

THE TRANSFORMATION OF CHARITY INTO BIENFAISANCE AND FRATERNITY IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE

John Pappas

The French Enlightenment represents an upheaval in traditional values. Inspired by the Cartesian method which consists in brushing aside all accepted positions in order to reach true principles through the deductions of reason alone, the eighteenth-century philosophes, while retaining the concept of charity insofar as it represents a concern for one's fellow humans, reject its Judeo-Christian base and seek a foundation more in keeping with the nature of man.

The word "charity" was too loaded with religious connotations to be retained. Indeed what we would call "works of charity" such as orphanages, hospitals, schools, et cetera, were run under the auspices of religious orders and institutions. A new name had to be found for such activities, "bienfaisance," which we could translate as benevolence, or simply do-goodism, and a new basis had to be found to justify such humanitarian activity other than the double Biblical commandment of loving God and loving one's neighbor as oneself. The anticlerical overtones of such a change are clearly enunciated in this declaration of the Abbé de Saint-Pierre:

Since I noted that among Christians an abuse was made of the term "charity" in the persecution of one's enemies, and that heretics say they practice Christian charity in persecuting other heretics or Catholics themselves . . . I sought a term which would give us more precisely the idea of doing good to others, and I could not find one more suited to making myself understood than the term "bienfaisance."

Voltaire gives him his approval by saying:

The Abbé de Saint-Pierre has just created a word missing from Vaugelas's dictionary. That word is "bienfaisance." I like it; it combines, if one is to believe one's heart, many of the virtues at once. (quoted in Gusdorf, 363-364)

If Voltaire considers the word an invention of the Abbé de Saint-Pierre it is because he does not know the *Summa theologiae*, where Thomas Aquinas points to beneficence as one of the "exterior effects" attached to the act of charity (Dublanchy, 2257). We will return to this idea; these authors who received their education in religious schools, while seeking to reject Judeo-Christian concepts, cannot escape them entirely. Voltaire, for example, is obliged to recognize that works of charity institutionalized by religious organizations have a social utility; but in the article "Charity" in his *Philosophical Dictionary*, he seeks to link the word "bienfaisance" to "charity" while attacking the church which created these institutions:

These houses of charity, of "bienfaisance," are as useful and respectable as are useless and ridiculous the riches that some monasteries and chapels possess. It is a beautiful thing to give bread, clothing and remedies, and all kinds of aid to one's brothers; but what need does a saint have of gold and diamonds?

However, when speaking of the Hôtel-Dieu, a hospital which cared for the sick and the indigent, he cannot help exclaiming: "The hospitals are monuments of 'bienfaisance.'"

If one is not to engage in charitable activities through love of God and one's neighbor, as stipulated in the *Torah* and the *New Testament*, what will be the justification for choosing "bienfaisance" rather than an egoistical hedonism? The eighteenth century proposes several answers according to the philosophy one espouses. Deists such as Montesquieu, Rousseau and Voltaire have recourse to the natural law engraved in the hearts of men by God and valid for all human beings. Thus, in his *Poem on Natural Law* Voltaire affirms:

No; the God who made me did not make me in vain . . .
 Morality, uniform in all times and everywhere,
 Through the endless centuries speaks in the name of God.
 It is the law of Trajan, of Socrates and yours.
 Nature is the apostle of this cult.
 Good sense receives it, and avenging remorse,
 Born in one's conscience, is its defender.
 (*Oeuvres complètes*, 9: 444)

Similarly, in book IV of his *Emile*, Rousseau has his vicar of Savoy seek out the maxims that must guide his conduct: "I find them in the depths of my heart, written by nature in indelible letters." And he too has recourse to one's conscience as a brake on evil-doing. As for Montesquieu, he declares that the Creator has given us "immutable laws": "Before the establishment of societies, men already followed the laws of nature which no authority can change or abolish" (1: 418). And in letter 26 of the *Persian Letters* he affirms that women "all carry in their heart a certain character of virtue which is engraved there."

In their schools the Jesuits also taught the natural law. After all did Saint Paul not write:

When the pagans, without having any law, do naturally what the law commands they . . . show that the requirements of the law are written in their hearts. Their conscience bears the same testimony, and also their thoughts, which alternately accuse or defend them. (*Rom.* 2.14-15)

But the Jesuits insisted that without the backing and confirmation of a divine revelation we cannot be certain that our judgments are good because the impulses of nature can also lead to evil. This is what Father Berthier, the Jesuit editor of the *Journal de Trévoux* suggests when speaking of the "true philosopher": "He needs superior motives to love mankind: his inclination does not lead him to that; but the law reminds him of it" (*Journal de Trévoux*, Jan. 1762, 1: 149).

On the other hand, the philosophes reject the doctrine of original sin which sees in man a penchant toward evil which religion must combat,

and they postulate that man is naturally good. For them, this voice of the heart becomes infallible. Even an unbeliever like Diderot can have Cécile exclaim in his play *The Father of the Family*: "My heart tells me that this is bad; and it has never deceived me" (act 3, scene 1).

Whereas Voltaire had called nature the "apostle" of God, Nature will replace Him entirely in the vision of the atheists such as Diderot, d'Holbach, Helvétius and the Marquis de Sade, and it will be adored with the same quasi-religious fervor. In his *The System of Nature*, for example, d'Holbach cries out:

"Oh Nature! Sovereign of all beings! and you, her adorable daughters virtue, reason and truth! Be forever our only divinities."
(2: 420)

Henceforth it is this deified Nature which must be obeyed. If the idea that we must always follow the sentiments nature inspires in us can be questioned and indeed leads to the dilemma Diderot will expose in his *Rameau's Nephew*, there is a "law" of nature which all the philosophes accept. As Rousseau states: "Man is a social being who needs a morality intended for humanity" (*Contrat*, 473). Since, according to Montesquieu, "the desire to live in society is a fourth natural law" (*Esprit*, 1: 11), the philosopher must acquire a social conscience which will enable him to conform to it. The article "Philosophe" in Diderot's and D'Alembert's *Encyclopedia* describes this process of civilization for man:

The very necessities of life make it necessary for him to deal with others; and in whatever state he finds himself, his needs and well-being require him to live in society. Thus, reason demands of him that he know, that he study, that he work to acquire qualities of sociability.

First of all he will be "full of humanity" and "humanity itself interests one in the good or ill fortune of one's neighbor." Thus: the philosopher is jealous of what is called *honor* and *probity*. Civil society is, so to speak, a divinity for him on earth; he incenses it, he honors it by his probity, by an exact attention to his duties, and by a sincere desire not to be a useless

or embarrassing member of it.

This "probity" resembles strangely the traditional notions which insist on one's "duties" toward the state and society. So much so that Diderot, although his philosophy denies all meaning to the terms "vice" and "virtue" and postulates that everything nature creates is valid, is forced to reject these principles in the name of the well-being of society. In *D'Alembert's Dream* he makes a clear distinction between his philosophical position and his mores in society: "Whatever might be your judgment of my ideas, I hope that you will not conclude anything against the honesty of my mores." He admits that "it would trample underfoot all decency, attract to oneself the most odious suspicions, and commit a crime of treason against society." And he concludes: "I would not lift my hat in the street to the man suspected of practicing my doctrine; it would be enough that he be called infamous."

This fear of incurring the scorn of society is present also in the admonition of d'Holbach to be virtuous: "Be reserved, temperate and chaste, because voluptuousness, intemperance and excesses will destroy your being and make you an object of scorn" (2: 411). Thus, despite his atheism and rejection of traditional values, the mores he preaches will continue to be dictated by a Judeo-Christian morality, if only to prove that one can be virtuous without believing in its religious foundation. In his *Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage* Diderot becomes indignant against unnatural religious restrictions and preaches a total sexual freedom outside of marriage. But at the end, "A" asks: "Then what will we do? Will we return to nature? Will we obey the laws?" And "B" replies that we must submit to the laws:

Let us tell ourselves, let us ceaselessly cry out that they have attached shame, punishment and ignominy to actions which are innocent in themselves; but let us not commit them, because shame, punishment and ignominy are the greatest of all evils. (643)

Thus the practice of Christian virtues becomes a defensive arm. A good example is the gesture of "bienfaisance" of D'Alembert on the occasion of a fire at the Hôtel-Dieu. He organized a collection at the

French Academy “for the poor of the Hôtel-Dieu” and he writes to Voltaire asking him to contribute so that his name can appear on the list that will be sent to the king; and he explains:

The sanctimonious members of the Academy would have wished that this idea had not come to a damned philosophe and encyclopedist like me; but after all they will have to admit it, and I informed the archbishop when I sent him the 1200 pounds the following Sunday that I am the one who had proposed it. (quoted in Voltaire, *Oeuvres complètes*, 48: 274)

The archbishop, he adds, received “the philosophes’ money for the poor at the moment he was getting dressed to exorcise them.”

If certain philosophes conformed to the mores of their society as a defensive tactic, the Marquis de Sade, in the name of the same philosophical principles as those of d’Holbach, will not be afraid of following them all the way despite the social disapproval he was risking:

Let us deign for a moment to enlighten our souls with the holy torch of philosophy: what other voice but that of nature suggests to us personal hatreds, vengeance, wars, in a word all those motives for perpetual murders? Now, if she counsels them to us, she therefore needs them. Then how can we, after that, suppose ourselves to be guilty towards her, when all we are doing is following her views? (144)

So the “voice of nature” is an equivocal basis for preaching “bienfaisance.” Diderot himself recognizes it. Even though he affirms his conviction that one should be virtuous “even in a society as poorly organized as ours,” he admits that he did not know how to go about convincing his fellow citizens that in spite of it all one must be “a man of probity”:

Shall I admit it to you? I did not even dare pick up my pen to write the first line. I said to myself: If I do not emerge victorious in this

endeavor, I will have become the apologist of wickedness: I will have betrayed the cause of virtue, I will have encouraged man to vice. No, I do not feel up to that sublime task; I would consecrate my whole life to it uselessly. (*Réfutation*, 536)

One of the principal arguments used by Diderot and his century is that virtue, which includes “bienfaisance,” leads to individual happiness. When Rousseau creates his utopia of Clarens in *Julie, or the New Héloïse*, he tries to move his reader with bucolic scenes in order to prove that virtue makes one happier than does vice. Even a scoundrel like Valmont in *Dangerous Liaisons*, when he feigns charity towards a poor peasant family, is astonished by the effect it produces in him to see “that family groveling before me”; and Laclos has him say:

I will admit my weakness; my eyes filled with tears, and I felt in me an involuntary and delicious impulse. I was amazed at the pleasure that one feels in doing good. (Lettre XXI)

Thus a current apology for doing good in the eighteenth century will be that it gives us pleasure. The article “Bienfaisance” in the supplement to the *Encyclopedia* tells us that it is “a daughter of kindness and of the love of humanity,” and one of the forces which invites us to it is “nature, through the feeling of pleasure, which is in the soul of the one who has given, and which is renewed upon seeing the object of one’s good deeds” (888).

In his *Conversations with Catherine II* Diderot declares:

There is only one duty, which is to be happy. Since my natural, invincible, inalienable inclination is to be happy, it is the only source of my duties and the only basis for all good legislation. (*Oeuvres politiques*, 320-321).

It will therefore be necessary to prove that doing good makes one happier than doing evil! Thus in *Rameau’s Nephew* Diderot tells the story of a man from Carthage who comes to the aid of his aged parents and exclaims:

Ah, my dear Rameau, that man looked upon that moment as the happiest in his life. He spoke to me of it with tears in his eyes; and I, in telling you this story, I feel my heart stirring with joy, and the pleasure leaves me speechless. (117)

According to the traditional definition of charity toward one's neighbor, this act "seeks only the good of the object loved." We love our neighbor because he is loved by God, who enjoins us to do likewise: "It is enough that the natural affection be mastered by the supernatural motive and finally directed toward the supernatural and eternal good of the person loved" (Dublanchy, 2256-2257).

The eighteenth century insists more on the happiness derived from the act of benevolence for the benefactor than on the "duty" of coming to the aid of one's neighbor. Even the clergy offers such arguments for charity. The Abbé Mallet, for example, a professor of theology at the Sorbonne, reviews in his article "Charity" in the *Encyclopedia* the distinction made between "perfect" love for God—whom we love for his perfections in a disinterested manner—and "imperfect" love, which leads us to love Him for the eternal happiness we will have if we remain faithful to His commandments. According to the traditional view, if this latter aspect of love is acceptable, the first one takes precedence as an ultimate goal (Dublanchy, 2219-2220). But, says Mallet, of all the attributes of God, in reality only those which constitute a link between the Creator and the creature arouse in us sentiments of love. These sentiments are so inseparable from the view of happiness, and charity is so united to the penchant toward enjoyment, that we cannot separate ourselves from these things except through chimerical hypotheses removed from nature. To say that the love of God for his attributes alone—"perfect" love—is a "chimerical" hypothesis shows to what extent certain theologians themselves had assimilated the ideas of their century!

In his novel *Manon Lescaut* the Abbé Prévost draws the consequences of such an insistence on egotistical motives. When the seminarian Tiberge tries to turn his friend Des Grieux away from his love for Manon by pointing to the greater happiness that virtue gives, his friend replies:

There is no worse method of turning a heart away from love than to describe its attractions and to promise it more happiness through the exercise of virtue. The way we are made, it is certain that our happiness consists in pleasure; I defy anyone to formulate another idea of it. (396)

Diderot utilizes an analogous argument in *Rameau's Nephew*. When the philosopher preaches an "honorable" life "useful" to one's fellow citizens, the Nephew replies:

You think the same happiness is made for everybody. What a strange vision! Yours supposes a romantic turn of mind which we do not have; a bizarre mind, a particular taste. You decorate that strange view with the name of virtue; you call it philosophy. . . . To drink good wine, fill up on delicate foods; roll over on beautiful women; rest in nice soft beds. Except for that, the rest is only vanity. (114)

And when the philosopher tells the story of the man from Carthage while insisting on the fact that honesty leads to happiness, the Nephew retorts:

Yet I see an infinity of honest people who are not happy; and an infinity of people who are happy without being honest. (118)

If I have devored this much space to Diderot's arguments it is because of all the philosophes he analyzed the most deeply the dilemma of his century in the face of the question: "Why should we be 'bienfaisant'?"

In his *Journal de Trévoux*, in February 1760, the Jesuit Berthier writes:

People have prided themselves on being philosophers, and they have struck at the foundations of morality, of laws, of reason. They speak only of humanity and they have become concerned only with self-interest, which is so often hard, inhuman, despotic and unjust.

In this respect Lester Crocker, in his study on the ethical thought of

the Enlightenment (chapters 5-6) affirms that the philosophy of the eighteenth century leads to a hedonistic nihilism which culminates with the Marquis de Sade. And yet all the philosophers, if we except Sade, preached virtue and beneficence despite their philosophical theories. This "bienfaisance" which they advocate curiously resembles the notions of "charity" and "virtue." Saint Paul had written: "For one single formula contains the whole of the Law in its fullness: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (*Gal. 5.14*). The article "Bienfaisance" in the supplement to the *Encyclopédie* declares that "the single quality of doing good brings with it the whole extent of the duties of morality." Jesus Christ had said: "When you give alms let your left hand be ignorant of what your right hand is doing so that your almsgiving may remain secret" (*Matt. 6.3-4*). The same *Encyclopédie* article declares, concerning the help one gives to an indigent person: "Have no other witness than your conscience. Would it be asking too much of you that the very person you are helping be ignorant of the name of his benefactor?"

This resemblance is not accidental. While rejecting the Judeo-Christian basis of morality, the philosophes remain emotively attached to it: "They all served mass as altar boys," explains José-Michel Moureaux (165), "[they] attended services and participated in their liturgy, heard those innumerable sermons which leave an indelible impression in the minds of young listeners." Diderot had even studied theology in his youth. If later he will deny the very validity of the word "virtue," he will not preach it any less on an emotional level in his bourgeois dramas and in his esthetic theories:

Oh what a great good would come to men if all the arts of imitation proposed a common objective and joined one day with the laws to make us love virtue and hate vice. (*Oeuvres esthétiques*, 196)

It is this rupture between the denial of religious principles which his philosophy requires and the emotional attachment to those old notions of "virtue" and "vice" which make him cry out:

I am entaged at being entangled in a devilish philosophy that my mind cannot keep from apptoving, and my heart from denyng.
(*Correspondance*, 9: 154)

In this sense the philosophes resemble someone who thinks he is swimming against a current and does not realize he is still being carried downstream in spite of himself.

If Didetot thought that divulging his materialistic doctrine publicly would be committing a crime of "lèse-société" (high treason against society), others would not be as scrupulous. Already in 1758, Helvétius had declared in *On the Mind (De l'esprit)*:

Always and everywhere, in matters of motality and in marters of the mind it is personal interest which dicrates the judgment of individuals. Self-interest is the only judge of the ptobity of the mind. (1: 54-55)

And d'Holbach published a series of works which culminated in 1770 in the *System of Nature*. This summation of the materialistic thesis began a veritable "civil war" among the philosophes (Pappas, "Voltaire," 525-549). In fact the deists shared with the Christians the conviction that the virtue necessary in a society is guaranteed only by the law of God. In 1748 Montesquieu had already affirmed in the *Spirit of Laws*: "Religion, even false, is the best guarantee for the uprightness of men" (2: 137). Rousseau had followed him in his *Social Contract*: "It is very important for a state that each citizen have a religion that will make him love his duties (334). But in *Emile* he goes even further. After rejecting the Christian revelation as false, he gives this final advice to his disciple: "Go back to your country, take up the religion of your fathers. Follow it in the sincerity of your heart, and do not leave it any more." Then he concludes with Saint Paul: "Love God above all else and your neighbor as yourself is the resumé of the Law" (*Oeuvres complètes*, 4: 631-632).

Voltaire, like Montesquieu, affirms: "It is certain that in a civilized city it is infinitely more useful to have a religion, even if a bad one, than to have none at all" (*Dictionnaire philosophique*, 42). The atheist who denies a rewatding and avenging God thus becomes an enemy of society:

Although I pride myself in being very tolerant, I would be inclined rather to punish the person who would tell us today: "Ladies and gentlemen, there is no God; calumniate, perjure yourself, steal, assassinate, poison someone, all that does not matter, as long as you are the fittest or the cleverest." It is clear that that man will be pernicious for a society. (*Oeuvres complètes*, 28: 133)

After having waged a relentless campaign against Judaism and Christianity, Voltaire, faced with the conclusions to which the principles of the materialists led, will end up like Rousseau's Savoyard vicar by praising Jesus. He counsels in *God and Men* (1769): "Let us adore the Supreme Being through Jesus, since that is what is established among us" (*Oeuvres complètes*, 28: 238; see also Pappas, "Rousseauisme," 1176-1179). And in *The Story of Jenny or the Atheist and the Sage* (1775), he will make a priest his apostle of deism. In the face of this reversal of position it is not surprising that the Abbé Galiani could exclaim:

It is really pleasant that we have reached a point where Voltaire appears to be moderate in his opinions and that he flatters himself to be counted among the protectors of religion and that we must, instead of persecuting him, protect and encourage him.

And when the patriarch of Fetney, imitating Jesus, asks his "brothers" to love one another, Galiani replies:

Voltaire is wrong to tell the philosophes: "love each other, my children." This should only be said to members of a sect . . . The philosophes are not made to love one another . . . Voltaire has not loved, and he is loved by no one. He is feared, he has his claws, that is enough. (2: 103-104, 309)

If the philosophes had turned to "bienfaisance" to replace charity, the French Revolution will inaugurate what Michel Vovelle calls "that new value called fraternity" (202). But just as the word "bienfaisance" existed before its "invention" by the Abbé de Saint-Pierre, "fraternity" was already present in the three monotheistic religions, as Marcel David points out

in *Fraternity and the French Revolution*. If the Encyclopedists were not tempted to make use of the terms "fraternity" and "brotherhood," which they no doubt judged "too immersed in an outmoded tradition," they had pushed the analysis of "bienfaisance" "to the point of preparing the revolutionaries without too much a stretch of the imagination to give a renewed youth to the 'sweet ties' of bienfaisance. . . and more broadly, of fraternity" (David, 9, 20, 25).

At the opening session of the Estates General on May 5, 1789, the Keeper of the Seals Barentin had pleaded with citizens of all orders: "Unite your minds and hearts and may a solemn engagement tie you together with all the bonds of fraternity." The reply of the deputies of the nobility was scathing: "We do not want sons of shoemakers and cobblers to call us brothers. There is as much difference between us and them as between a master and his valet." On the other hand, the clergy welcomed the term "fraternity." As David writes, when in June, 1789 the king accepted that the powers be verified in common, "each of the clerics was careful to place his acceptance under the sign of fraternity" (David, 45-46).

The source of this new term to designate charity still remained the same. The definition of fraternity placed at the head of the Constitution of the year III (1795), "Do nor do unto others what you would nor have done to you; always do unto others the good you would like to receive from them" is an evident paraphrase of Matthew's quotation of the words of Jesus: "So always treat others as you would like them to treat you; that is the meaning of the Law and the Prophets" (*Matt.* 7.12). This is a factor which helps explain why in 1789 a good number of believers—noblemen as well as prelates—were found among the revolutionaries. The Marquis of Caraccioli, for example, expresses his enthusiasm for the reunion of the three Orders and for the taking of the Bastille by writing: "This lesson was necessary to repress the wicked." For Caraccioli, Sylviane Albertan-Coppola tells us (47), the revolution seems to fulfill Christian ideals: "By restoring equality and liberty, which are Christian in essence, the year 1789 has brought Christianity to its original values. In order to accomplish this completely, in Caraccioli's perspective, fraternity, without which Catholicism is inconceivable, must be established." It is not surprising that among the ten members of the Committee for Mendicity

founded in 1790 "six are churchmen, two of them bishops" (Rebérioux, 71).

The philosophes wrote theories, but the structures of the Old Régime still remained intact. The Revolution upsets this hierarchical regime where the Church, under the aegis of the Very Christian King, was a part of the privileged classes. As Voltaire would do later, Fénelon, the Bishop of Cambrai, in his discourse pronounced at the Consecration of the Elector of Cologne in 1707, became indignant at the opulence in which certain men of the Church lived: "How can we make people love the cross if we reject it to embrace pomp and voluptuousness?" In addition, the religious wars and the persecution of Protestants, especially after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, gave the Church an image of oppressors of liberty. Concerning the law which made the Elector of Cologne automatically a bishop as part of his function, whether a churchman or not, Fénelon deplored the harmful union of Church and State under the Old Régime when princes used the sword instead of charity in the pursuit of Protestants:

Let us remember that the cult of God consists of love No human power can force the impenetrable entrenchment of liberty in a heart. For Jesus Christ his reign is within man because he wishes love. Thus he did nothing through violence, but everything through persuasion. . . . Love does not enter a heart through constraint: each individual loves only as much as he wishes to love. (268)

And he evokes the early years of Christianity in Rome when the Church was persecuted but when "it was never so free, so strong, so flourishing, so fertile" (258).

Thus, despite the massacres and persecutions against the clergy, especially after 1793, we could suggest that in the long run the Revolution benefitted the Church because it liberated it from the control of the Bourbons and purified it by eliminating opportunists, thus reducing the clergy to faithful believers. In a sense Fénelon's earlier aspirations are realized and in 1789, as we have seen with Caraccioli, a great number of believers recognized their own values in the ideals of

the Revolution. The establishment of tolerance, including religious tolerance, in the Declaration of Rights had the support of bishops while the nationalization of the possessions of the clergy—for which was substituted a budget for the support of religious worship—represented for the pastors a net improvement of their condition.

But the Pope's condemnation of the Civil Constitution for the clergy was to lead to conflictual relations. By eliminating the participation of the clergy and the religious who, under the Old Régime, supervised works of charity, the State was obliged to assume responsibility for the care of the poor in society. However, the costs for hospitals so exceeded the resources of the revolutionary government that the Civil Constitution on the clergy specifically excluded the Grey Sisters from the regulations imposed on other religious orders; and this lasted until 1793 when the Convention decided to apply them to the Grey Sisters as well. The Jacobin legislation dismissed them from the hospitals and imprisoned the recalcitrants. As Alan Forrest puts it in his book *The French Revolution and the Poor*, it was a "purely political decision which went counter to the interests of the aged and the ill." He concludes: "It is the poor and the sick who suffered the most from the demands of political orthodoxy" (85-86).

The elimination of the Grey Sisters from the hospitals was an economic catastrophe. Their devotion to the sick received in fact an absurdly low salary. In addition, by confiscating the properties owned by hospitals, the revolutionaries deprived them of a large part of their income. Through necessity, in the year III, the Grey Sisters were liberated and reintegrated into hospital service. But until the Empire, the hospitals continued to deteriorate. The funds derived from patronage or bequests, very diminished by the exile of the nobility and the wealthy, or utilized for other purposes, were no longer available.

During the Revolution concern for the poor or the indigent was justified less by an appeal to fraternity than by a keen sense of equality. Although the word "fraternity" is often evoked in speeches in the Assembly, it was especially used in connection with festivals. And under the Terror, the very idea of universal fraternity is temporarily abandoned in favor of a sectarianism which branded as "conspirators" or "enemies" those who were not partisans of Robespierre. In his speech of 18 Floréal of the year II (May 7, 1794) proposing a decree instituting national feasts

we find a surprising absence of fraternity in his list of festivals—to the Supreme Being, to Liberty, to Equality, et cetera (*Oeuvres*, 10: 462-463). As Marcel David states, the embarrassment of the revolutionaries before this word is comparable to that of the philosophes with the word “charity”:

The authors of the Constitution wish to place measures of aid to various types of poor people under the aegis of concepts other than charity or almsgiving, too rooted, as they saw it, in the traditions of the Catholic Church. If they had recourse to fraternity, the risk would have been, from their point of view, that their break had not been sufficiently consummated with the notions I have just evoked and which would supposedly stem from a private, simple good will. Thus they preferred to speak of “relief,” of “bienfaisance,” or even of “assistance” . . . all notions judged compatible with what was expected from the public character in terms of the debt and obligation of the entire society. (99)

Assistance will no longer be “a form of charity but a fundamental human right, a debt which the nation has contracted toward its citizens” (Forrest, 62-63).

In the face of the increasing number of poor, the Revolution organized a detailed inquiry leading to national legislation. Lay regional offices established lists of poor without means of support, thus accomplishing what Alan Forrest calls “certain tasks carried out by a modern department of social services” (118). Laws were enacted dealing with pensions for abandoned children, the poor, the aged and the indigent. They even conceived the project of a “great book of national beneficence,” which was later abandoned. These laws which will not be applied until their abrogation in Frimaire of the year V, “can be considered as a declaration of intention and a manifesto outlining the main thrust of the philosophy of revolutionary ‘bienfaisance,’ but not as practical measures bringing relief to the poor” (Forrest, 125).

Yet aid to the poor was not unanimously accepted by the revolutionaries; they were especially reticent concerning beggars and

vagrants. For some of them, Forrest tells us, vagrancy "is not only an insult to the good citizens who work without complaining and contribute to the prosperity of France; it is a school of crime" (60). This attitude was fostered by the Physiocrats who were less interested in aid to the destitute than in the enrichment of the nation. In his article "Foundations" in the *Encyclopedia*, Turgot concluded that Christian charity had "failed in its fundamental mission" since it had increased the number of assisted families. This economic liberalism (in the French sense; we would say "laissez-faire capitalism") has a modern ring. Its arguments were utilized by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher to justify the reduction of aid to the poor. Two recent articles in the *International Herald Tribune* remind us that the problem is still very current. Here is one dated January 7, 1999:

"Meanness" is driving out compassion in dealing with the homeless as cities across the United States tighten restrictions on sleeping and begging in public places and "criminalize" homelessness, according to a report from the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty in Washington.

And an item dated January 20, 1999 reads: "The American Civil Liberties Union of Pennsylvania vowed to file a federal lawsuit to block an ordinance allowing the police to remove vagrants from city sidewalks." But let us return to France.

"The work ethic," writes Alan Forrest, "is very strict in revolutionary France. For the Jacobins in particular, the interests of the State come first. And those who do not contribute to the common good fail in their elemental duty." If Babeuf can protest against this attitude, which has as its effect to "make the poor responsible for their poverty" (Mazauric, 71) all agree that "bienfaisance" must not become an incentive to laziness.

In reality opinion is fundamentally divided on the attitude to have and the type of action to take: Must we consider the poor as "children of the motherland" toward whom "society has a debt of honor"? Or are they a "social plague who must be eradicated in the interest of the nation"? There lies, says Alan Forrest, "the difference between the humanitarian and the repressive tendency" (57-58). The Committee on Mendacity,

instituted in 1790, opts for the repressive method and creates “beggars’ depositories”—a solution, says Forrest, “which tends to destroy the external signs of begging rather than resolving the economic and social problems of poverty” (50). And yet, despite the real lack of help for the poor during the Revolution, due to any number of reasons, mainly economic, one principle returns constantly in the speeches and decrees which is summed up in the Declaration of Rights as a preamble to the Constitution of 1793:

Public aid is a sacred debt. Society owes subsistence to unfortunate citizens, either by obtaining work for them or by assuring the means of existing to those who cannot work.

Of course the debate already existed before 1789. In 1765 Rousseau had added to his *Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar* a note addressed to materialists:

Philosophers, your moral laws are very beautiful, but please, show me their sanction. (*Emile*, 409)

In his discourse of May 7, 1794 (18 Floréal of the year II), Robespierre, while praising Rousseau, takes up the arguments of the deistic philosophes before the Revolution. He accuses the atheists such as Guadet, Hébert, Danton and others of “drying up the heart” and of “erasing the idea of that beautiful morality” by tending to “justify egoism.” And he concludes by saying that “it is the religious sentiment” that “imprints in the soul the idea of a sanction given to moral precepts by a power superior to man.” In the decree he proposes, he places among the “duties of man”:

...to help the unfortunate, to respect the weak, to defend the oppressed, to do to others all the good one can, and to be unjust toward no one. (*Oeuvres*, 10: 453, 456, 463)

We might suggest that Robespierre should have practiced what he preached! But it is interesting to note that the problem which he brings

up is the one which had already divided the philosophes. It is still a current problem.

In 1961, at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions in California under the direction of Robert M. Hutchins, a group of intellectuals studied the idea of liberty and concluded that "virtue" was the cement of society. I quote from their report: "The relationship between virtue and political liberty is so intimate that American society depends more on the habitual moral responses of its members than on any system of laws to keep itself free" (*Religion and American Society*, 33). As to the basis for this morality, the unbelievers of the group admitted that historically religious principles were at the root of concepts such as the dignity of man and his inalienable rights, but they considered that Western man, having once known liberty, can maintain his sentiment of personal dignity without having recourse to a theological foundation (32). Others, like the Protestant minister Robert E. Fitch, insisted that "any agnostic or atheist in any country is always a parasite for ethical values on the religious heritage of that country" (13-14). Such arguments are reminiscent of the eighteenth-century debate.

It is evident that the Judeo-Christian heritage is the basis of our concern for "charity" toward the poor, and the concept of "fraternity" continues to inspire even those who reject its corollary, the paternity of God. A purely scientific vision would stress the survival of the fittest and would "purify" the human race by eliminating its weaker specimens, as Plato proposed to do in *The Republic* by exposing weaker children, in keeping with the custom of the ancients. Despite the optimism shown by the non-believers in the symposium already mentioned, it is legitimate to ask if the ethical tradition they uphold can survive without its religious foundation. We might point out for example that in this century the most brutal totalitarian regimes, those of Stalin and Hitler, formally banned this religious tradition and suppressed the notion of the "dignity" of the individual it requires.

Today there are examples of the more traditional notion of charity as in the Abbé Pietre's work among the poor in France or Mother Teresa's in India, but a counter-current to the Judeo-Christian ethic is the emphasis on self-interest both of the eighteenth-century Physiocrats as we have seen in Tutgot's *Encyclopedia* article, and further developed by

Adam Smith who postulated that the individual's concern exclusively with his own interest serves the common good in the long run. The classical capitalistic "trickle-down" theory of course influenced the cuts in welfare costs for the destitute in the era of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, who said that aid to the poor should be handled by private charities, not the government, and it still has its defenders. A recent *Newsweek* article indicated that with government reduction of welfare aid, private assistance is developing in the United States; but significantly, people prefer to give their time instead of money in volunteer work. As one interviewee is quoted as saying: "I prefer to give my time rather than money because that way I know exactly where it goes" (Jan. 13, 1992, 39).

A recent book by the present Minister of Health in France, Bernard Kouchner, is entitled *Charity Business*. This title suggests that the earlier notion of "charity" as love for one's neighbor has undergone a depersonalization and has become a "business" where the costs of salaries, elegant headquarters, and advertising equal and even surpass the sums allotted to the poor. A number of scandals in France, such as embezzlement of funds some years ago in the French Red Cross and more recently in an organization for cancer research called "L'Arc" have further discouraged private giving in France. An article in the November 27, 1998 issue of the *International Herald Tribune* is entitled: "French Charity: A Weak Culture of Giving in the Land of Fraternity." It underlines how the French government suspects and discourages private giving and prefers welfare aid distributed by its own agencies. In this respect it continues the Revolutionary view that aid to the poor should be detached from private giving and is a duty of the government toward its citizens. Today in France, the word "solidarity" has replaced "fraternity" which, except for its inscription with "liberty" and "equality" on government buildings has all but disappeared in official references to aid for the needy.

Is the West losing its Judeo-Christian roots? Voltaire had written that "Where charity is absent, the law is always cruel" (*Oeuvres complètes*, 25: 540) and in his deistic vision he had called man's concern for his neighbor a natural law. Although he rejected this view, Diderot wrote in his *Rameau's Nephew*: "There must be a certain dignity attached to man's

nature which nothing can stifle" (92). This human "instinct," as Voltaire had called it, which leads us to compassion for those who are suffering, is perhaps our best hope that the Judeo-Christian tradition will continue to sustain the moral values of our Western civilization.

Paris, France

NOTE

¹ An earlier, French version of this article was printed as "Le XVIII^e siècle, de la charité à la fraternité" in volume 11 (April 1993, entitled *La Charité*) of the *Autrement* "Séries Morales." This updated English version was given as a talk on May 7, 1999 in the Taft Lecture Series at the University of Cincinnati. Translations from the French are my own.

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