

# AGAINST RELIGION: D'HOLBACH, *THE SYSTEM OF NATURE*

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## Introduction

Among Enlightenment's privileged targets was, of course, religion. At least, this was the feeling largely shared among public perception, whether one deplored or celebrated it. Again, it's necessary to agree on the meaning of this opposition between Enlightenment and religion. In many ways, the Enlightenment is an age neither more nor less religious than any other. It was pitted with permanent conflicts and quarrels.

But what I'd like to point out here is that the century incontestably demonstrated an audacity of thought which was a lot more conscious of itself. Lots of combining factors and several angles of attack came together to offer a varied range of convictions, from the simple critique of the clergy to radical or atheist incredulity, passing by what is suitably called "deism"; that's to say the belief in the existence of a transcendent being, a creator of the world but without this belief being based on a divine revelation.

And yet, all the great religions of Europe were founded on a revelation, whether it be Judaism, in the minority, or the different Christian confessions which still shamelessly opposed each other in Europe, even if the time of civil wars had passed. Common ground between religion and anti-religion is, without a doubt, the belief or not in the authority of a divine revelation, in other words of a text which is meant to faithfully transcribe the word of God.

## Part 1 – An anonymous System

The most radical form of opposition to religion came about clandestinely in 1770 under a pseudonym from Holland; it was called the *System of Nature*. It's an impressive book which puts forward a sort of complete, philosophical assessment, offering a view of the world resolutely atheist and materialist. Two years later, appeared *Good Sense*, a type of résumé on the system of nature which was more incisive and accessible. The *System* was, of course, condemned straight away and symbolically burnt on the strand. It aroused anger among the clergy in France and sparked numerous replicas.

Most interesting is perhaps observing that the person who seemed to be the most unhappy with this incredulous eruption was no other than Voltaire. He will write many works to refute what seemed to him to be a dangerous descent into incredulity which appeared to be too radical, notably in political matters. As for Voltaire, one must recognise it, even if it means fighting, without rest nor weakness, the superstition and fanaticism upheld by institutionalised religions. One requires a religion for the people and the king, otherwise the people and the king could believe themselves to be superior and permit themselves to everything. Voltaire took on the role of God's lawyer.

Incidentally, his refutation of the *System* in 1770 was called *Dieu, Réponse au Système de la nature*. In a way, he was annoyed at being beaten in his fight against religion by a form of incredulity which appeared to him to be socially counterproductive. And if he sees atheism as the position largely held among the Encyclopaedists, he worries about this rise in power without managing to discover who had written the work.

## Part 2 – A very discrete writer: The baron d'Holbach

Its author was none other than the baron d'Holbach. A very discrete character from the republic of letters who recognised himself as only being able to have an anonymous existence. It was such a well-guarded secret that it would only be upon his death in January 1789, as the winds of the Revolution were getting ready to blow, that the revelation was made. And we'd discover that while he only passed himself off as a modest encyclopaedist, a friend of Diderot, managing a salon which he hosted, specialist in mineralogy and chemistry, he was also, in fact, an unparalleled propagandist who wrote the most violent and famous of works against religion from the 1760s onwards, including the *System of Nature*, the *Social System*, *Christianity Unveiled*, *Letters to Eugenia*, *Universal Morality* and the *Natural Policy*.

This incredibly rich man devoted all his time and his energy to tirelessly publishing against the place of religion in society, to promote a political and social model, not democratic in modern terms, but a model which anticipated what would be the separation of state and religion in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that's to say a country where different faiths coexisted, all peaceful and without privileges, with no place in the state machine, so that the religious sphere would be separated from political affairs.

D'Holbach drew attention over time to a whole tradition which pre-existed him and which he largely helped to circulate. Aside from his own publications, one mustn't forget his important business of translating and editing anti-religious texts, written both at home or abroad, and notably from England. For example, he translated the great English philosopher Hobbes and several essays by the Scot David Hume, who incidentally frequented his salon during his Parisian visit.

## Part 3 – The atheist "system"

Going back to *System*, which had an enormous impact, one must say that its gradual establishment, which set a systematic pathway for atheist ideas, was incidentally quite an abstract work which, in the mind of the author, was not in reach of ordinary people. It reserved the atheist belief for an elite sufficiently learned to understand the interest without worrying over the social disapproval which it was the subject of. The baron started by laying the materialist foundations of his conception of nature. "Only matter exists, ideas have no real existence outside our understanding; these are only signs that our judgement uses to explore this world around us and undoubtedly whose secrets we'll never penetrate; imperfect and washed-up humans that we are".

The idea that God can only be a false abstraction since it cannot be referred to any tangible reality susceptible to being brought to light only serves the interests of people who are gripped by the prestige of this figure; this brings us back to the idea of a supreme and menacing authority. It is necessary, therefore, to free us from these frightening ghosts in order to be in a position to make sense of nature's elements which we can experiment on, notably through science. We can see how the baron d'Holbach's position was both offensive and defensive. It's about putting reason in the position of understanding what's in reach without affirming to universal understanding and even less to an idealist afterlife. This comes back to concentrating not on the salvation of another world but to the everyday happiness in the world we know.

It is, therefore, an invitation to modesty and humility in knowledge, but equally a call to daring to act within the limits set by our understanding. In that, the baron d'Holbach's radicalism is a good representative of part of the Enlightenment's legacy, that of the freedom to think and critique, of questioning beliefs and contesting them if necessary.