

Ecce homo!



History of Religions in Translation

1

General Editors

Luther H. Martin, *University of Vermont*

Jacques Waardenburg, *University of Lausanne*

Donald Wiebe, *Trinity College, Toronto*

Mouton de Gruyter
Berlin · New York

Baron Paul Tiry d'Holbach

Ecce homo!

An Eighteenth Century Life of Jesus

Critical Edition and Revision
of George Houston's Translation from the French

Andrew Hunwick (Editor)

Mouton de Gruyter
Berlin · New York 1995

Mouton de Gruyter (formerly Mouton, The Hague)
is a Division of Walter de Gruyter & Co., Berlin.

⊗ Printed on acid-free paper which falls within the guidelines
of the ANSI to ensure permanence and durability.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Holbach, Paul Henri Thiry, baron d', 1723 - 1789.
[Histoire critique de Jésus Christ. English]
Ecce homo!: an eighteenth-century life of Jesus / Baron d'Holbach; critical edition
and revision of George Houston's translation from the French by Andrew Hunwick.
p. cm. – (History of religions in translation; 1)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 3-11-014521-9 clothbound (alk. paper)
ISBN 3-11-014520-0 paperback (alk. paper)
1. Jesus Christ – Biography – Early works to 1800. 2. Jesus Christ – Rationalistic
interpretations – Early works to 1800. I. Hunwick, Andrew. II. Title. III. Series.
BT300.H7413 1995
232.9'01 – dc20
[B]

95-16826
CIP

Die Deutsche Bibliothek – Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Holbach, Paul Heinrich Dietrich Baron von:
Ecce homo! : An eighteenth century life of Jesus; critical edition and revision of
George Houston's translation from the French / Baron Paul Tiry d'Holbach.
Andrew Hunwick (ed.). – Berlin; New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1995
(History of religions in translation; 1)
ISBN 3-11-014520-0 pb.
ISBN 3-11-014521-9 cloth
Nc: GT

© Copyright 1995 by Walter de Gruyter & Co., D-10785 Berlin

All rights reserved, including those of translation into foreign languages. No part of this
book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechan-
ical, including photocopy, recording or any information storage and retrieval system,
without permission in writing from the publisher.

Disk conversion: Lewis & Leins GmbH, Berlin.

Printing: Ratzlow-Druck, Berlin.

Binding: Lüderitz & Bauer, Berlin.

Cover design: Sigurd Wendland, Berlin.

Printed in Germany.

ET DICIT EIS, ECCE HOMO

[And he says to them, Behold the man]
(John 19:5)

for Kerry
ὅτι αἶί με παρακέκληκας καί
τὴν ψυχὴν μου ἀνώπθωκας

Acknowledgments

I have pleasure in acknowledging my gratitude, appreciation, and indebtedness to the following, who have contributed to the completion of this edition:

Roland Desné, for graciously providing a transcript of the manuscript by 'Salvador'; Jeroom Vercruysse, for generous help and provision of rare documents; John Lough, for advice, and for the courtesy of making available his doctoral dissertation on D'Holbach; James Willis, for kindly translating post-medieval Latin texts, and checking the manuscript; Wallace Kirsop, for help and advice with physical bibliography; Danielle Morris, Christine van Aurich, and Genevieve Tilbrook for invaluable assistance in preparing the final text; Toni Munro and Aurora Morelli for painstaking help with variants; Luther Martin, for invaluable advice and unstinting encouragement; librarians and library staff, especially Giles Barber, Lawrence McIntosh, Maria Sulek, Jill Hughes, Wilma Minty, Marcia Harrison; also to En Kho, Anne Wishaw, Margaret Jones, Audrey Black, the late Mary Alexander, and to the staff of Reid Library, University of Western Australia; my departmental heads Denis Boak and the late Bruce Pratt for grants towards travel and research expenses; friends and colleagues (in alphabetical order): Norman Ashton, Sue Boorer, Marie-Hélène Cotoni, Paula Cristoffanini, Rev. Dr John Cullen, Canon John Fenton, Rabbi David Freilich, Hélène Jaccomard, John Jory, John Kinder, the late Pat McGushin, John McManners, Rev. Bill Morgan, Trevor Newland, Rev. Dr Eric Osborn, Neil O'Sullivan, Rev. Barry Ryall, Brian Willis, and Frank Yeomans; and the University of Western Australia, whose grant of a 75th Anniversary Research Award made it possible for me to complete my task.

The book is dedicated to my wife Kerry, whose patient forbearance and constant encouragement were an unfailing source of reassurance and inspiration.

Andrew Hunwick
December 1994

Abbreviations

Arsenal	Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Paris
A.-T.	Diderot, <i>Œuvres complètes</i> , ed. J. Assézat & M. Tournoux. 1875–1877, Paris: Garnier.
Bachauumont	<i>Mémoires secrets pour servir à l'histoire de la république des lettres en France depuis 1762 jusqu'à nos jours</i> . [Secret memoirs for the history of the republic of letters in France from 1762 to the present day] 1780–1789, London: Adamson.
BEH	Jeroom Vercruysse, <i>Bibliographie des écrits du Baron d'Holbach</i> . [Bibliography of D'Holbach's works] (Lettres Modernes) 1971, Paris: Minard.
BL	British Library, London
Bn	Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris
BnF	Bibliothèque Nationale, Manuscrits français
Br	Bibliothèque Royale, Brussels
BV	<i>Bibliothèque de Voltaire: catalogue des livres</i> [Catalogue of Voltaire's library] (1961)
CBH	Guillaume De Bure l'aîné, <i>Catalogue des livres de la bibliothèque de feu M. le baron d'Holbach</i> [Catalogue of late Baron d'Holbach's library] 1789, Paris: De Bure.
CLT	Grimm, Friedrich M.F. von. <i>Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique</i> [Literary, philosophical and critical correspondence] 1877–1882, Paris: Garnier.
E1, E2, E3	Editions of <i>Ecce homo!</i> , English translation of <i>Histoire critique de Jésus-Christ</i> (see Introduction, section 8)
F1, F2, F3	Editions of <i>Histoire critique de Jésus-Christ</i> (see Introduction, section 8)
GEK	Sauter, H. & Loos, E. (eds.), <i>Paul Thiry Baron D'Holbach: Die gesamte erhaltene Korrespondenz</i> [D'Holbach's extant correspondence] 1986, Stuttgart: Steiner.
PG	<i>Patrologia Græca</i> , ed. J.P. Migne. 1857–1866, Paris: Migne.
PL	<i>Patrologia Latina</i> , ed. J.P. Migne. 1844–1864, Paris: Migne.

RHLF	<i>Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France</i>
Roth-Varloot	Diderot, D. <i>Correspondance</i> , ed. G. Roth & J. Varloot. 1955–1970, Paris: Minuit.
Sacy	<i>La Sainte Bible</i> , translated by Louis-Isaac le Maistre de Sacy. 1696, Paris.
SVEC	<i>Studies on Voltaire and the eighteenth century</i>
VCo	Voltaire, <i>Correspondance and related documents</i> . 1968–1977, Oxford: Voltaire Foundation.
VCN	<i>Corpus des notes marginales de Voltaire</i> [Marginal notes in Voltaire's books]. 1979–, Berlin: Akademie Verlag.
VM	Voltaire, <i>Œuvres complètes</i> [Complete works], ed. L. Moland. 1877–1885, Paris: Garnier.
Wade	Ira O. Wade, <i>The clandestine organization and diffusion of philosophic ideas in France from 1700 to 1750</i> . 1938, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
Abbreviations	ix
Introduction	1
Preface	39
<i>Chapter I</i>	
Account of the Jewish people and their prophets. Discussion of the prophecies relating to Jesus	56
<i>Chapter II</i>	
Account of the birth of Jesus	70
<i>Chapter III</i>	
Adoration of the Magi and shepherds. Massacre of the Innocents, and other circumstances which followed the birth of Jesus Christ	81
<i>Chapter IV</i>	
Baptism of Jesus. In the desert. Commencement of his preaching and miracles. Wedding at Cana	96
<i>Chapter V</i>	
Journey of Jesus to Jerusalem. The sellers driven out of the Temple. Conference with Nicodemus	104
<i>Chapter VI</i>	
Jesus' adventure with the Samaritan woman. His journey and miracles in the land of the Gerasenes	110
<i>Chapter VII</i>	
Jesus cures two persons possessed by devils. Miracle of the swine. Wonders performed by Jesus until the end of the first year of his mission	121
<i>Chapter VIII</i>	
What Jesus did during his stay in Jerusalem, that is, at the second Passover of his mission	134

Chapter IX

Jesus works new miracles. Calling of the Twelve Apostles 142

Chapter X

Sermon on the Mount. Summary of Jesus' moral code. Observations on that code 147

Chapter XI

Actions and parables of Jesus. His relatives move against him. Journey of Jesus to Nazareth, and the success he had there 162

Chapter XII

Mission of the apostles. Instructions Jesus gave them. Miracles he worked until the end of the second year of his own mission 173

Chapter XIII

Jesus returns to Galilee about the time of the third Passover of his mission. What he did until the time he left 184

Chapter XIV

Jesus shows himself in Jerusalem. He is forced to leave it. Resurrection of Lazarus. Triumphant entry of Jesus. His retreat to the Garden of Olives. The Lord's Supper. He is arrested 197

Chapter XV

Trial and condemnation of Jesus. His punishment and death ... 215

Chapter XVI

Resurrection of Jesus. His conduct until his Ascension. Examination of the proofs of the Resurrection 229

Chapter XVII

General reflections on the life of Jesus. Preaching of the apostles. Conversion of St Paul. Establishment of Christianity. Persecution it suffers. Causes of its progress 243

Chapter XVIII

Account of Christianity from Constantine to the present day ... 263

Appendix A

Letter from Alessandro Verri to Cesare Beccaria (26 November 1766) 278

Appendix B (Preface n. 24)

Apocryphal gospels 280

Appendix C (Preface, n. 34)	
The Nicene Council of A.D. 325	286
Appendix D (chapter I n. 44)	
Old Testament prophecies	288
Appendix E (chapter I n. 44, referring to Appendix D n. 4)	
Lipmann-Mühlhausen, <i>Liber nizzachon vetus</i>	292
Appendix F (chapter I n. 44, referring to Appendix D n. 5)	
<i>Munimen fidei</i> , second part	295
Appendix G (chapter II n. 11)	
The virgin birth	296
Appendix H (chapter XV n. 16)	
The Jewish trial of Jesus	299
Appendix J (chapter XV n. 50)	
The <i>Testimonium Flavianum</i>	309
Appendix K (chapter XVII n. 32)	
Plotinus, Porphyry and Iamblichus	312
Appendix L (see chapter XVII n. 37)	
Christian martyrdom	314
References	317
Index to scripture passages	331

Introduction

1. D'Holbach's place in the history of European free thought: influences and sources

In seventeenth-century France, commentaries on the bible had tended to consist of allegorical explanations inspired by Church Fathers, moral discourse, or apologia composed along strictly orthodox lines,¹ rather than objective scholarly examination of the scriptures.

However, the *Tractatus theologico politicus* (1670) of the Dutch philosopher Spinoza marked the beginning, in Europe, of a new approach to biblical scholarship, according to historical and linguistic criteria. It called traditional interpretations of the Bible into question, asserting notably that they must be understood in the context of their time.

The French Oratorian Richard Simon (1638–1712) is widely considered as the founder of biblical criticism.² While not venturing to question the sacred character of holy writ, he carried out textual analysis of the Bible, and translated the New Testament himself, along historical and rational lines.³ Intentionally or no, such an approach to scripture tended to diminish its spiritual and miraculous content,⁴ consequently arousing numerous detractors, including Bossuet.

The protestant Jean Le Clerc (1657–1756), who also published his own translation of the New Testament, raised similar questions therein about traditional renderings, stressing the biblical use of figurative language, and the predominance of reason over authority and tradition.

1 M.-H. Cotoni, *L'Exégèse du Nouveau Testament dans la philosophie française du XVIII^e siècle* [New Testament exegesis in eighteenth-century French philosophical literature] (SVEC 220), pp. 11-12.

2 Cotoni, pp. 16-30.

3 D'Holbach's library (on which, see Bruce Eames, 'Baron d'Holbach's library', *Australian journal of French studies* 1991, 28: 249-253) contained a copy of R. Simon's *Histoire critique du vieux testament* (1678) – CBH 37. Could this have inspired the French title of the present work?

4 Because of this, Cotoni (p. 30) sees in R. Simon 'an unwilling support for later *philosophes*'.

Under the appearance of defending orthodoxy, and bringing his own considerable scholarly resources to the task, Pierre Bayle (1647–1706), an opponent of Le Clerc, carried out rational and sceptical analyses of church tradition and dogma, appealing for tolerance and freedom of thought.⁵

Both Le Clerc and Bayle also edited ‘popular’ periodicals devoted to the discussion of theological controversies, and providing reviews of the considerable outpouring of writings about the Bible published between 1680 and 1710, including the censored and prohibited works.⁶

Christian apologists sought, by the accumulation of doctrinal ‘evidence’, to refute the arguments of writers who broke with tradition: this meant that, in simple terms, a dividing line was established between those who saw in the New Testament a supernatural and unchanging expression, and those who used textual study as a means to unlocking the sense of the scriptures in the light of reason. Later writers, taking up the ‘demonstration’ method used by the apologists, would continue to ask the same questions that had already been raised, while setting aside any solutions that had been previously put forward.

The extensive works of the Benedictine Dom Augustin Calmet (1672–1757), who wrote early in the eighteenth century, include a detailed commentary on the Old and New Testaments, and a *Dictionnaire historique, critique, chronologique, géographique et littéral de la Bible* (1720–1721), a copy of which was in D’Holbach’s library.⁷ Calmet’s scholarly and would-be objective approach led him to examine the interpretations of points of scripture such as Jesus’ two genealogies, his sweat of blood, or the death of Judas; and to discuss such matters as the apocryphal gospels, or the various towns called Cana. In the best academic tradition, however, Calmet does not venture to propose conclusive solutions to difficulties if these are not to be found; thus his monumental books provided an abundant source of material for those eager to subject the scriptures to critical examination.⁸

⁵ D’Holbach had Bayle’s complete works in his library (CBH 1709).

⁶ See CBH 2685–2687, 2683 (Le Clerc, *Bibliothèque universelle; Bibliothèque choisie; Bibliothèque ancienne et moderne*; Bayle, *Nouvelles de la république des lettres* [Universal library; Select library; Ancient and modern library; News from the republic of letters]).

⁷ CBH 53.

⁸ Cotoni, pp. 61–63.

The discoveries of the historians, chronologists, astronomers and geologists, coupled with biblical criticism of the type undertaken by Spinoza or Richard Simon, had made the traditional 'religious' view of man and his universe increasingly untenable...⁹

In France, censorship of the press and printed books was rigorously strict¹⁰ in the first half of the eighteenth century. Ecclesiastical authorities were continually on the watch for writings likely to turn the faithful away from God and the king,¹¹ and so very few books dealing with 'les grands sujets' were published between Bayle's *Dictionnaire* of 1697 and Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois* [Spirit of the laws] of 1748. Yet there was in France, at this time, particularly in regard to religion, a sustained development of free thought.¹² Penalties for merely writing about 'les grands sujets' were much less severe than those imposed for publishing such ideas, so free thought found expression in the manuscript essay. Writers included a disclaimer, denying any intention of undermining accepted views and beliefs and, by way of further precaution, claimed that the ideas they presented had been translated from some ancient writer, or unearthed among the papers of someone long dead.¹³

We know from a police document of August 1729¹⁴ that religious freethinkers tended to congregate in caf  s, where the *colporteurs*¹⁵ circulated and sold¹⁶ 'clandestine' manuscripts¹⁷ of irreligious tendency.¹⁸ The

-
- 9 J.H. Brumfitt, *The French Enlightenment* (1972, London: Macmillan), p. 34.
 - 10 Diderot records the severe punishment of *colporteurs* (see below, n. 15) who distributed copies of D'Holbach's anonymously published *Christianity unveiled* (Roth-Varloot 503 [8 October 1768]).
 - 11 D'Holbach, in a letter to Paolo Frisi (GEK, letter 30 p. 52) mentions writings which, owing to watchful magistrates, were thin on the ground: they were, it seems, cheaper and much easier to find in London.
 - 12 For a chronological list, from 1743 to 1751, of free-thinking works, printed under false names of publishers, and either produced secretly in France or smuggled in from Holland, see J. Varloot, introduction to Diderot, *Textes choisis* (1952 [Classiques du peuple] Paris: Editions sociales), p. 20 n. 1.
 - 13 I. O. Wade, *The clandestine organization and diffusion of philosophic ideas in France from 1700 to 1750* (1938, Princeton: Princeton U.P.), p. 3.
 - 14 F.N.N. Ravaisson-Mollier, *Archives de la Bastille* (1866-1891, Paris: Durand et Pedone-Lauriel), 14:221, cit. Wade, p. 5.
 - 15 On the 'colporteurs', see J.-P. Belin, *Le Commerce des livres prohib  s    Paris de 1750    1789* (1913, Paris: Belin), pp. 78-101; also Wade p. 9, and VCo 11577.
 - 16 The manuscripts, it seems, were in great demand (Wade, p. 274). Some have survived in bound collections (Wade, pp. 23-25, 28). It seems that they were

well-known study of French clandestine literature by Ira Wade analyses 102 different manuscript treatises of this kind¹⁹ that circulated during the first half of the century:²⁰

The treatises criticize constantly the facts of the Bible. They discuss at great length the arguments proposed by the orthodox to defend the divinity of Christianity: prophecies, miracles, the persecution of the Church martyrs, the morality of the Christian Religion and the historical development of the Church. They assail violently the dogma of the Church, particularly Transubstantiation, the doctrines of original sin, the Trinity, and the immortality of the soul. They stress the defects of the Christian institution – its intolerance, the crimes of its priesthood, and the uselessness of monks. From every angle they attack the Church in its different manifestations.²¹

In general, they proclaim the preeminence of reason over revealed religion.²² As we have seen, all these unorthodox and heretical ideas, generally speaking, did not represent any particularly innovative thought. What was new, however, as Gustave Lanson was apparently the first to point out, was the vigour and sheer vehemence with which the ideas were now expressed.²³ The authors sought not to reform the Church,

even procured and, presumably, read by members of the clergy and the Parlement (pp. 5-6), the latter receiving their copies as a perquisite of office (CLT 9:112). Wade (pp. 4, 9-10) notes that some enterprising persons undertook to supply a regular list of paying customers with manuscript copies of treatises. They were the work of trained copyists, and were consequently expensive: those who could afford it, however, had personal copies made by their secretaries.

17 Ann Thomson ('Qu'est-ce qu'un manuscrit clandestin?') [What is a clandestine manuscript?], in: *Le Matérialisme du xviii^e siècle et la littérature clandestine*, ed. O. Bloch [1982, Paris: Vrin], pp. 13-16) prefers the designation 'clandestine texts'.

18 See Wade, p. 5; Cotoni, p. 59.

19 An updated list by Miguel Benitez (*Rivista di storia della filosofia* 1988, 3:501-531) comprises 148 titles, together with locations. See also R. Desné, 'Manuscrits philosophiques clandestins dans les bibliothèques de la R.D.A.', in: *Dix-huitième siècle* 1989, 21: 451-455.

20 B.E. Schwarzbach (SVEC 1986, 245: p. 346) suggests that the circulation of this material was less widespread than might be imagined: "The clandestine literature was certainly not, at its inception, a popular literature on the working-class level – most of the tracts exist in so few copies that they cannot be presumed to have had significant diffusion."

21 Wade, p. 271. On the repetition of ideas, see Cotoni, p. 170.

22 Wade, p. 3.

23 RHLF 1912, 19: 309. Cf. also Wade pp. 272-273.

but to bring about a better, freer way of life, where morality would be based on the dictates of nature and reason, and the needs of humankind as social beings.²⁴

Some of the treatises were eventually published, though not, for the most part, until after 1750,²⁵ notably through the efforts of D'Holbach himself who, in collaboration with Jacques-André Naigeon,²⁶ was responsible for editing and publishing a number of them.²⁷

But even before being printed, the treatises were undeniably well known to authors such as D'Holbach,²⁸ Voltaire, Rousseau, and Diderot, who chose to write about 'les grands sujets' between 1750 and 1789.²⁹

24 "... in arguing that Moses could not under any circumstances have been the author of the Pentateuch ... they hoped to prove that the Bible was not divinely inspired, that Christianity was not a divine religion and therefore that the whole scheme of life, political, social and moral which existed because Christianity was assumed to be divine, would have to be changed." (Wade, pp. 271-272)

25 Wade (p. 1 n. 1) records how Voltaire's works circulated in handwritten copies before being printed.

26 Naigeon (1738-1810) was D'Holbach's secretary, librarian, and editor (not to say 'co-religionist', partner-in-crime, and general dogsbody!).

27 See below, n. 53. J. Varloot (1952, vol. 1 p. 15) stresses that these 'subterranean' documents were anonymous, and that the French police, between 1740 and 1750, fought a losing battle trying to track them down.

28 Cf. Wade, p. 274. Cotoni observes (p. 277) that there are clear traces of the manuscripts in D'Holbach's published writings. Indeed the *Ecce homo!* is in fact based to a considerable extent on one such clandestine text (see below, section 4). No copies of 'clandestine' texts were to be found in D'Holbach's library which, however, was doubtless 'purged' after his death, by friendly hands, of any controversial items.

29 Wade (pp. 274-275) notes however that no complete study has been made of the extent to which these writers were familiar with the treatises, and that their use of ideas similar to those put forward in the treatises does not necessarily prove that they 'borrowed' the ideas, or that the writers were familiar with each and every manuscript treatise containing such ideas. Cotoni (1977, RHLF 77, p. 29) ascribes the difficulty of identifying specific sources to the popularization of these new ideas.

2. Biographic note

Paul Thiry (or rather Tiry) was born at Edesheim (Palatinate) in December 1723, and baptized a Catholic.³⁰ His mother died when he was seven, and he was adopted by his uncle Franz Adam Holbach, who made his fortune in France and who, on becoming ennobled in 1720, wrote his name with the particle *d'*. Paul van Holbach studied Law at the University of Leyden, where he befriended many English students, in particular John Wilkes, who was regularly to supply him with English books – D'Holbach's only visit to England was in 1765, and his knowledge of English thought and institutions was made through books, rather than personal contact. D'Holbach had in his library almost all the major writings of the English deists, and published translations, in some cases rather freely adapted,³¹ of works by Hobbes, Matthew Tindal, John Toland, Peter Annet, Anthony Collins, and Thomas Woolston. However, as John Lough has shown in the course of a thorough discussion of deist writers in England, although D'Holbach refers to these writers in his own works,³² it seems his own thought was not specifically influenced by theirs:³³ in any event, as will be discussed below, he was concerned

30 "... as late as 1756 the curé of Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois in Paris enthusiastically vouched for D'Holbach as 'making profession of the Catholic, apostolic and Roman faith, the duties of which he fulfils with edification'." (*Diderot et l'Encyclopédie: exposition commémorative* pp. 49-50, cit. A. Wilson, *Diderot* [1972, New York: O.U.P.], p. 176 n. 11). D'Holbach describes himself in the same terms (see GEK letter 40 (?1769), p. 59; see also K. Muller, 'D'Holbach, determined fatalist', *SVEC* 284, 1991: 291-308: 'D'Holbach never repudiated religion in public' (p. 307).

31 Cf. Cotoni, p. 299.

32 The *Ecce homo!* contains references to Collins' *Literal scheme of prophecy* ... , Woolston's *Discourses on the miracles* ... , and Annet's *History and character of St Paul examined* (chs. I, VII, XVII). Toland's *Nazarenus* is mentioned in chapter III n. 18 (the French translation of this book [1777 (London)], however, is not the work of D'Holbach [see BEH p. 40]).

33 *Some aspects of the life and thought of Baron d'Holbach* (1938, unpublished doctoral thesis), pp. 93-135 (I wish to record here my especial gratitude to Professor Lough for graciously making his work available to me in photocopy). The author points out, for instance, that D'Holbach, in his translation, 'makes Collins use much more violent expressions than are to be found in the original' (p. 113 – cf. n. 32); '... although Annet provided D'Holbach with considerable material for attacks on David and Paul, he could have no influence on him in the realm of ideas, for the good reason that he had none

to present propaganda, openly and virulently anticlerical, rather than a reasoned discussion of theological notions.³⁴

D'Holbach also travelled and studied in Germany; he was a foreign associate of the Berlin Royal Science Academy,³⁵ and was subsequently also elected to the Academies of Mannheim and St Petersburg. He became a naturalized Frenchman in September 1749, and in 1750 he married Basile-Geneviève-Suzanne d'Aine, who died tragically four years later at the age of 24; her parents were D'Holbach's cousin Suzanne, and Nicolas d'Aine, secretarial adviser to the king: in 1754, when his father-in-law died, D'Holbach bought the right of succession to this office. The previous year he had succeeded to his uncle's title, and half his estate. In 1756 he married Charlotte-Suzanne, his first wife's sister.

It seems not unlikely that D'Holbach became an atheist because of his first wife's untimely death: if this were not the sole cause, probably it was at least the deciding factor among several.³⁶ Because of the influence of his English friends, and because of his studies in mineralogy and geology,³⁷ he was no doubt a materialist, and deist by the time he settled in Paris, in 1749. According to Dominique Joseph Garat, writing in the early nineteenth century, D'Holbach was a deist until 1750, when he came under the influence of Diderot,³⁸ who purportedly converted

to offer, which were not commonplaces to D'Holbach' (p. 132); '... the relations between D'Holbach and Toland ... were of no great importance' (p. 110).

34 It may also be stated, with certainty, that D'Holbach was not influenced by the *Apologia* of Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768): fragments of this work, consisting of rational examination of Christian revelation and the life of Jesus, were not published until 1774-1778, post-dating the publication of D'Holbach's anti-religious books. It is perhaps curious that D'Holbach is not mentioned in W.G. Kümmel's exhaustive study *The New Testament: the history of the investigation of its problems* (tr. H.C. Kee, 1972, London: SCM), which does, however, discuss John Toland's *Nazarenus* (1718), to which D'Holbach refers in the present work (ch. III n. 14; and see above, n. 32), and Matthew Tindal's *Christianity as old as the creation* (1730), a summary of which was contributed by D'Holbach to the *Recueil philosophique* (1770).

35 Cf. GEK, letter 5 p. 14.

36 D'Holbach's uncle, for instance, had been involved in certain disputes with the clergy.

37 Cf. P. Charbonnel, *D'Holbach, Premières Œuvres* ['Early works', *Classiques du peuple*] (1971, Paris: Ed. Sociales), p. 67 n. 3.

38 Diderot wrote that as well as contributing articles to the *Encyclopédie* (see

him to atheism.³⁹ But according to a letter written by Alessandro Verri in 1766, D'Holbach became a committed atheist after seeing his first wife dying, aged only 24, and terrorised by fears of hell-fire and eternal punishment.⁴⁰ The effect may be imagined on an only child who, deprived of affection in earlier years, had seemingly found happiness with a kindred soul only to have it snatched away almost at once.⁴¹ One imagines also his distress, desperation, and sheer anger at being powerless, despite his own position, wealth, and learning, to bring his wife any reassurance or comfort in her last hours, let alone set her free from what he undoubtedly saw as superstitious misgivings arising from unfounded and pernicious persuasions inculcated in her since childhood by priests:⁴² such an incident would also explain the particularly bitter antipathy D'Holbach felt towards the clergy, and which pervades virtually all his books.

D'Holbach had a reputation for generosity and hospitality,⁴³ perhaps the best-known testimony being that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau:

This Baron... had a considerable fortune which he put to noble use, entertaining in his home men of letters and of worth, and by his knowledge and enlightenment holding his own in their midst.⁴⁴

From 1756, on Sundays and Thursdays, at his house in the Rue Royale, he gave dinner-parties lasting five or six hours, for 'men of letters, gentlemen and foreigners'.⁴⁵ Here could be heard the 'freest of conversations', especially on religion and government.⁴⁶ Diderot relates that

below, n. 47), D'Holbach provided constant financial and moral support for the project (Roth-Varloot 321 [4:300-301, 304], 522 [9:29]).

39 D.J. Garat, *Mémoires historiques sur la vie de M. Suard* (1820, Paris: A. Belin), vol. 1 pp. 208-209).

40 John Lough published the letter in 1957 (RHLF 57: 541-542); an English translation may be found in Appendix A of the present volume.

41 D'Holbach's mother died when he was 20; his treatment at the hands of his uncle Franz Adam appears to have been less than warm-hearted (GEK letter 2 p. 12).

42 Compare the similar circumstances accompanying the death of Julie in J.-J. Rousseau's *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse*, bk. vi letter 11.

43 Diderot recounts (Roth-Varloot 638) that D'Holbach was subject to bouts of ill-humour, for which however he invariably made amends (Roth-Varloot 147, 153 [2:269, 291]).

44 J.-J. Rousseau, *Confessions* bk. viii.

45 Abbé André Morellet, *Mémoires sur le XVIII^e siècle et sur la Révolution* [Memoirs of the XVIIIth century and the Revolution], ed. J.-P. Guicciardi (1988, Paris: Mercure de France), p. 130. Guests, at various times, included

Hume, on the occasion of his first visit to D'Holbach's 'salon', mentioned to his host that he had never met a non-believer: D'Holbach indicated that of the eighteen persons present, fifteen were atheists.

Between 1751 and 1765, D'Holbach anonymously contributed many articles to Diderot's *Encyclopédie*,⁴⁷ mainly on geology, metallurgy, chemistry, mineralogy, and natural history, and published translations of German and other scientific works.⁴⁸ His wealthy situation also enabled him to publish – anonymously, under false names, or the names of persons already dead⁴⁹ – over a dozen original anti-religious, materialist, or political books⁵⁰ between 1756 and 1776,⁵¹ and a dozen more deis-

Diderot, Rousseau, Helvétius, Buffon, Condillac, Turgot, Boulanger, Duclos, Marmontel, Saint-Lambert, Chastellux, Damilaville, Naigeon, Hume, Wilkes, Walpole, Lord Shelburne, Garrick, Sterne, Gibbon, Adam Smith, Benjamin Franklin, etc. (Morellet, pp. 132-133). On Morellet and Naigeon, see the article by J.-Cl. David in SVEC 1982, 215:253-272.

46 Morellet, p. 130. D'Holbach's house was known as 'the great synagogue' (CLT 8:414, 15:418 n. 1).

47 John Lough has identified over 400 articles by D'Holbach in the *Encyclopédie*: see in particular: 'Prêtres', 'Persécuteur', 'Fanatisme', 'Théocratie', 'Représentans'. (J. Lough, 'D'Holbach's contribution', *Essays in the 'Encyclopédie' of Diderot and d'Alembert* [1968, London: OUP], pp. 111-229.) Diderot's gratitude is expressed on the first page of the 'editors' notice' prefacing the second volume. For a discussion of antireligious tendencies in D'Holbach's *Encyclopédie* articles, see Trevor Newland, 'D'Holbach, religion, and the *Encyclopédie*', *Modern language review* 1974, 69:523-533.

48 He was (mistakenly) credited with introducing special uses of certain words: *anthropomorphisme*, *coordination*, (*société*) *opulente*.

49 D'Holbach ascribed his *Théologie portative* to 'Abbé Bernier', *La contagion sacrée* to John Trenchard, *Système de la nature* to Jean-Baptiste de Mirabaud, *Le bon sens* to Jean Meslier, *Essai sur les préjugés* to César Chesneau Dumarsais, and *Le Christianisme dévoilé* to 'the late Mr [Nicolas-Antoine] Boulanger' [in English, titles are: Pocket theology, Holy contagion, System of nature, Common sense, Essay on prejudice, Christianity unveiled]. Cf. CLT 8:158: "The late Mr Fréret and the late Mr Boulanger are two worthy souls who suffer to be found amongst their papers anything that others would be fearful of finding amongst their own".

50 See J. Vercruysse, *Bibliographie des écrits du Baron d'Holbach* [Bibliography of D'Holbach's works] ('Lettres modernes', 1971, Paris: Minard); the same author is editing a bibliography of works about D'Holbach: see also his recent 'present state' of D'Holbach scholarship ('Paul Thiry Baron von Holbach 1723-1789 : Philosoph der franzoesischen Aufklaerung' [1991, Speyer: Historischen Vereins]).

51 *Eléments de la morale universelle* [For a universal morality], actually pub-

tic or anticlerical texts translated from English between 1759 and 1772. In collaboration with Naigeon, he was also responsible for editing and publishing several 'clandestine' texts, similarly freethinking in tendency, that previously had circulated only in manuscript.⁵² He died in January 1789, having suffered from recurrent illness for some eighteen years.

3. D'Holbach and religion

All religion, D'Holbach held, is an illusion, based on fear and ignorance. Primitive people ascribed natural calamities to the whim and anger of some force in the sky, endowed with human feelings of love, hatred, greed, or vindictiveness. In superstitious and blind terror, they sought to appease the unknown power,⁵³ eventually perceived as an all-powerful monarch of earth and skies, by offering sacrifices. Rational thought was set aside; as mediators between themselves and the 'divinity', people accepted priests,⁵⁴ who thereupon enlisted the aid of secular authorities

-
- lished under D'Holbach's name, did not appear until after his death, in 1790.
- 52 Boulanger's *Despotisme oriental* and *L'Antiquité dévoilée*; Fréret's *Lettre de Thrasybule à Leucippe*; *Examen critique des apologistes de la religion chrétienne*, by Jean Lévesque de Burigny; *Le Militaire philosophe, ou difficultés sur la religion proposées au R.P. Malebranche* (1768 [1767], London: chapter XVIII in that particular edition consists of material added by D'Holbach; it is now generally accepted that the work is by Robert Challe (see the monumental edition by F. Deloffre and M. Menemenioglu, 1983, Oxford: Voltaire Foundation); *De la tolérance dans la religion* by J. Crellius; Mirabaud's *Opinions des anciens sur les Juifs*; and *Le Philosophe* by Dumarçais, published in *Recueil philosophique* (although some of the manuscripts were originally unsigned, their authors have been subsequently identified). John Lough suggests (unpubl. diss., p. 346) that *Recherches sur les miracles*, also traditionally ascribed to Fréret, and Orobio's *Israël vengé* should be included as well.
- 53 Cf. *Contagion sacrée* [Holy contagion] (1768, [London]), p. 8: 'there is no nation on earth that has not suffered set-backs, disasters, and misfortune, all of which, for lack of proper knowledge of their natural causes, were taken as signs of anger from heaven.'
- 54 Cf. Preface to *Ecce homo!*: 'In accordance with his fears and prepossessions, a Christian believes himself lost, should he find in the sacred books reason to doubt the veracity of his priests.' Cf. also Cotoni, p. 285: 'Through a series of concentric circles, Christian beliefs are reduced to just one real kernel: the priest.'

to reduce the 'faithful' to a state of servitude.⁵⁵ For D'Holbach, priests symbolized deception and oppression, and were the source of social, moral, and even economic ills: he declared in 1773 that the State should confiscate the church's accumulated wealth,⁵⁶ disproportionately great in relation to the clergy's contribution to the common good.⁵⁷

D'Holbach knew Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, and was familiar with the works of the Church Fathers. Like Voltaire, though neither a theologian nor an exegete, he read the scriptures intelligently, and was conversant with learned works on the subject.⁵⁸ Yet despite his own considerable learning, he was concerned not with metaphysics or dogma, but with practical and moral ethics. His purpose was utilitarian: the enlightenment of his fellow creatures. This is made clear in the sixth chapter of *Essai sur les préjugés* [Essay on prejudice], the heading of which states: 'Fellow citizens owe each other nothing less than the truth'.⁵⁹ D'Holbach held that religion and religious morality were harmful to humanity. Christianity, teaching 'blessed are they who are poor, and who weep',⁶⁰ was demonstrably opposed to welfare and happiness.⁶¹

It is human nature, D'Holbach held, to seek happiness, sympathy, and kindness, and people must be freed from a submissive⁶² and miserable existence consisting of painful choices, the wretched effects of exagger-

55 '... Constantine ... gave prevalence to the opinion of those Fathers of the Council [of Nicaea] who knew how to win him, for a time, over to their side'; '... the orthodox in the church were those who had the power to exile, imprison, and destroy their adversaries'. (*Ecce homo!*: Préface and ch. xviii).

56 *La Politique naturelle, ou discours sur les vrais principes du gouvernement* [Natural politics, or discourse on the true principles of government] (1773, [London]), vol. 1 p. 228. Cf. also D'Holbach's letter of 25 August 1770 to Abbé Galiani (GEK letter 45 p. 67): 'a book ... says to sell everything the Church has, so as to eliminate the national debt ...'

57 Paulette Charbonnel (1971, p. 56) ascribes D'Holbach's entire output of writings attacking Christianity to the antipathy he felt for the clergy's supposed 'parasitism'. Clearly D'Holbach's hostility towards the clergy was a major motivating factor in his campaign against religion: there is, however, no specific evidence to show that the clergy's privileged financial situation was the sole and only reason for this enmity.

58 See above, nn. 3, 7.

59 *Essai sur les préjugés* [Essay on prejudice] (1770, [London]), pp. 149-150.

60 Luke 6:20, 21.

61 *Le Bon Sens* [Common sense] ch. 161.

62 Cf. Mark 16:16, Matthew 21:21.

ated and unnatural austerities: the alleged virtue of Christian humility served merely to degrade humanity, stifling any desire to be of service to fellow-creatures.⁶³ Knowledge must be based on scientific proof and reason. Disparagement of reason was surely an affront to God,⁶⁴ while morality must have its foundations in nature:

If we are asked what can be put in the place⁶⁵ of a religion which at all times has produced effects pernicious to the happiness of the human race, we will say... 'Why trouble yourselves searching for a law from above, when you have the law that is common to all the world, and engraved on the tablets of *nature*?'⁶⁶

In place of religious morality, which he rejected as socially harmful, D'Holbach appealed for the establishment of a 'natural' system of ethics, based on the needs of individuals as social beings: nature urges humanity to seek out its own happiness.⁶⁷ Such morality, moreover, says D'Holbach, would not be displeasing to God.⁶⁸ Christian doctrine is thus presented as contrary to the welfare of its adherents.

⁶³ *Le Christianisme dévoilé* [Christianity unveiled] ([1755] 1756, [London]), pp. xix, 186.

⁶⁴ *Ecce homo!* ch. xvi. Cf. *System of nature* (2nd ed. [London], 1770 [BEH (1770) A7 – Bn Rés.D2 5167]), vol. II p. 272: 'Reason tells human beings to use their own powers of reason, and be guided by them; religion teaches that their reason is corrupt'. The notion is a common one in D'Holbach's writings; similar examples may be found in *La Contagion sacrée* (1768, [London]), p. 88; *L'Esprit du judaïsme* (1770, [London]), p. 199.

⁶⁵ Cf. *System of nature* vol. I p. 363: 'Let no one accuse me of destroying, and not building; of combating errors, and not putting truths in their place; of undermining the foundations of religion, and those of sane morality at the same time'.

⁶⁶ *Ecce homo!* ch. xviii, last paragraph.

⁶⁷ *System of nature* vol. II p. 271. See also the study by T. Newland, 'Holbach and religion versus morality', SVEC 1975, 111: 203-218.

⁶⁸ *Tableau des saints* [Tableau of the saints] ([London] 1770), foreword p. xxxvii. Cf. T. Newland, p. 218: '[D'Holbach's] anti-religious views provide a constant counterpoint to his moral philosophy'.

D'Holbach's attacks on religion are based on virtually no original thought;⁶⁹ the idea that he presents, for instance, of a new morality was already to be found in clandestine texts, some of which he himself had a hand in publishing.⁷⁰ It is not possible, however, to establish specific sources for all ideas contained in the *Histoire critique de Jésus Christ*⁷¹ [Critical History of Jesus Christ], re-titled *Ecce homo!*⁷² in the English translation.

4. Ecce homo! (The critical history of Jesus Christ)

There seems no doubt that the Baron d'Holbach was responsible for the *Histoire critique de Jésus Christ*, the first edition of which was circulating by September 1770,⁷³ though it was not placed on the Index until February 1778.⁷⁴ It contains references to ten previously published works which are either ascribed to D'Holbach, or which he probably

69 Cf. J.H. Brumfitt, *French Enlightenment*, p. 7: '... men like D'Holbach ... do not appear to me to be profoundly original thinkers.'

70 The *Letter from Thrasybulus to Leucippus* (Fréret is the accepted author), published by D'Holbach and Naigeon in 1765, stresses the importance of social usefulness in regard to any religion, as well as that of rational analysis and authentic knowledge; an analysis of the apocryphal gospels in *Examen critique des apologistes de la religion chrétienne* [Critical study of Christian Apologists] (1766) apparently provided the basis for a brief discussion of such documents in the Preface to *Ecce homo!*, which openly ascribes this work to Fréret also; and a materialist standpoint is to be found in *Le Militaire philosophe* [The philosopher-soldier], published in 1767.

71 See above, n. 29.

72 'Ecce homo!' [Behold the man!] were Pilate's words to the mob in John 19:5.

73 S.l., s.n., s.d. [Amsterdam: Rey, 1770]: see BEH [1770] A4. The *Mémoires secrets* for 1st October 1770 state that the author of the *History and character of St Paul examined* (1770) had just brought out *Histoire critique de Jésus Christ* (the former is mentioned in chapter xvii n. 20: pages 1-154 contain D'Holbach's translation (see above, n. 32) of the pamphlet by Peter Annet [J. Lough, 'Essai de bibliographie critique des publications du baron d'Holbach', RHLF 1939, 46: 222.]). Rudolf Besthorn also argues, on stylistic grounds, in favour of attributing the book to D'Holbach ('Die *Histoire critique de Jésus Christ*. Ein Werk Holbachs', *Beiträge zur romanischen Philologie* 1968, 5:5-27, cit. BEH [1770] A4 n. 2).

74 See below, n. 123.

translated;⁷⁵ also there are references to books in D'Holbach's personal library.⁷⁶

It appears also that the author, be it D'Holbach or another, was guilty of plagiarism.⁷⁷ The *Préface*, apart from some sixteen sentences, and the last three chapters (xvi, xvii, xviii) are by D'Holbach. The rest, however, roughly three-quarters of the printed book, is largely based on another work, one known manuscript copy of which survives, entitled *Histoire*

⁷⁵ All page references are to the first French edition (1770, Amsterdam: Rey). Original works: p. 6, *L'Esprit du Judaïsme* (1769); p. 174, *Théologie portative* (1767); p. 347, *Examen...de saint Paul* (1770); p. 369, *Christianisme dévoilé* (1766), *Contagion sacrée* (1768). Translations: p. 21, A. Collins, *Examen des prophéties* ...; p. 22, *Israël vengé* (1770), 'of which there are surviving manuscripts'; p. 171, *L'Enfer détruit* (1769): 'There is however no direct proof that D'Holbach had any hand in the translation ...' (J. Lough, 'Essai ...', p. 231)

⁷⁶ E.g. works by Philip van Limborch (first French edition p. 22 – CBH 175), Pijart (p. 262 – CBH 109), Souverain's *Platonism unveiled* (pp. 353, 357 – CBH 243), etc.

⁷⁷ It might appear that D'Holbach thus took a short cut (also cf. above, n. 73, on P. Annet) because his efforts at the time had been mainly devoted to his most important book, on which he had been working for at least four years – the voluminous (800 pages) *System of nature* (BEH [1770] A6 n. 3.) John Lough has shown, however (unpubl. diss., pp. 73-81), that probably D'Holbach's works were not written in the order in which they were published, and indeed that many of them were written several years before they appeared. On this point, the 'notes' and 'editor's additions' in *Ecce homo!*, for instance, which were evidently supplied by Naigeon, refer to books published after 1760. The last of these notes, near the end of chapter xviii, states that 'at the time of writing' the author had not 'foreseen' the Jesuits' expulsion from France: since this occurred in 1767, the *Ecce homo!* must have been in preparation at least four years before its publication in 1770 (cf. Anna Minerbi Belgrado, *Paura e ignoranza: studio sulla teoria della religione in D'Holbach* ['Fear and ignorance: a study of religious theory in D'Holbach', 1983, Florence: Olschki], p. 13). On the other hand D'Holbach undoubtedly sought to protect himself by giving the impression that his works belonged to the first half of the century: for instance, the final note of chapter vii (first French edition, p. 139) states that Dom La Taste's *Lettres théologiques aux...défenseurs des convulsions* ... [Theological letters to ... convulsionist supporters], published in 1740, had been 'recently written'; in chapter xvii (pp. 337, 340), it is also stated that the seemingly miraculous phenomena were 'very recent', and that he himself witnessed the convulsions of the Abbé Béchérand, which however took place in July 1731, when D'Holbach was only seven years old (J. Lough, unpubl. diss., p. 75).

critique de Jésus fils de Marie,⁷⁸ tirée d'ouvrages authentiques par Salvador, juif⁷⁹ et traduite par un Français réfugié.

This document, evidently the first 'life of Christ', is a sort of 'Harmonia evangelica', presenting the 'generally agreed order of events' in Jesus' life⁸⁰ from the rationalist, free-thinking standpoint that characterizes the 'clandestine manuscripts'.⁸¹ Christian doctrine is examined, questioned, ridiculed on moral,⁸² semantic, historical, and comparative religious grounds; the very notion of miracles, fulfilled prophecies, and revealed religion are rejected; explanations of the nature of christianity and its success are sought in the New Testament's presentation of Jesus and his followers. In an attempt to explain away everything, the author depicts Jesus as an unrealistic visionary, asserting that he had a normal birth, that his acts of healing proved nothing, and that the miracles were pre-arranged. In order to demystify the scriptures where no rational explanation is available, the writer denies that this or that really happened, pointing to contradictions in the gospels, a lack of corroborating evidence, the credulity of the crowds, or the stupidity of the disciples.

78 [Critical History of Jesus, son of Mary, drawn from authentic documents, by Salvador, a Jew, and translated by a French refugee] Ms. Hamilton 590a, Deutsche Staatsbibliothek (East Berlin). My thanks to the Department of Manuscripts and Literary Archives for kindly lending me their microfilm (B423) of the entire manuscript. R. Desné ('Sur un manuscrit utilisé par d'Holbach ...' [O. Bloch (ed.), *Le Matérialisme du XVIII^e siècle et la littérature clandestine* (1982, Paris: Vrin) places the composition of the manuscript around 1759–60 (Desné, p. 175; see also nn. 1–2). I should like to express my sincere gratitude to Roland Desné for his very great kindness and generosity in providing me with a copy of his own transcript of this manuscript, as well as the pre-publication typescript of the above-mentioned article. His critical edition of the manuscript is to appear in the series 'Libre Pensée et littérature clandestine', published by Editions Universitas (Paris).

79 'This attribution is evidently a fabrication ... If the author were Jewish, would he write, with no other comment: I am no friend of Jews; but a historian must tell things as they are (ms., p. 308)?' (R. Desné, p. 175). Cf. also his 'anti-semitic' statements (e.g. ch. ix n. 3); however, 'Salvador' evidently knew Hebrew (cf. for example chapter III n. 7), having presumably had the advantage of above-average education, or conceivably even specialized training.

80 Cf. chapter VI n. 1, and the opening sentence of that chapter.

81 Although contained in the Deutsche Staatsbibliothek's inventory of manuscripts, the text by 'Salvador' did not attract the attention of scholars until 1975 (cf. R. Desné, nn. 1, 2).

82 E.g., the beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount; the Lord's Prayer; Matthew 6:39, Luke 6:29; etc.

This text is more or less rewritten by D'Holbach:⁸³ passages are extended, paraphrased, shortened, or removed, and other comments and asides, sometimes no more than one or two words, are added.⁸⁴ Though 'Salvador's somewhat hectoring tone is generally moderated to one of ironic mockery, D'Holbach's additional material is on the whole more polemical and specifically anticlerical, and reinforces the negative aspects of the depiction of Jesus.

All D'Holbach's fundamental ideas are present, specifically or implicitly, in the *Ecce homo!* D'Holbach's purpose is in fact stated in the very first sentence of the work:⁸⁵ the story of Jesus needs to be examined carefully. The scriptures are unclear, or ambiguous. Jesus' behaviour resembles that of a misguided fanatic,⁸⁶ scarcely in keeping with the conduct one might expect of a 'god': he has not been a 'light to the world'. On the contrary – under the yoke of priests, who are supported by temporal rulers, and who do not emulate the gentleness of their divine master, people submit in dark misery, convinced that their blind submission, termed 'faith', is essential to ensure their salvation in another life, and to protect them against damnation. They dare not pay heed to the doubts raised by their own capacity for reasoning, such is the priests' control over their minds.

In order to be of service to humanity, D'Holbach proposes, in *Ecce homo!*, to undertake a critical scrutiny of surviving accounts of the life of Christianity's founder. The ensuing discussion of the gospels will be based on reason, the only acceptable criterion of knowledge. The reader may, he adds, rest assured that it is possible to entertain doubts about the scriptures, and still remain a good person. The hope is expressed, in the book's closing pages, that the time will come when humanity will no longer be terrorised by priests. When that time comes, as the final paragraph states, religion will be supplanted by the triumph of reason

⁸³ See above, n. 31.

⁸⁴ The additions to the Preface and to chapters I to xv are enclosed in square brackets in the text of the present edition. For examples of specific comparisons, see R. Desné, pp. 171-174.

⁸⁵ As indicated in the text, the second part of the sentence, after the semi-colon, is in D'Holbach's own words.

⁸⁶ 'In short, it seems the character of Jesus was a fairly constant combination of zeal and trickery' (ch. xvii). Terms used ironically in the present work to designate Jesus include '(our) adventurer', 'charlatan', 'doctor', 'Æsculapius', 'healer', 'hero', 'master', 'missionary', 'orator', 'preacher', 'Saviour', 'miracle-worker'.

and nature,⁸⁷ and the supremacy of a moral and ethical system, opposed to religion, and independent of it.⁸⁸

5. Circulation

Only a few friends were aware of D'Holbach's activities as writer and publisher⁸⁹ – most notably Diderot, who died before him,⁹⁰ and Naigeon, who did not reveal the secret till some fifteen years after D'Holbach's death. We know from a letter⁹¹ by Naigeon that his younger brother,⁹² 'supply officer at Sedan', also a non-believer and apparently an able penman as well, made fair copies of D'Holbach's manuscripts; if the younger Naigeon were not in Paris, they were forwarded to him at Sedan by his elder brother through the intermediary of a well-disposed postal inspector named Bron. The completed copies were posted to Liège, whence they were conveyed to the publisher Marc-Michel Rey⁹³ in Amsterdam

87 'Reason' implies the capacity, determined by instinct or 'nature', for discerning good and evil by the acquisition of knowledge that, unlike religion, is not 'revealed', but acquired by 'experience', i.e. human perception of the external world, or personal awareness.

88 Cf. *Contagion sacrée* [Holy contagion], pp. 87-88: 'Whatever religion may decide ... sane morality can consider only truly useful acts as virtuous'.

89 Morellet, *Memoirs*, p. 133. The Abbé also held (p. 134) that those who were aware of the 'philosophical' activities of D'Holbach, Diderot, and their circle, kept the secret because they presented no possible threat to society (see below, n. 158).

90 Grimm relates that D'Holbach was with Diderot on that day (cit. A.-T. vol. 1 p. LXV).

91 'Extrait d'une lettre écrite par M. Naigeon le jeune ...' [Extract from a letter of the younger Naigeon], *Collection Barbier* 5, fol. 97r-102r (Bn F, Nouvelles Acquisitions françaises 5184): see A.M. Belgrado, *Paura* ..., p. 10 and especially n. 4.

92 Charles Claude Naigeon (1757-1832).

93 1780. See also the allusion, in CLT 8:157-158, to the flood of antireligious books emanating from the bookshop of Marc-Michel Rey in Amsterdam: two specific examples of such books, according to the same passage, were *Letters to Eugenia* and *Holy contagion*. Abbé Morellet also notes (p. 133) that D'Holbach was responsible for most of the material printed by M.-M. Rey, in particular *System of nature*, *Natural politics*, and *Christianity unveiled*. In a letter to the Abbé Galiani (11 August 1769, GEK letter 37 p. 54), D'Holbach wrote that Rey was thus growing rich from the 'Mammon of iniquity'. Wily and prudent, M.-M. Rey, like D'Holbach, effectively

by a certain Madame Loncin, who corresponded with him.⁹⁴ Books were subsequently brought into France in luggage of nobles, military personnel, or wealthy businessmen, under false bindings, or in parcels with false labels.

It is not possible to state with any certainty the market for which D'Holbach's books were intended. At that time, only some thirty per cent of French people could read, despite a marked increase in literacy from a hundred years earlier.⁹⁵ Possibly, in view of the international status of the French language, D'Holbach had a European audience in mind; his works were published outside France, but this was of course a measure of prudence, given their controversial subject matter, and the fact that many of them were officially banned. Recent research by Robert Darnton, based on the records of book-trading kept by the Société Typographique de Neuchâtel, shows that, in the area of 'religious' publications, D'Holbach was the most 'popular' author after Voltaire, and that the *Ecce homo!* was the most requested title after *The system of nature*.⁹⁶ We have no way, however, of knowing how many copies of D'Holbach's books were printed, but as they could not be distributed through official channels, the number of copies must have been relatively limited, given their limited potential circulation. We do know that the books were very expensive to buy,⁹⁷ no doubt because of the risks

covered his tracks. Although roughly one-third of his papers have survived, in private and library collections, none provides information regarding sales, receipts, wages, payments to authors, or lists of publications (apparently he did not have his own printing-press); and although allusions in passing by his correspondents clearly indicate that he was responsible for publishing books by D'Holbach, Diderot, Voltaire etc., it is nowhere specifically stated that he did so: even in Holland, in the eighteenth century, freedom of the press had its limits. (I am most grateful to Jeroom Vercruyse for the foregoing material, which forms part of a forthcoming study on M.-M. Rey.)

94 Cf. also R. Darnton, 'Publishing D'Holbach's *Système de la nature*', SVEC 1989, 265: 1706-1709.

95 J. Lough, *Writer and public in France: from the Middle Ages to the present day* (1978, Oxford: Clarendon Press), p. 164.

96 R. Darnton, *Edition et sédition: l'univers de la littérature clandestine au XVIIIe siècle* (Coll. 'NRF Essais', Paris, Gallimard, 1991), p. 168 and *passim*.

97 The equivalent of a wholesale price of the *Théologie portative* was three francs (worth about fifty dollars in 1985), the *Christianisme dévoilé* varied from twelve francs (wholesale) to thirty francs (\$150-\$400), while the *Système de la nature*, originally costing about thirty francs (\$400), could fetch up to five louis (\$1750) after being condemned by the Parlement (Charles

incurred by the vendors,⁹⁸ and so could have been purchased only by the relatively affluent.⁹⁹

Even within his circle of friends and acquaintances, D'Holbach's atheistic viewpoint was considered extreme. He himself recognized the impossibility of converting an entire nation to atheism,¹⁰⁰ being convinced that few individuals were capable, by intellect or character, of comprehending or accepting its essential basis.¹⁰¹ In this regard, the reaction of D'Holbach and Diderot, on perusing the refutation of *The system of nature* commissioned from the Abbé Bergier by the Assembly of Clergy, is significant: both declared there would be barely fifty people in Paris capable of comprehending their ideas.¹⁰²

D'Holbach further admitted – in a footnote – to being aware that his stated task of improving the lot of humanity was unlikely to be achieved, because his books would be read only by 'average' people, those who have time for such pursuits as reading.¹⁰³ D'Holbach, evidently not ex-

Simon Favart [1710-1792], *Mémoires et correspondance littéraires, dramatiques et anecdotiques* [Paris: Collin, 1808], vol. II p. 246; also J.-P. Belin, *Commerce . . .*, pp. 106-107, citing Bn F 22.100 f° 101, and Favart).

98 It was evidently considerations of prudence also that dictated Fréret's concern that his *Letter from Thrasybulus to Leucippus* should not be generally circulated. (Charles Pinot Duclos [1704-1772], *Mémoires* in: *Œuvres*, Paris: Belin, 1820, vol. I p. 24)).

99 'Yet his works do seem to have circulated widely, and to have been available, presumably by borrowing [cf. Belin, p. 107], even to less wealthy people . . . The principal purchasers of the banned books were the court nobility, the *noblesse de robe* [non-inheritance nobility], the financiers, some sections of the clergy, particularly abbés, and a number of the liberal professions. There are abundant proofs of the popularity of anti-Christian and even anti-religious sentiments in these sections of society' (J. Lough, unpubl. diss., pp. 326-327). Among the regular customers to whom the widow Stockdorf, of Strasbourg, sent banned books, including titles by D'Holbach, were magistrates, nobles, and the king's chaplain (*Archives de la Bastille* [Arsenal] 12 398, cit. Belin, p. 103; cf. above, n. 16). In 1794 when the Privy Council in Britain was considering charges of high treason against Godwin and others, Pitt pointed out that *Political justice*, at three guineas a copy, could do little harm among those who had not three shillings to spare (cf. above, n. 97).

100 *System of nature* vol. II p. 377.

101 *System of nature* vol. II pp. 348-349.

102 Abbé Nicolas-Sylvestre de Bergier (1718-1790), letter of 6 June 1770 (*Lettres inédites* [Unpublished correspondence] in: *Académie des Sciences, Belles-lettres et Arts de Besançon* (1891)), p. 231).

103 *Essay on prejudice* ([London] 1770), p. 47n; also *Christianity unveiled*, p. v.

pecting to reach a wide readership in his lifetime, counted on a favourable response from generations to come.¹⁰⁴

6. Publication and public reaction

In October 1770, France was generally free of political and ecclesiastical unrest. Choiseul still clung precariously to power. The parlements, however, since the expulsion of the Jesuits from France in 1767, had shown themselves openly hostile to the crown; and in December 1770, Choiseul, a secret supporter of the parlements, would be dismissed by the king.

The seventeen-sixties were marked by sporadic, but frightful instances of religious persecution, notably the cases of Calas, Sirven, and La Barre, taken up and defended by Voltaire. On the other hand, the prohibition of books, particularly those having antireligious tendencies, was, relatively speaking, much less rigorous. The liberal censorship of Malesherbes, Controller of the book trade from 1750 to 1768,¹⁰⁵ ensured relative freedom of the press.¹⁰⁶

The *Mémoires secrets* of 1st October 1770¹⁰⁷ announce the appearance of a 'remarkable' book, the *Ecce homo!*, adding that it is appropriately preceded by the *Epistle to Urania*, 'which everyone knows is by M. de Voltaire'. The entry for 10 October¹⁰⁸ is ambivalent: while describing the preface as 'reprehensible' and the book's intentions as 'criminal' and

¹⁰⁴ *System of nature* vol. II p. 379.

¹⁰⁵ Chrétien Guillaume de Lamoignon de Malesherbes (1721-1794) was favourably disposed to the *philosophes*. Although the *Encyclopédie* was officially banned in 1752, he covertly and effectively made its continued publication possible.

¹⁰⁶ Some flagrant anomalies are mentioned by Paul Hazard, *European thought in the eighteenth century* (1965, Harmondsworth: Penguin), pp. 111-112. Cf. Alfred Cobban, *A history of modern France* (1963, 3rd ed. Harmondsworth: Penguin), vol. I pp. 85-86: 'The censorship of books was still vigorously carried out by the [parlements], but with more show than effect. Regularly books were condemned to be burnt by the executioner, and as regularly the publishers produced piles of unwanted remainders to be ceremonially destroyed, and continued to circulate and sell the condemned works as freely as before.'

¹⁰⁷ Bachaumont vol. V p. 173.

¹⁰⁸ Bachaumont, vol. V pp. 174-6.

‘abominable’, the author nevertheless presents a sympathetic outline of its contents.

Voltaire apparently did not acquire his copy of *Ecce homo!*¹⁰⁹ until a year later. On 14 November 1771, in a letter to d’Alembert, he wrote, with mock disapproval, that he had perused the book with ‘saintly horror’, crossing himself at every page, and that the book’s appearance signalled imminently that of the Antichrist.¹¹⁰ The following March, the *Ecce homo!* was in fact banned in Geneva, as ‘impious, scandalous, contrary to good behaviour’.¹¹¹

Early in 1770, *The system of nature* had appeared to an enthusiastic reception, and had been not unexpectedly condemned, in August, by the Parlement. By way of introduction to its review of the Abbé Bergier’s refutation of *The system of nature*, the *Année littéraire* observed that whereas hitherto the *philosophes* had professed deism,¹¹² and in so doing had displayed a certain propriety, *The system of nature*, while containing nothing that was basically new, was the first work of flagrant and undisguised atheism to appear in print.¹¹³ In fact, in his antireligious works preceding *The system of nature*, D’Holbach’s atheism is implicit, rather than overtly expressed.¹¹⁴ In *Ecce homo!*, in particular, two minor alterations¹¹⁵ made by D’Holbach to the text by ‘Salvador’, suggest that D’Holbach was concerned to eradicate any suggestion of a tendency towards deism: in chapter vi, D’Holbach deletes the statement by ‘Salvador’ to the effect that Judaism was fundamentally deistic; and in chapter x, ‘Salvador’s term *raisonneurs* [‘reasoners’] is replaced by *athées* [atheists].¹¹⁶

¹⁰⁹ BV1656 (see VCN vol. iv pp. 436-438: Voltaire’s copy contains few page-markers or marginal annotations, and none is of significance).

¹¹⁰ VCo 17446. See also below, ch. vii n. 25.

¹¹¹ VCo app. 356.

¹¹² For a summary of the polemical exchange between deists and atheists to which the publication of *System of nature* gave rise, see P. Hazard, *La Pensée européenne au xviii^e siècle* (1946, Paris: Boivin), vol. iii pp. 870-871 (the English edition of Hazard’s study omits the material contained in the third volume of the French original).

¹¹³ *Année littéraire* [Year’s literature] 1770, vol. viii, letter xiv, pp. 313-314.

¹¹⁴ See in particular J. Lough, unpubl. diss., p. 143 and *passim*.

¹¹⁵ These are pointed out by R. Desné (‘Sur un manuscrit . . .’, p. 174).

¹¹⁶ See below, ch. x n. 24: at that point in the text D’Holbach adds a further, somewhat cryptic passage, apparently implying that persons who are not ‘poor in spirit’, and from whose number atheists, by inference, would not

Voltaire had been appalled by the appearance of *The system of nature*,¹¹⁷ partly because he dreaded, with justification, a reaction from the clergy, who in fact, with the king's approval, seized the opportunity to have censorship controls strictly and ineluctably applied;¹¹⁸ and partly because, despite his own antireligious writings and campaign against l'infâme, he himself remained staunchly opposed to atheism.¹¹⁹ Voltaire was apparently unaware that 'this accursed *System of nature*'¹²⁰ actually was the work of D'Holbach;¹²¹ certainly, he received the baron in Paris with cordiality when the two men finally met in 1778.¹²²

In fact, *The system of nature* became a 'best-seller' because of sheer notoriety, rather than because of the extremist material it contained. Certainly, however, the *Ecce homo!* is more restrained and less controversial in content than *The system of nature*, or *Christianity unveiled*, and possibly that explains why these two works, both going through thirteen editions in D'Holbach's lifetime, enjoyed far greater commercial success than *Ecce homo!*, which ran to only three.

It would seem, in any event, that Voltaire did not reckon *Ecce homo!* a dangerous book, likely to exacerbate the difficulties being faced by the *philosophes*. Unlike *System*, it is, as has been mentioned, not overtly

be excluded, would be no less deserving of the gift of faith than those who believe unquestioningly.

117 CLT 9:117-119 (1 September 1770). See also Shirley A. Roe, 'Metaphysics and materialism: Needham's response to D'Holbach', *SVEC* 1991, 284: 309-335: part of Voltaire's outrage at *The System of Nature* resulted from D'Holbach's use of John Turberville Needham's biological observations (p. 311).

118 Cf. VCo 16827 (15 October 1770). In December 1772 d'Alembert, writing to Voltaire (VCo 18104), speaks of the continuing severity of the 'inquisitions'.

119 On this point, a letter written by Voltaire in 1768, to the Marquis de Villeveille (VCo 15189), on the importance of rulers recognizing the existence of a God who punishes and forgives, is particularly instructive. A response to Voltaire's argument may be found in the *System of nature* (vol. II p. 350). By way of reply to the *System of nature*, Voltaire published his own work *God* (VCo 16374 n. 1).

120 Cf. VCo 16693, 16694.

121 Voltaire's copy of *System of nature* appears as no. 1660 in BV (see VCN vol. IV p. 439).

122 *Journal de Paris*, 9 February 1789, p. 176A. On the meeting of D'Holbach and Voltaire, cf. also the remarks of J. Vercruysse regarding VCo app. 287 and the foregoing reference ('Recherches sur la correspondance d'Holbach', *Tijdschrift voor de studie van de verlichting* 1973, vol. I p. 91).