, aussi bien que tous les autres abus et erreurs, dont j'ai parlé, ne sont fondés que sur la croïance et sur la persuasion qu'il y a un Dieu, c'est-à-dire sur la croïance et sur la persuasion qu'il y a un Etre souverain tout-puissant, infiniment bon, infiniment sage et infiniment parfait, qui veut être et adoré et servi des hommes d'une telle ou telle manière; et que les Princes et les Rois de la terre prétendent même aussi fonder leur puissance et leur autorité sur celle d'un Dieu tout-puissant, par la grâce duquel ils se disent établis pour gouverner et commander tous les autres hommes; il faut maintenant prouver et faire manifestement voir qu'il n'y a point de tel Être et qu'il n'y a point de Dieu [...]. C'est ce que je vais faire voir par des argumens démonstratifs, tirés des principes de métaphysique, des principes physique et des principes de morale [...]⁷⁶.

God does not exist

The 'moral' arguments are mentioned above: the most important of them is the existence of evil and suffering in the world. The capital 'metaphysical' argument was the way Christian theology described God. First, Meslier derided the notion of the Holy Trinity, pointing to the fact that Christian theologians say that God has no body and no form whatsoever, and yet, having no body and thus no sex, is deemed to be the father of the second person of the Trinity⁷⁷. But the complexities of the Christian notion of the Holy Trinity, incomprehensible to many believers, were easy to mock, and Meslier's ambition was to prove, compellingly and irrefutably, that God simply did not exist at all.

convenables et les plus nécessaires à la conservation et à la multiplication du genre humain [...] dans tous ceux et celles qui ne sont point légitimement conjoints ensemble selon ses loix et ses ordonnances [...]. See also *ibidem*, 159–160.

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*, 157: 'La troisième erreur de sa morale consiste en ce qu'elle approuve et qu'elle recommande la pratique et l'observance de certaines maxims et quasi de certains préceptes, qui tendent manifestement au renversement de la justice et de l'équité naturelle, et qui tendent manifestement aussi à favoriser les méchants et à faire opprimer les bons et les foibles: car elle approuve et recommande la pratique et l'observance de de ces precepts et de ces maxims du Christ, qui disoit et qui commandoit à ses disciples d'aimer leurs ennemis et de faire du bien à ceux qui leur feroient du mal; qui leur recommandoit de ne point résister aux méchants, mais de souffrir paisiblement leurs injures et leurs mauvaises traitemens, non seulement sans s'en venger, mais aussi sans s'en fâcher, sans en murmurer et sans s'en plaindre'.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, 288–289.

⁷⁷ *Ibidem*, 31.

The ‘physical’ argument is the following: God, according to Christian theology, is immaterial, he is in no specific place, has no body and no emotions comparable to human emotions: does not desire or loathe anything the way humans do; he exists in no way, concluded Meslier, so he does not exist at all⁷⁸. The matter exists, as we all can see, while we cannot see God; why actually should we imagine that there is anything apart from the visible matter? Christians are expected to believe in the existence of a being which is perfectly good and beautiful, and which also wants people to believe in its existence, yet remains invisible to their eyes instead of showing itself with all its splendid qualities, thus putting an end to any doubts non-believers can have. ‘Mais comme ce prétendu être si souverainement parfait ne se fait voir, ni sentir, ni connoître nulle part en aucune manière que ce soit, il n’y a certainement aucune raison de dire, ni de croire qu’il y ait effectivement un tel être; il y a au contraire tout sujet de croire et de dire qu’il n’est pas’⁷⁹.

There is nothing but the matter, life and death are just modifications of the matter⁸⁰, even souls are material⁸¹. As souls are material and mortal, there is no life after death, so we cannot hope that evil deeds will be punished after their perpetrators’ death, and that virtuous people will be rewarded after they die. This means that ‘there is no sovereign goodness to reward all the righteous and all the innocent, and no sovereign justice to punish the wicked’, and if there is no sovereign goodness and justice, there is no sovereign wisdom and power, which means that there is no ‘infinitely perfect Being’, and consequently that there is no God⁸².

⁷⁸ *Idem, Le Testament*, vol. 3, 19–21: ‘Or nos Déicoles reconnoissent et conviennent que leur Dieu veut toutes choses sans aucun mouvement de sa volonté et qu’il fait toutes choses sans aucun mouvement d’action (...) suivant quoi il faut donc qu’ils reconnoissent et qu’ils disent aussi qu’il est sans être et qu’il existe sans existence, c’est-à-dire qu’il n’est point du tout, puisqu’il n’a aucune manière particulière d’être, ni aucune manière particulière d’exister; car ce qui n’a aucune manière particulière d’être, ni aucune manière particulière d’exister, n’existe certainement point du tout.’

⁷⁹ *Ibidem*, 21.

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*, 288: ‘la vie et la mort, la beauté et la laideur, la santé et la maladie, la force et la faiblesse des corps vivans ne sont que des modes ou des modifications de la matière, aussi bien que de l’étendue’. See also *ibidem*, 339: ‘La vie, la pensée ne sont point des êtres absolus, des êtres propres et particuliers, mais seulement des modifications de l’être qui vit et qui pense [...]’.

⁸¹ *Ibidem*, 303: ‘notre ame n’est que ce qu’il y a eu en nous de matière plus subtile et plus agitée que l’autre plus grossière matière, qui compose les membres et les parties visibles de notre corps’. Meslier’s argument here is that the state of a soul depends on the state of the body: ‘elle se fortifie et s’affoiblit à mesure que notre corps se fortifie et s’affoiblit, ce qui ne seroit certainement pas si elle étoit une substance spirituelle et mortelle’ – *ibidem*, 304–305. He also quotes Pliny, Cicero and Seneca as philosophers who expressed their lack of faith in the immortality of souls, and adds that there is no mention of immortal souls in the Old Testament – *ibidem*, 353–365.

⁸² *Ibidem*, 365: ‘il est clair et evident, que l’âme n’est ni spirituelle ni immortelle, mais qu’elle est matérielle et mortelle aussi bien que le corps. Et si elle est mortelle comme le corps, il n’y a donc de récompenses à espérer, ni de châtimens à craindre après cette vie. Il y a donc mille et mille milliers de justes et d’innocens, qui n’auroient jamais la récompense de leurs vertus, ni de leurs bonnes oeuvres, et mille et mille milliers de méchans et abominables scélérats, qui ne seront jamais punis de leur méchancetés et de leurs détestables crimes [...]. Il n’y a donc point de bonté souveraine

Besides, if God was ubiquitous and nothing happened without him wishing it, it meant that he personally controlled every single movement of everything which existed in the world. But, Meslier asked, how could he make anything move if he had no material body and no hands?⁸³ And why do we move sometimes in an imperfect way, if God, who is responsible for every mouvement, is infallible?⁸⁴ And in the end – how should God be able to move anything at all, and be the first source of movement in the universe, if he did not even move himself – and the Christian theologians claim that he is ‘non seulement sans corps et sans forme et sans étendue aucune, mais est encore entièrement immobile, immuable dans sa nature, immuable en lui-même, immuable en ses pensées, immuable dans sa connoissance, immuable dans ses desseins et immuable dans ses volontés’?⁸⁵ It meant that praying to God, whose decisions are unchangeable, to ask him for anything is a waste of time⁸⁶. Whatever Christians say about God wishing to be adored and offered sacrifices, we can see that those who worship God do not enjoy better fates than those who neglect the religious cult, hence it is clear that worshipping God is useless⁸⁷.

It was not enough to discourage people to worship God by showing them that there is no Providence; Meslier wanted also to convince his readers that even believing in the existence of God was useless. The idea of God did not explain anything, because whatever happened in the world, could perfectly well be explained by natural processes. The story of Creation was just a fable, as useless as the idea that God’s will ruled the world. We do not need to believe that the nature was created by an almighty, infinitely wise and good Creator: the order of the nature, its stunning beauty and complexity, is only a way the matter moves – and,

pour récompenser tous les justes et tous les innocens, et point de justice souveraine pour punir les méchans. Et s’il n’y a point de justice souveraine, ni de bonté souveraine, il n’y a point non plus de sagesse ni de puissance souveraine. Et s’il n’y a point de bonté, point de justice, point de sagesse et point de puissance souveraine, il n’y a donc point d’Être infiniment parfait, et par conséquent point de Dieu, qui est ce que j’avois à prouver et à démontrer’.

⁸³ *Ibidem*, 1.

⁸⁴ *Ibidem*, 5: D’ailleurs si c’est un être tout-puissant, infiniment sage et éclairé, qui forme et qui dirige dans nous-mêmes et dans tous les autres êtres tous les mouvemens internes et externes qui se font dans les corps et dans toute la nature, comment peut-il y avoir [...] aucuns mouvemens qui soient tout soit peu déréglés et irréguliers?

⁸⁵ *Ibidem*, 9.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*, 10: ‘il est inutile à nos Déicoles [...] de le prier et de l’adorer, il est inutile à eux de lui offrir des sacrifices, comme ls font, afin d’obtenir de lui par ce moïen quelque grâce ou quelque faveur [...]. Car puisqu’il est immuable de sa nature, comme ils le prétendent, et que toutes ses pensées, désirs, volontés sont prises de toute éternité, il est sûr que qu’il ne changera pas de pensée et de volonté à leur égard pour toute les prières qu’ils sauroient lui faire [...]’.

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*, 12–13: ‘Si Dieu avoit fait, comme disent nos Déicoles, de tels commandemens aux hommes, de le prier, de le adorer et de lui offrir des sacrifices, il auroit sans doute, ou au moins il devoit avoir plus d’égard à ceux qui observent fidèlement ses commandemens, qu’à ceux qui en les observent point [...]. Or nous voïons manifestement tous les jours qu’il n’a pas d’égard, ni de considération pour les uns que pour les autres, et que les biens et maux arrivent indifféremment aux uns comme aux autres.’

anyway, the nature is not everywhere perfect, which suggests that there cannot be an infinitely wise, good and almighty Creator:

Or je dis, que tout ce qu'il y a de plus beau et de plus admirable dans la nature, ne démontre pas tant l'existence d'un Dieu tout-puissant et infiniment bon, comme le moindre mal démontre qu'il n'y en a point; et la raison évidente de cela est, comme j'ai déjà dit, parceque tout ce qu'il y a de plus beau et de plus admirable dans la nature, se peut faire par les loix et par les forces de la nature meme, et que d'ailleurs il n'est pas croiable, qu'il y auroit aucun vice, ni aucun défaut dans aucune creature, ni qu'elle souffrirait aucun mal, si elle sortoit [...] de la main toute-puissante d'un Dieu infiniment bon et infiniment sage⁸⁸.

As to the existence of Devil, Meslier had expressed his opinion even before denying the existence of God: Devil exists, but in no metaphysical way. The only real Devil in the world are the rich and nobles, and the fact that the Christian religion tolerates existing inequalities in social statuses and incomes, suggests that it cannot be God-given, because 'a God who would be infinitely good and wise and just would not like to establish and maintain such glaring injustice'⁸⁹. The existing tyrannical regime with its unjustifiable differences between the poor and the rich, the nobles and the lowborn, has no real legitimacy, as there is no God – so it is high time to think about a great change.

The Rebellion

On the first pages of his monumental work we find a phrase that was to become famous:

Il me souvient à ce sujet d'un souhait que faisoit autrefois un homme, qui n'avoit ni science ni étude; mais qui, selon les apparences ne manquoit pas de bon sens [...]. Il souhaitoit [...] que tous les grands de la terre et que tous les nobles fussent pendus et étranglés avec le boïaux des prêtres – cette expression exprime tout ce que ces sortes de gens-là méritent⁹⁰.

⁸⁸ *Ibidem*, 117.

⁸⁹ *Ibidem*, 180–181: 'Chers amis, on vous parle de diables, on vous fait accroire que les diables sont ce qu'il y a de plus méchant et effroiable – mais sachez qu'il n'y a point pour vous de plus méchants, ni de plus véritables Diables à craindre, que ces gens-là, car vous n'avez point de plus grands adversaires à craindre, que les Grands, Nobles, Riches [...] les Diables que vos Prédicateurs et Peintres vous dépeignent [...] ne sont que les Diables imaginaires comme la Religion Chrétienne souffre, approuve et autorise une si injuste disproportion d'états et de conditions parmi les hommes, c'est une preuve assez évidente qu'elle ne vient point de Dieu: la droite raison nous fait voir, qu'un Dieu qui seroit infiniment bon et sage, et juste ne voudroit point établir ni maintenir une si criante injustice.'

⁹⁰ *Idem*, *Le Testament*, vol. 1, 18–19. In another fragment, however, Meslier states that some churchmen, namely bishops and curates, are useful for the society '[...] quoique leur fonction de Evêque et Curé soit entièrement vaine et inutile, néanmoins comme ils sont établis et qu'ils sont préposés pour enseigner les bonnes moeurs et toutes les vertus morales aussi bien que pour

Meslier, who had always been reputed to be a charitable person, did not present this as his own idea. Nevertheless, the final part of his book, namely Chapter 98, is a call to a social revolution which would put an end to the royal tyranny. It did not really matter that Meslier was writing his *Testament* under the reign of Louis XV, born in 1710, and immensely popular with his subjects during his minority (1715–1723) and the first years of personal rule. Meslier was disillusioned as far as monarchy was concerned; during the long reign of Louis XIV he had observed the disastrous effects of religious intolerance of the king who in 1685 revoked the Edict of Nantes; then, in 1693 and 1709, the periods of catastrophic famine ravaging France; and many times he had to see troops marching through the Ardennes – or even worse, troops living in the villages. As Louis XIV was trying to control virtually every aspect of his subjects' lives and most of the armed conflicts that cost France so dear were his own decisions, Meslier grew to praise tyrannicide: 'Où sont ces généreux meurtriers des Tyrans que l'on a vûs dans les siècles passés?', recalling Jacques Clément and François Ravillac, murderers of Henry III and Henry IV⁹¹.

As noble tyrannicides were nowhere to be seen, Meslier appealed to the people; after all, the powerful ruled only as long as people obeyed them, and the rich stayed rich as long as the poor gave them fruit of their work⁹². 'Vous serez miséables et malheureux, vous et vos descendants, tant que vous souffrirez la domination des princes et des rois de la terre; vous serez miséables et malheureux tant que vous suivrez les erreurs de la religion et que vous assujétirez à ses superstitions'⁹³. Meslier called upon the people to renounce religion and make churchmen work like others⁹⁴, but it was to be only the first step; the next one was to unite and get rid of princes and kings:

[...] tâchez de vous unir tous, tant que vous êtes, vous et vos semblables, pour secouer entièrement le joug de la tyrannique domination de vos princes et vos rois; renversez partout tous ces trônes d'injustice et d'impûtés; brisez toutes ces têtes couronnées, confondez l'orgueil et la superbe de vos tyrans et ne souffrez jamais

enseigner les erreurs et les superstitions d'une fausse Religion, on ne doit pas les regarder tout-à-fait comme inutiles, puisqu'il faut dans toutes les Républiques bien réglées, qu'il y ait des maîtres qui enseignent la vertu et qui instruisent les homes dans les bonnes moeurs, aussi bien que dans les sciences et dans les arts [...] on peut dire qu'ils travaillent en quelque façon pour le bien public, et en cette considération, ils ont quelque droit de vivre et d'être entretenus du bien public' – vol. 2, 184.

⁹¹ *Idem*, *Le Testament*, vol. 3, 374.

⁹² *Ibidem*, vol. 2, 224: 'Qu'est-ce-que seroit, par exemple, des plus grands Princes et des plus grands Potentats de la terre, si les peuples ne les soutenoient? [...] ils ne seroient rien que des hommes foibles et petits comme vous, si vous ne souteniez leur Grandeur, ils n'auroient pas plus de richesses que vous, si vous ne leur donniez pas de votres, et ils n'auroient pas plus de puissance ni d'autorité que vous, si vous ne vouliez pas vous soumettre à leurs loix.'

⁹³ *Ibidem*, vol. 3, 377.

⁹⁴ *Ibidem*, 377: 'abolissez même entre vous tous ces vains et superstitieux offices de prêtres et de sacrificateurs et réduisez les à vivre et à travailler comme vous'.

qu'ils règnent aucunement sur vous. [...] malheur aux peuples qui se rendent lâchement esclaves des tyrans, et qui se rendent aveuglement esclaves des erreurs et des superstitions de la religion⁹⁵.

But Meslier's program was not just destruction of the old order. He was not an anarchist. Having criticized most of the clergy, as well as lawyers and tax-collectors as useless for the society⁹⁶, Meslier offers an idea of a communist society – an idea which, he insisted, had been actually expressed in the *Bible*⁹⁷; instead of accepting private property of 'des bien et de richesses de la terre'⁹⁸, people

devroient tous également les posséder en commun et de jouir en commun [...] J'entends tous ceux d'une même endroit (ville, bourg, village, paroisse) ne composassent tous ensemble qu'une même famille, se considérant tous les uns et les autres comme frères et soeurs [...] qui devroient tous s'aimer et vivre paisiblement et communément ensemble, n'ayant tous qu'une même ou semblable nourriture et étant tous également bien vêtus, logés, chaussés et couchés mais s'appliquant aussi également tous à la besogne ou quelque autre honnête et utile emploi, chacun suivant sa profession, ou suivant ce qui seroit plus nécessaire et plus convenable de faire [...] sous la conduite de ceux qui seroient les plus sages et les mieux intentionnés, pour l'avancement et maintien du bien public⁹⁹.

Meslier believed that if people started to live like this, in small communities allying themselves with each other in case any of them needed help¹⁰⁰, they would be able to avoid misery, 'car la terre produit presque toujours assez suffisamment et même assez abondamment de quoi les nourrir et entretenir'¹⁰¹.

Meslier died in 1729. During the 1730s, his work started to circulate in the form of clandestine copies¹⁰². Voltaire, who heard for the first time about Meslier's work from his friend Thiériot in 1735¹⁰³, wrote on 8 February 1762 to his Parisian friend Étienne Noël Damilaville that there were more than one hundred copies in Paris, and that fifteen to twenty years earlier a manuscript copy had cost eight gold louis¹⁰⁴, which meant an exorbitant price for a book. He had its fragments published as

⁹⁵ *Ibidem*, 377–378.

⁹⁶ *Idem*, *Le Testament*, vol. 2, 184–210.

⁹⁷ *Ibidem*, 233. Meslier refers to Acts 2:44.

⁹⁸ *Ibidem*, 210. It seems that Meslier did not think himself to be original in this aspect, as he quotes Seneca's letter 90, as well as Pascal's opinion and Plato's *The Republic* – see 230–233.

⁹⁹ *Ibidem*, 210–212.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibidem*, 211.

¹⁰¹ *Ibidem*, 222.

¹⁰² Jonathan I. Israel writes about 35 catalogued copies of the clandestine manuscript entitled „Mémoire des Pensées et Sentiments” – Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment. Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 690.

¹⁰³ Bertrand, “Voltaire”, 228–229.

¹⁰⁴ Il y a quinze à vingt ans qu'on vendait le manuscrit de cet ouvrage huit louis d'or. C'était un très gros in-4°; il y en a plus de cent exemplaires dans Paris. – Voltaire, *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire: Correspondance générale*, vol. VII (Paris: Lequien, 1824), 212.

Extrait des sentiments de Jean Meslier adressés à ses paroissiens sur une partie des abus et des erreurs en général et en particulier in Holland in 1761. It would have been certainly extremely difficult to publish the whole, given how long is the work which had to be printed, sold and bought secretly. Still, Voltaire had chosen to publish only the first five ‘proofs’. The rest was far too radical for him; whatever his enemies would say, Voltaire had never espoused atheism, so he chose the fragments which would match his own deistic stance, making Jean Meslier appear to be a deist, too. He went as far as to suggest that Meslier on his deathbed ‘asked God to forgive him teaching the peasants Christianity’; unhappy as Meslier had been about having to teach it, he certainly did not ask God for anything, simply because he did not believe in sense of such activity. Nevertheless, that was to be read also in Voltaire’s *Dictionnaire philosophique*, published in 1764¹⁰⁵.

Voltaire’s version does not include any fragment talking of a rebellion against the existing political order and the necessity to destroy the Church. Despite his bitter attacks against ecclesiastical censorship and intolerance of the Catholic church, Voltaire was far from willing to destroy the whole institution. He was also anything but ready to support Meslier’s idea of a violent social revolution.

Yet even this emasculated version was unacceptable for the French authorities, and when Voltaire wrote from his *Délices* to Paris-based d’Alembert in July 1762, urging him to distribute copies of the text and reproaching him with lack of enthusiasm: ‘How lukewarm you are at Paris! You hide your light under a bushel!’ – D’Alembert’s answer showed that he considered Meslier’s work too radical: ‘You blame us for being lukewarm, but as I believe I have already told you, fear of the stake has a very cooling effect’¹⁰⁶.

In 1764, Voltaire had some of Meslier’s thoughts printed in a book entitled *L’Evangile de la Raison*. On its title page one can read that it is a posthumous work by ‘M.D.V.&D.F.’, sponsored by the Jesuits (which was certainly meant to make its readers smile) and printed in London. Another edition appeared just a year later as *L’évangile de la raison, ouvrage philosophique* – this time the title page indicates neither the identity of the authors nor the publishers¹⁰⁷; new editions followed in 1766 and later.

In 1772 baron d’Holbach published (anonymously) his own book entitled *Le Bon Sense*¹⁰⁸. During the revolution, in 1791, the book was reprinted as *Le Bon Sense du curé Meslier*.

¹⁰⁵ Voltaire, *Dictionnaire philosophique* (Paris: Cosse et Gaultier-Laguionie, 1838), 317.

¹⁰⁶ Jean Orieux, *Voltaire*, transl. Barbara Bray, Helen R. Lane (New York: Doubleday, 1979), 366.

¹⁰⁷ These editions are usually described in library catalogues as “published by abbé Du Laurens” which meant Henri-Joseph Du Laurens (or Dulaurens), a monk being a prolific author of anticlerical writings (1719–1793).

¹⁰⁸ Baron d’Holbach may have been also the author of a book printed in 1881 in Paris as *La religion naturelle*.

In 1732 long fragments of Meslier's work were translated into English by Anna Knoop as *Superstition in All Ages*. Text was published in 2009 as *Testament. Memoir of the Thoughts and Sentiments of Jean Meslier*, with a preface by Michel Onfray¹⁰⁹.

The first entire French version was published in 1864 in Holland by Rudolf Charles d'Ablaing van Giessenburg; it attracted attention of followers of socialism of the time¹¹⁰. Unsurprisingly, Meslier's anti-religious and anti-monarchical ideas found much interest in the Soviet Union, where he was considered to be a pioneer of both scientific atheism and socialism. An abridged version of his book was published in Moscow in 1925, followed by an unabridged one in 1937¹¹¹. Another edition, prepared by Boris F. Poršnev of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, was published in 1954¹¹². Meslier's life and work were also described by Boris F. Poršnev (*Mel'e*, Moscow: 1964), and his student Gennadij S. Kučerenko (*Sud'ba "Zaveščaniâ" Žana Mel'e v XVIII v.*, Moscow: 1968; *Žan Mel'e i francuzskij materializm XVIII veka*, Moscow–Paris 1970), and other historians¹¹³. In Poland, Jan Szczepański's translation of an abridged version was published in 1955 with a knowledgeable preface by Zbigniew Bienkowski¹¹⁴.

In France the first official edition of the whole work was printed only in 1970–1972. It was a critical edition by Deprun, Desné and Soboul, entitled *Oeuvres complètes* (3 vols, Paris, 1970–1972).

Aleksandra Porada

***Le Testament by Jean Meslier: the pioneering work
of the militant atheism in France***

Summary

Jean Meslier (1664–1729) was probably the most radical thinker of the French Enlightenment, yet he is relatively little known. He was a modest priest working all his life in a village, and his work – the monumental *Le Testament*, found only after his death – seems to have been far too radical to be printed in an unabridged version till mid-19th c. Still, Meslier's book deserves to be studied closely – as the boldest and most

¹⁰⁹ Brian McClinton, „Jean Meslier's Testament”, *Humanism Ireland* 131 (2011): 17.

¹¹⁰ The earliest sign of the interest which Meslier's work started to awake in the socialist circles may have been a paper by Georg Adler, „Ein vergessener Vorläufer des modernen Sozialismus (Jean Meslier)”, *Gegenwart* 26 (1884).

¹¹¹ Julia, McKee, „Les confrères de Jean Meslier”, 62.

¹¹² *Žan Mel'e, Zaveščanie*, transl. Fyodor D. Kapelûš, Gennadij P. Polâkov (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1937, 1954).

¹¹³ In the 1980s Meslier's work was subjects of scholarly works by Fedor Â. Polânski.

¹¹⁴ Jan Meslier, *Testament*, transl. Zbigniew Bienkowski (Kraków: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1955).

consequent attack on everything religions are, from Catholic Church traditions till the very idea of the divine.

The first part of *Le Testament* contains critique of credibility of the *Bible*, the miracles related in it, as well as the prophecies made by Hebrew prophets and Jesus Christ and promises given by God to Jews, which, according to Meslier, have remained unfulfilled. The next part is an attack on the contradictions found in the *Bible*, which uses testimonies of the ancient historians suggesting that the Gospels are not a reliable source of knowledge about events of Christ's lifetime. The analysis of the behavior of Jesus leads Meslier to call him a madman, and the Christian ethic is presented as unnatural and dysfunctional.

Meslier goes on to prove that all religions are lies, originally invented by cynical individuals to support their ambitions to rule their fellow humans. Analyzing critically theology, Meslier convinces his readers that there is no God at all; consequently, all ecclesiastical institutions are useless and actually harmful, because they support tyrannical governments. They should be abolished, and all religious beliefs should be renounced. The famous final part of *Testament* is a powerful call to a great revolution that would put end to both Christian religion and the political and economic systems supported by the Catholic church.