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## A Translation of Jean Meslier's "Lettres aux cures"

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### Abstract

Much of the current historical debate surrounding the Enlightenment centres on distinctions between the Radical and Moderate expressions of this intellectual movement. These debates attempt to judge the degree to which atheism and substance monism define, guide, or influence radical politics. Some intellectual historians support the idea that radical philosophy leads to radical politics; that point, however, is much debated. Jean Meslier's (1664–1729) 1729 *Testament* would tend to support such a connection between radical philosophy and radical politics. However, two letters that he left at the end of his life addressing his brethren in the priesthood offer a somewhat different perspective. In these letters, never before translated into English, we find different themes: instead of substance monism leading to atheism and driving radical, anti-monarchical, and anti-clerical politics, Meslier's empathy for his parishioners and his desire for truth lead him to suggest modest changes to existing social structures that involve the clergy's active support of the poor. Such a tone would seem to allow for a vision of enlightenment as an activity, as James Schmidt has suggested, promoting truth and justice, rather than one emphasizing irreconcilable philosophical positions.

### Introduction

In 1729, a village priest in France named Jean Meslier (b. 1664) died and left behind three copies of a manuscript that contained what he wanted his parishioners and fellow priests to know of his true thoughts toward the end of his life. This remarkable manuscript contains the first explicit confession of atheism in the Western world, a lengthy series of proofs that claim that all religion is false, arguments that the drastic inequality that he witnessed in his day arose from the abuses of these religious lies, and a call to eliminate the reprehensible injustices that constantly beset the poor that he served. Its 600 pages of small, neat, but somewhat difficult-to-read handwriting are supplemented by two short letters to his brethren in the priesthood. This manuscript (minus the letters), which has come to be called Meslier's *Testament*, was originally transcribed by Rudolf Charles and published in 1864;<sup>1</sup> Charles' edition was followed in 1970 by a critical edition that was supplemented by Meslier's marginalia, Voltaire's shortened "edition" of Meslier's work, and the two letters mentioned above.<sup>2</sup> When the work was finally translated into English in 2009 (subsequently out of print), this edition did not include these two letters.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Meslier, *Le Testament de Jean Meslier*, 3 vols., ed. Rudolf Charles (Amsterdam: La Librairie Étrangère, 1864).

<sup>2</sup> Jean Meslier, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 3 vols., eds. Jean Deprun, Roland Desné, and Albert Soboul (Paris: Anthropos, 1970).

<sup>3</sup> Jean Meslier, *Testament: Memoir of the Thoughts and Sentiments of Jean Meslier*, trans. Michael Shreve (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2009).

One might think that, by virtue of their relative brevity, the two letters contain little of import, given that we have the complete *Testament*; this is far from true. In fact, they provide insights into the mind of a dying and tranquil atheist long before the more famous David Hume died without God and without anxiety. They contain calls to his fellow priests to use reason to reject superstition, direct declarations of his own disbelief, and passages of tremendous empathy for the poor that he served on a daily basis. This empathy makes these letters, above all, remarkably human documents. In them, Meslier may chastise his fellow priests for practising idolatry, abusing the poor, and teaching errors (the word “error” appears forty-three times in the first letter alone), but he also pleads with them to have pity on and help the poor: help them because they barely have “enough to sustain their poor lives;” help them because they “groan under the unsupportable yoke of tyranny;” don’t tell them things that “prevent them from calmly enjoying life’s blessings;” and above all, stop torturing their minds “with punishments from God and the eternal tortures of a dreadful hell that does not exist.”

Beyond the insight the letters provide into Meslier’s sympathetic personality, they have important historical value. In particular, they remind us that, as James Schmidt has suggested, *enlightenment* was an activity, something that one did — teach truth, help others overcome error, promote justice — and not merely an intellectual stance or a label for a historical period.<sup>4</sup> This becomes particularly apparent in the first letter, where Meslier reminds his fellow priests that when society inevitably experiences a massive change and the nobility loses its power, the people will need “wise and enlightened people to teach [them] about natural sciences and morality” and that priests will be “perfectly suited for this work.” This statement is far removed from the sentiments of an uneducated villager that Meslier recounts in the second chapter of the *Testament*: “His wish was that all the rulers of the earth and all the nobles be hanged and strangled with the guts of the priests.”<sup>5</sup> Meslier’s letters remind us that these are not *his* sentiments; the role that Meslier sees for priests in a world without superstition and tyranny is that of an *enlightener*. His fellow priests could easily fill this role because, according to Meslier, “Most people already see for themselves the errors and the abuses that keep them down; they only need a little help in this regard, and a little more enlightenment to see clearly the vanity and to entirely free their minds.”<sup>6</sup> Priests, he claims, could do that if they would only open their minds to reason, a sentiment echoed in the *Testament* where he admits that “bishops and parish priests” are not “completely useless” because they are supposed to “teach good manners and . . . moral virtues.”<sup>7</sup>

This view of “the people” as being able to “see for themselves” and as needing only “a little help” to “free their minds” is a radical departure from the views of the great French thinkers who preceded and immediately followed Meslier. In Meslier’s France, the people to whom Meslier wanted to extend enlightenment were considered incapable of even modest intellectual achievements; they were irredeemably vulgar and superstitious. Even Diderot, a most empathetic man, saw no means of bringing modern, enlightened thinking to the minds of the masses.<sup>8</sup> And Voltaire insisted not only that the difference between the common people and those who had time and inclination to think was unbridgeable, but that such a separation was desirable — that we do service to all by separating “the stupid people” from honourable people, and that it is “essential that there be ignorant wretches.” In fact, he feared popular education and dismissed it as socially useless.<sup>9</sup> Helvétius wrote that the common people lived in “a state

<sup>4</sup> James Schmidt, “What Enlightenment Was, What It Still Might Be, and Why Kant May Have Been Right after All,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 15 (2006): 647–663.

<sup>5</sup> Meslier, *Testament*, 37.

<sup>6</sup> That is, to see the vanity of their beliefs and to free their minds of superstition.

<sup>7</sup> Meslier, *Testament*, 283.

<sup>8</sup> Harry C. Payne, *The Philosophes and the People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 13–15.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 95–97.

of habitual delirium" equivalent to "madness."<sup>10</sup> Even Rousseau, the great defender of the downtrodden, wrote that "the poor have no need of education."<sup>11</sup> The French *philosophes* prior to 1750 generally regarded the common people with "a sense of despair at the general wretchedness, illiteracy, and brutishness of the poor, which appeared by and large incurable."<sup>12</sup>

However, in the latter part of the eighteenth century, a number of important French thinkers began to come around to Meslier's point of view, despite not knowing that it was his. In the 1760s, economists known as Physiocrats, who sought to institute freer markets in the grain trade, saw universal education as the most viable means to overcome popular resistance to such changes, and even suggested that parish priests could serve as teachers.<sup>13</sup> In 1763, René de la Chalotais published a book proposing a national educational system for all;<sup>14</sup> in 1768, Abbé Baudeau suggested that universal education was a governmental duty; in 1775, Turgot proposed a "council on national education" to promote and ensure universal education. Eventually, these general calls for reform took on greater detail as thinkers such as Mercier de la Rivière saw the instruction of civic responsibility to be an essential part of education, a sentiment with which Turgot agreed.<sup>15</sup>

No one, however, promoted a broader or more coherent plan for universal education than Condorcet. His *Report on Education* (1792) claimed that education was essential if people were to keep from living stagnant lives; that the sexes should be educated together to promote sociality; that the educational system should be entirely secular; that education should promote a critical mentality toward everything from political structures to religious beliefs; and that education should focus on instruction in science and scientific advances.<sup>16</sup> From 1760 to 1780, therefore, the basic hope regarding education that Meslier promoted in his final letters, and which the early *philosophes* such as Diderot, d'Holbach, Helvétius, and Voltaire rejected, grew from a basic faith that the people could learn to reason properly into elaborate educational plans at the foundation of French Enlightenment thought. And while Meslier's brief letters — of which none of these thinkers knew — certainly had no direct impact on ideas regarding popular education, it remains fascinating that, in some way, he saw past the objections that even great thinkers such as Diderot and Voltaire raised regarding the education of the masses.

A second reason these letters have historical value is that they add nuance to discussions regarding Radical Enlightenment. Some Enlightenment historians propose a strong link among materialism, atheism, and radical politics<sup>17</sup> and cite Meslier as exemplary in this regard.<sup>18</sup> While parts of Meslier's *Testament* certainly give the impression that his atheism and substance monism lead to a call for outright rebellion culminating in something akin to communism,<sup>19</sup> and while he is "often interpreted as one of the earliest advocates for communism,"<sup>20</sup> these two letters give a slightly different impression. In them, materialism is

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>11</sup> Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, cited in Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment, An Interpretation: The Science of Freedom* (New York: Norton, 1977), 519.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment, An Interpretation: The Science of Freedom* (New York: Norton, 1977), 519.

<sup>13</sup> Payne, *The Philosophes*, 97.

<sup>14</sup> J. Salwyn Schapiro, *Condorcet and the Rise of Liberalism* (New York: Octagon Books, 1963), 197.

<sup>15</sup> Payne, *The Philosophes*, 99–106.

<sup>16</sup> Schapiro, *Condorcet*, 196–214.

<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 11–12.

<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670–1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 724–728.

<sup>19</sup> Meslier, *Testament*, 303–308.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Devellennes, "Radical Atheism: Jean Meslier in Context," in *Reassessing the Radical Enlightenment*, ed. Steffen Ducheyne (New York: Routledge, 2017), 160.

not mentioned as the foundation for atheism, nor is atheism the foundation for radical politics; instead, the pursuit of truth and justice is foundational; these are the bedrock of Meslier's thought.

This assessment accords with a contemporary description of him as "extremely rigid in favor of justice."<sup>21</sup> In this sense, Meslier's letters are not documents of the Radical Enlightenment as his *Testament* is commonly and properly classified, but rather deeply human documents that hope to inspire others to undertake the cause of enlightening the less informed and less fortunate. This does not imply that Meslier does not belong to the Radical Enlightenment — in many ways he epitomizes it; it simply means that whatever radicalism one finds in Meslier could be considered to grow out of his personal pursuit of truth and of justice. Perhaps his substance monism emerged from his atheism, his atheism from his love of truth, and his revolutionary politics from his empathy and his desire for justice.

In conclusion, these two relatively obscure letters from one of the Enlightenment's bravest and most radical thinkers shed light on several key historiographical issues of the Enlightenment. First, they lead us to consider an important and largely neglected interpretation of enlightenment as an activity rather than as an intellectual movement. This is not to suggest that interpretations of the Enlightenment that treat that age as an intellectual movement are incorrect; it merely suggests that contemporary thinkers may have considered the goal of disseminating truth to be on par with pursuing it. Second, the letters suggest that the foundation of Meslier's radical politics may lie not in his materialist philosophy, but rather in a more human goal of seeking justice. Again, this does not imply that radical political positions could not arise from radical philosophical ones; but it does suggest the possibility for deeper scholarly investigation into the idea that Radical Enlightenment politics — especially in the second half of the eighteenth century — could be founded in simpler humanitarian notions such as the pursuit of universal justice. Third, the letters reveal an unusual faith in the abilities of the lower classes in eighteenth-century France. Given that no scholarship known to this author has uncovered such contemporary faith in the intellectual powers of "the people" of that age, these letters may provide encouragement to seek for other similar examples.

### **A Note on the Translation**

As any translator knows, balancing the literal translation with the intended meaning in the target language is difficult. Sometimes, the best choice is to stay close to the original despite potentially awkward syntax; other times the governing syntax of the original should be abandoned for the more nuanced meaning of the target language. This problem occurs in Meslier's two letters, as it would with nearly any eighteenth-century French writer. But Meslier is troublesome for other reasons as well. He tends to be extremely precise in his use of language — one could say that he seems obsessed with not being misunderstood. A perfect example of this hair-splitting comes in the opening sentence: "You will no doubt be surprised, and perhaps even more than surprised — I dare say astonished. . . ." Most would have been satisfied with "surprised." This type of precision can sometimes lead to very long sentences with convoluted syntax. To alleviate this problem somewhat, Meslier's original punctuation is not always retained. In some cases, the length of single sentences has demanded that they be divided to make them easier to follow.

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<sup>21</sup> See Meslier, *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 3, page 390: we might say, "unyielding when it came to injustice."

### First Letter

Gentlemen,<sup>22</sup>

You will no doubt be surprised, and perhaps even more than surprised — I dare say astonished — when you learn about the thoughts and feelings with which I have lived and with which I will have ended my days; but I am also persuaded, gentlemen, that if each of you were to use only the natural lights of your minds, and consider a little carefully the reasons that there are to think and speak as I have done about the errors and abuses that are commonly and universally seen in the world, your astonishment will easily turn to respect; and perhaps then you will immediately find yourselves in another state of astonishment more well-founded than the first; this other astonishment will be seeing that so many gross errors, and so many evil abuses could have been established and preserved for so long, so strongly and so universally in the world without anyone knowing and without anyone wanting to disabuse people of them, nor to openly speak out against so many detestable errors and so many wicked abuses, despite how many wise and enlightened people there have been in all ages that seemed to oppose these errors and impede their progress.

It is you, gentlemen, who have the keys to science and wisdom, to know how to discern good from bad, vice from virtue, the true from the false, and the truth from error, lies, and imposture; it is up to you to instruct the people, not in the errors of idolatry, nor in the vanity of superstition, but in the science of truth and justice and in the science of every kind of virtue and good morals; you are all being paid to do that; this is why the people give you so much to live at ease with while they suffer working night and day, sweating,<sup>23</sup> barely having enough to sustain their poor lives, and it is not their intention to pay you well to keep them in error nor in vain superstitions under whatever pretext of religion it may be. And you yourselves, gentlemen, for your part, it should not be your intention either to want to teach them errors, or to want to keep them in vain superstitions; perhaps you yourselves believe blindly that which you make them believe blindly. Because if you do not believe, and notwithstanding this, you only wanted for political reasons or out of self-interest, to teach them errors and keep them in vain superstitions to better serve you and yours, and to better make a profit in this way, you will act not only dishonestly, but faithlessly, and against the love that you owe them; and they might, in this case, look upon you not as true and faithful pastors, but rather as deceivers, and as impostors or as unworthy scoffers who would take advantage of the ignorance and simplicity of those who do you so much good and who place so much trust in you. That being the case, please excuse me, gentlemen, if I say it: this being so, I would dare to say that you would not deserve to see the light of day nor to eat the bread that you eat.<sup>24</sup> And if it is not truly your intention to teach them errors nor to keep them in vain superstitions, then it is no doubt not your intention to be in error either, nor to keep yourselves in vain superstitions, because I imagine that no one would want to deceive himself, nor allow himself to be deceived, particularly in matters of this nature; the most pious, the most devout, the most zealous, and the best intentioned should feel full of indignation to see himself duped by errors and superstitions, by so many vain and false religions that there are in the world; and this being so, which one must assume, examine with all seriousness, gentlemen, what you blindly believe, and what you make others blindly believe. Because wishing to be content to believe blindly, this is wanting to expose one's self to error, it is to want to be deceived, and it is impossible to not fall into error following such an

<sup>22</sup> This letter is addressed "To the gentlemen, priests of the neighborhood of Est. and their colleagues." The letters come from Meslier, *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 3, 181–206.

<sup>23</sup> The manuscript reads: "à la sueur [unintelligible word] de leurs corps" (to the sweat of their bodies). Desné may have left this word out because it appears that Meslier may have accidentally repeated "de leurs."  
<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10721195w/f323.item.zoom>.

<sup>24</sup> Meslier put the phrase after this colon in parentheses.

obvious principle of error and deceit. Did your leader not tell you, or at least did he himself not say to his first disciples, that “if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch” (Matthew 15:14).<sup>25</sup> Yes, he certainly said it. Because believing blindly is like walking blindly; it is to obviously expose yourself to falling into a trap of errors, lies, and imposture.

Gentlemen, challenge that blind belief; challenge those blind impressions that you have received since birth and from your education; grasp things more deeply; go back to the source of everything that has made you believe blindly; carefully weigh the reasons that there are to believe or to not believe, what your religion teaches you and so absolutely compels you to believe. I am sure that if you follow properly the natural light of your mind, you will see at least as well and as certainly as I do, that all the religions of the world are nothing but human inventions and that everything that your religion teaches you and compels you to believe as supernatural and divine is at bottom nothing but error, lies, illusions, and imposture. I have given clear and evident proofs and they are as conclusive as they can possibly be in any kind of science; I put them in writing and I have filed them with the Office of Justice of this parish to serve as testimony of the truth to the people, if it seems good to them.<sup>26</sup> Whoever wishes to see what is in it, provided they<sup>27</sup> are left there, because it is not the customary policy in our France to allow writings of this nature to become public, nor to remain in the hands of the people, because they would make them see all too clearly the manner in which they are abused, and the indignity and injustice with which they are treated. But the more it is forbidden to read and to publish these kinds of writings, the more they should be read and published everywhere, in order to better confound the errors, superstitions, and tyranny; “let all them be confounded that do vain things.”<sup>28</sup>

It is not the time to inveigh against me, gentlemen, nor to act like those idolatrous Ephesians who, in like circumstances, vehemently defended their great Diana of Ephesus (Acts 19:23).<sup>29</sup> It is not time to hurl anathemas, insults, and calumnies against me; it would not suit you. And it will not, in the end, make your cause any better, nor mine the worse. It is a matter of — or rather, it will be a matter of — seriously examining my reasons and proofs; it will be a matter of seeing if they are truly solid and convincing, and seeing if they are well-founded, or if they are not. In a word, it is a question of knowing if what I have said is true, or if it is false — that is what should be examined without passion and without prejudice, as well as without falsifying anything that I have said or written. And if after having done a serious examination, you find that I effectively say the truth and that my reasons and my proofs are truly solid and convincing as well as conclusive as I claim, it will be up to you, gentlemen, to generously but prudently take up and sustain the party of truth on behalf of the truth itself and on behalf of the people who groan under the

<sup>25</sup> All biblical citations, whether Meslier uses French or Latin, are from the King James Version of the Bible. Where the book and verse are cited in parentheses in this translation, it is because Meslier included these in the body of the text in parentheses. Where Meslier included both the French and the Latin versions, only one English translation is included.

<sup>26</sup> I have rendered the word “lui” (singular: “him”) as “them” in this case to refer to “the people.” Roland Desné (vol. 3, 186) notes that it is unclear who the “him” (“lui” in the original) refers to because it could refer to either “the people” or to the clerk of the Office of Justice (“le greffe de la justice”), both of whom are mentioned in this sentence and both of which are singular nouns in French. Meslier could mean “if it seems appropriate to the ‘greffe’ to share his writings,” or he could mean, “if it seems wise to the people to read my writings.” Given Meslier’s persistent concern to help “the people,” I have opted for “them;” however, “him” would be a perfectly acceptable translation.

<sup>27</sup> I.e., his writings.

<sup>28</sup> “Confundantur omnes facientes vana.” The editors of Meslier’s *Oeuvres Complètes* note that this comes from an unknown source. The *Online Catalogue for Mass and Office Chants* identifies this as coming from a chant which in its full form reads “Etenim universi qui te exspectant non confundentur confundantur omnes facientes vana” (<http://cantusindex.org/id/g00698b>). The translation is taken from the *Tridentine Latin Rite Missal Project* at <http://missale.heliohost.org/emberwedlent.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Although Meslier cites Acts 19:23, he appears to be referring to Acts 19:28.

unsupportable yoke of tyranny and vain superstitions as you see them do every day. "For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now" (Romans 8:22). And if you do not dare any more than I to speak out openly during your lifetime against so many detestable errors and so many pernicious abuses that reign so powerfully in the world, you must remain silent for now and at least at the end of your life declare the truth. But if on the other hand you suggest that I myself am in error, that I have not spoken the truth, and that my reasons and my proofs are not solid and convincing, it is up to you to refute them and to make their falsity or their weakness plainly seen; and this is what must be shown, not by means of vain and frivolous reasons, like those that are commonly asserted at times like this, but by reasons that are at least as clear, at least as strong, at least as convincing, and at least as conclusive as are those that I have used to combat the errors and abuses of which I have spoken. Otherwise, and failing to do so, it must be recognized that you are in error and that you teach errors; because if the truth were on your side, the reasons and the proofs could not fail to be stronger and more convincing on your side than the other, according to the maxim of the Book of Wisdom itself, which says evil cannot conquer wisdom, therefore neither can error conquer the truth: "But vice shall not prevail against wisdom" (Wisdom of Solomon 7:30). If this saying is true, it is particularly so on this occasion, gentlemen, that wisdom must overcome evil and that truth must conquer error and lies, so that if your reasons and proofs are not at least as clear, as certain, as convincing and as conclusive as those that I have employed to prove all that I have put forward, it is necessary, as I said, to recognize that you are in error and that you teach errors. And if you recognize that these are indeed errors and abuses, you must tell the people and try to deliver them from tyrannical domination, from the rich, from the nobility and the great ones of the earth, as well as from errors and from vain superstitions of religion that only vainly disturb their minds' rest and prevent them from calmly enjoying life's blessings and to hold them all the more miserably captive under the tyrannical domination of the rich and the great ones of the earth; and instead of these errors, abuses, and these vain superstitions of religion; and in place of tyrannical laws of the princes and kings of the earth, laws and regulations must be established everywhere in line with correct reason, with justice, and with natural equality; which laws and regulations no one could reasonably find difficult to obey since reason is timeless and common to all men, which is to say, to all people and to all the nations of earth who cannot ask for anything better, perhaps, than to follow the rules of right reason and of natural justice. And perhaps it would be the only true way of happily uniting the minds of men and putting an end to all the bloody, cruel, and disastrous divisions that differences of religion, ambition, and self-interest of princes and kings of the earth bring forth so often and so wrongly among themselves, which would provide for them everywhere an inestimable abundance of peace and an inexhaustible abundance of goods, which might render them perfectly happy and content in life, if they knew how to use it well.<sup>30</sup>

This would allow wise men to pass on to others the rules and instructions of true wisdom, who must also flee from all errors and superstitions, and from all vices and wickedness, and who must teach men to make good use of all things. From whom gentlemen, from whom will the people receive these truly wise rules and instructions if not from you? It will not be, for example, from those soft and effeminate men who only give themselves to the pleasures of the senses; for the natural and carnal man, as our Saint Paul says, does not perceive or comprehend the things of the spirit, nor could he even comprehend them. How could he teach them to others? "But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God" (I Corinthians 2:14). It will not be from the rich, nor from the nobles and the great of the earth who want every day to haughtily dominate everything, and who by means of the errors and superstitions of religion worsen and every day make more burdensome the yoke of their tyrannical domination. For example, see how the tyranny of our kings is increased and how far it has ascended since the reign of Charles VII, when it was

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<sup>30</sup> Meslier is referring to the establishment of justice for everyone based upon principles of reason.

already piteous, as the Sr. de Commines says (in his *Memoirs*), “up until our times!”<sup>31</sup> And if this continues, what will become of the people? There will be nothing left for them to sustain a miserable life, and they will at last be compelled to rise up, and to do as those unfortunate, defeated people do who find no salvation except in despair, the last refuge of the unfortunate: “One hope there is for vanquished men, to cherish hope no more.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, it will not be from these proud and haughty tyrants that the people will receive the truly wise rules and instructions of which I speak. Nor will it be from these pedants and ambitious gentlemen, the bishops and prelates, who willingly would be worshipped on earth since it is on the very foundation of these errors, abuses, and superstitions that all their greatness is founded; and if these errors and superstitions should end, their greatness would end as well. You do not have to fear such a large inconvenience to yourselves, gentlemen, because when that change arrives,<sup>33</sup> your fall, if you should fall, won’t be from very high, nor will it be as rough as that of the gentlemen of which I speak, who will be extremely astonished to see themselves fall from so high because it is necessary that there be in all republics, and in all well-regulated communities, wise and enlightened people to teach others about natural sciences and morality and to entirely uproot errors and superstitions; you would be, if you wanted, perfectly suited for this work, and by this means you could still hold a position of considerable import in society and thus you could honourably regain what you will have lost. This is what the magistrates and all other officers of the police should not oppose at all; on the contrary, they ought rather to lend their hands willingly because they themselves should be very happy to see themselves as well as the others delivered from the tyrannical yoke of the domination of the great, and from the unsupportable yoke of error and superstition. It is from you in particular, gentlemen, that the people should receive these truly wise rules and instructions which consist of fleeing from all errors, superstitions, vices, and wickedness; and therefore you must tell them the truth and not enjoy keeping them in error and vain superstitions, nor see them tread on and tyrannized as they are every day by the rich and the nobles and the great ones of the earth. Errors and superstition have ruled the world for a long time; tyranny has ruled over it a long time; from now on, it will be time to end this. Your supposed holy prophets said that idols would end, that they would cease to appear, that they would be entirely destroyed, and that the very names of these idols would be entirely banished from the earth, and therefore idolatry will be no more, “Your idols may cease,” says a prophet, “I will destroy the idols” (Ezekiel 6:6 and 30:13). “And the idols he shall utterly abolish” (Isaiah 2:18). “I will cut off the names of the idols out of the land” (Zechariah 13:2).

Gentlemen, these supposed prophecies should have been fulfilled a long time ago. If you say that they are accomplished among you,<sup>34</sup> that you are not idolaters, and that you do not worship idols, it should be easy to convince you of this fact,<sup>35</sup> since you effectively worship weak little images of dough and flour, and that you honour images of wood and plaster, and images of gold and silver, as idolaters do. Gentlemen, you will be praised for putting an end to those idolatries and for revealing in our days the fulfilment of all that has been predicted concerning the destruction of all these vain idols. And you will be praised everywhere for destroying that detestable reign of errors and iniquity and establishing in its place the sweet and peaceful reign of truth and justice. Give, then, if you can, this pleasure to the people; all kinds of natural duties oblige you to do so; you are, you say, the peoples’ shepherds; they are therefore your flock; they are

<sup>31</sup> Philippe de Commines died in 1511. Meslier is implying that if things were intolerable for the poor centuries prior and that their condition was worsening, their situation may be hopeless, as the next line indicates.

<sup>32</sup> “Una salus victis, nullam sperare salute.” The editors of Meslier’s *Oeuvres Completes* point out that this line comes from Virgil’s *Aeneid*, II, 354, which is rendered in French as “L’unique salut des vaincus est de n’espérer aucun salut.” The English translation is from *The Collected Works of William Morris*, vol. 11, *The Aeneids of Virgil* (II, 354).

<sup>33</sup> Meslier is referring to the inevitable rebellion of the people that will come from their increased desperation and poverty.

<sup>34</sup> That is, that the prophecies do not pertain to them.

<sup>35</sup> That is, of the fact that they are indeed idolaters.

your parents, your relatives, your allies, and your friends; they are all your benefactors since it is from them that you draw all your subsistence; they are your fellow men and your compatriots; these are the many powerful and pressing motives which must lead you to strenuously take their side. Join them to deliver them from slavery and to deliver yourselves as well; give them this joy; this is the greatest good that you could ever do for them. It would not be necessary for you to take up arms; you can certainly do more peacefully, by your prudent advice, by your wise counsels, and by your learned writings, than you would by tumultuously making war. It will be easy for you to disabuse the people if you but follow the natural lights of right reason, without vainly allowing prejudice or the superstitions of your mythical religion to stop you. Most people already see for themselves the errors and the abuses that keep them down; they only need a little help in this regard, and a little more enlightenment to see clearly the vanity and to entirely free their minds; but they badly need other help: above all, unity and understanding among them to be delivered from the tyrannical power of the great ones of the earth; and they should be exhorted to maintain unity and understanding among them.

Gentlemen, you foster hope in them with promises of an alleged deliverance and an alleged spiritual redemption of their souls, made possible, you say, by the infinite merits of the death and passion of your divine Jesus crucified. But they need a more real good and a truer deliverance than that one; this deludes them and abuses them and only offers false hope as you do with an alleged deliverance — or redemption — that is merely imaginary, and of which your own supposed holy<sup>36</sup> prophets have never pretended to speak, when they announce to their people that God will deliver them from captivity, and that he would send them a powerful redeemer. True deliverance — or redemption — which the people need, and of which even the aforesaid supposed holy prophets have spoken, is the one that will deliver them, or should deliver them from all slavery, from all idolatry, from all superstitions, and from all tyranny, to make them live happily on earth in justice and peace, having an abundance of all things. It is just such a deliverance, gentlemen, it is just such a redemption that the people need, and not an imaginary redemption like the one you use to give them hope. For the poor, the true original sin is having been born, as they are, in poverty, in misery, in dependence, and under the tyranny of the great; it is necessary to deliver them from this detestable and cursed sin.

You delude yourselves, gentlemen, by figuratively interpreting and explaining allegorically and mystically the vain Scriptures that you call nonetheless holy and divine; you give them whatever meaning you want; you make them say everything that you want by means of these beautiful, supposedly spiritual and allegorical meanings that you fabricate for them and that you assign to them, in order to find supposed truths which are not there, and which never were there. But at bottom, what are all these beautiful figures and all these beautiful spiritual, allegorical, and mystical interpretations that you lend to your Scriptures? As the learned Saint Jerome in his *Epistle to Paulinus* says, they are nothing but frivolities and mummeries like those made by actors of farces and comedies; “This is frivolous,” he says, “and like a charlatan’s sleight-of-hand.”<sup>37</sup> I would dare say that you act in some ways like those supposed wise men of whom our St. Paul speaks, “They become lost,” he says, “who go astray and who lose themselves in the vanity of their thoughts, and who think themselves wise, yet become fools” (Romans 1:21).<sup>38</sup> Indeed, wanting to interpret and explain the Scriptures so vainly in this way is to want to be manifestly deceived and blinded.

You also delude yourselves when you dispute vain questions among yourselves about efficacious grace or sufficient grace and many other similar vain questions of your religion that Saint Paul himself calls

<sup>36</sup> Meslier apparently abbreviated “saintes” (holy) as “ss<sup>ts</sup>”; in the second letter, he uses the abbreviation “s<sup>ts</sup>.”

<sup>37</sup> “peurilia sunt haec, et ciculatorum ludo similia.” St. Jerome Epistle 53 to Paulinus. This sentence has also been translated “But all this is puerile, and resembles the sleight-of-hand of a mountebank.”

[http://www.tertullian.org/fathers2/NPNF2-06/Npnf2-06-03.htm#P1993\\_495856](http://www.tertullian.org/fathers2/NPNF2-06/Npnf2-06-03.htm#P1993_495856).

<sup>38</sup> This “quotation” is based upon Romans 1:21–22, but is not taken exactly from that verse. In this instance, I have translated it from the French.

“foolish questions and disputes about the law” (Titus 3:9). You have heated debates, some are for one side, some for another; this, at bottom, it is greater madness than that of those who fought for the shade cast by an ass.<sup>39</sup> And none of you pay attention to the gross errors and superstitions that this religion teaches you; the same is true no matter what these errors and idolatries may be, just as you pay no attention to the tyrannies of princes and kings, from whom all the evils that desolate the earth arise, and “who desolate it,” as a prophet says, “because no one cares for it and no one thinks about it;” “the whole land is made desolate, because no man layeth it to heart” (Jeremiah 12:11).<sup>40</sup>

Gentlemen, you also exercise your zeal denouncing and casting invectives against the vices of the people, against the slightest fault, against the slightest defect, against the slightest immodesty you see in them; you exaggerate their gravity and their enormity; you threaten them terribly with punishments from God and the eternal tortures of a dreadful hell that does not exist; yet you never speak out against public thieves nor against the gross injustice of those who govern the people, who plunder them, who trample upon them, ruin them, oppress them, and are the cause of all the evils and miseries that crush them. Vanity! Vanity! It is foolish vanity! Gentlemen, it is primarily against the errors of idolatry and against religious superstition, against public thieves, and against the gross injustices of a tyrannical government that you should fight, since these errors and these injustices are, as it is even said in your holy Scriptures, the source, the origin, the cause, the beginning and the end, that is to say the pinnacle of all the evils that are seen in the world, “For the worshipping of idols not to be named is the beginning, the cause, and the end, of all evil” (Wisdom of Solomon 14:27). Therefore, it is against all these detestable errors and against all these detestable injustices and tyrannies that you ought primarily to direct your zeal.

I am pleased to say all this before I die, and I must not avoid saying it, since it is so, and because I don't see anyone else saying it. If you blame me, I can say honestly, I am not troubled by that, especially because I speak for justice and the truth itself. I would gladly have, gentlemen, the honour of your approbation in this matter; I would gladly be your friend and friend of all honest people, but more willingly still be a friend of justice and truth, as he who said, “Plato is my friend; Aristotle is my friend; but I love truth even more.” And if you find me praiseworthy, I would not think to boast about it; nor do I hope for compliments, censures, or even a reply, because I shall soon leave the country; and I must leave, that is to say, end my days, before this letter is delivered to you. This is why if you have a reply to make, please address it to the public. Perhaps there will be someone among the people who will, if need be, defend my cause, or rather defend the cause of the people; because this has nothing to do with me, nor my particular interest on this occasion; it is about nothing less than the preservation of truth, and the restoration of good and public freedom — causes for which all men should sacrifice themselves. Let the public therefore defend its cause, if it chooses to, and as it sees fit. For my part, it is enough to have said what I thought; I will no longer take part in it; my time will be done. So now, gentlemen, I have only to say a last farewell to you, after which, if you still think it appropriate to say a devout *rest in peace*<sup>41</sup> for me, I wish that the prayer be for you, because for my part, I will no longer know what rest is, nor what peace is, nor what good and evil are; we must live to know these; the dead know nothing; it is a mistake to imagine otherwise; and this being so, it is useless to pray for the dead; it is useless to trouble ourselves for them; it is useless to pray to them; and it useless to me, gentlemen, for you to want now to absolve me of any civil duty, or even to tell me. . . .

<sup>39</sup> Meslier is referring to a fable in which a man rents a donkey and, during the heat of the day, rests in the shadow cast by the donkey. The donkey's owner protests that he rented the man the donkey but not the shade. A fight ensues and while they two men fight, the donkey runs off. <http://fablesaofaesop.com/the-ass-and-his-shadow.html>.

<sup>40</sup> Meslier is briefly summarizing a passage from the Bible. The first sentence is in French and the second sentence is in Latin: “Desolatione desolata est omnis terra, quia nullus est qui recogitet corde.”

<sup>41</sup> “requiescat in pace.”

Gentlemen,

Your very humble and obedient servant

Signed,

Jean Meslier, Priest of Est.p.g.i

### Second Letter

Sir,<sup>42</sup>

Seeing me as I think you do — near the end of my days, and therefore soon having nothing left to care for in the world — I no longer think it necessary to hide the truth; and I am very pleased to offer to the people, and especially to all our colleagues, for the public good, the reasons behind the thoughts and feelings with which I have lived. It is with this in mind, and at your pleasure, if you will, sir, that I address the enclosed letter to you, which I also ask you to communicate on your part to our colleagues, so that you will be the first to be informed, so that you can, if you deem it advisable, confer on it together, and judge as you see fit. I don't know what you will think, nor what you will say, any more than what you will say about me, for having put such thoughts in my will, and such a sketch<sup>43</sup> in my mind. Perhaps you will look at this project as a reckless act of madness; but no matter what judgements you reach, even if you judge me and my method unfavourably, I can say assuredly that the truth will always exist in itself, just as it is, because the truth does not depend on the will of men, nor upon any judgements they might make. It is up to them to conform to the truth, and to adjust their life to it, and not to it to adjust itself or accommodate itself to their fantasies, for this cannot be done. The truth, by virtue of being unknown, censured, or even persecuted, condemned, and oppressed — as is often the case among men — is not less true because of it. However beautifully men may speak or act, the truth will always be the truth; and in the same way, error will always be error even if it is permitted to be accepted, revered, and sanctioned. There is one of our supposed holy prophets who pronounces anathema — I would say misfortunes and a curse — against those who call evil good, and good evil; who make darkness light, and light darkness; and who make bitter sweet, and sweet bitter. "Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!" (Isaiah 5:20). If there were a reason, Sir, to fear the fulfilment of this supposed prophecy, it would be that you are all in danger of incurring the curse it threatens, since, it necessarily follows from the principles and maxims of your religion, that you often call evil good, and good evil; that you often make darkness light, and light darkness; and that you often make bitter sweet, and sweet bitter, as this prophet says. And this is why I have always hated and detested and cursed in my heart thousands upon thousands of times the vain and abusive duties of this, our vain and false ministry. But since we hardly see the effects of these kinds of curses upon those who most deserve to incur them,<sup>44</sup> this is also why they are barely noticed; and it is why it is not difficult now to call evil good, and good evil; nor is there any difficulty in making darkness light, and light darkness, nor in making the bitter sweet, and the sweet bitter. But even though those who most deserve to incur the curses of which this prophet speaks do not always incur them, they are certainly no less deserving of incurring them, and they are not, therefore, less deserving of blame and reproach. That is what ought to make you think very seriously, Sir, since truth and justice should always be the main object of your

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<sup>42</sup> This letter is addressed to "Monsieur le curé de... a..."

<sup>43</sup> Ideas, imaginings.

<sup>44</sup> That is, curses on those who confuse darkness and light, etc.

intentions. It should not be up to me, Sir, to show you or tell you such things. This should come from a great genius, and from a person of great authority and of greater rank than I, I admit it; I would much prefer it to be that way because it would have a greater effect on the minds of men. But since no one is willing to say it, Sir, please permit me, or at least suffer peacefully as I say it, in order to bring to pass in some way the words of our prophets that the “truth shall spring out of the earth” (Psalms 84:12).<sup>45</sup> Because the truth will, effectively, come from the earth if it comes from my mouth, since I am essentially nothing but dirt. But it would still be necessary, according to the same words of this prophet, for justice to look down from heaven — and not only look, but to descend from heaven, to subject all men to justice, and to establish among them a gentle and peaceful government; otherwise the poor can only expect to be forever miserable and unhappy in life. Whatever may be. The only thing I know now is that I will never again return to life; but I leave it willingly and without regrets; although I feel I have spent it gently and quietly enough, both in body and mind.<sup>46</sup>

Besides, I consider myself fortunate enough not to have had the misfortune to experience, like so many others, the harsh evils and afflictions of life. Farewell then, sir; I wish you happiness and peace; and truly,

I am your most humble servant.

Signed,  
Jean Meslier, Priest of Étrépigny<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Meslier cites this as coming from Psalms 84:12; it actually comes from Psalms 84:11.

<sup>46</sup> Here, Meslier adds the following note: “Unfortunately, I am on the verge of entirely losing my sight, which is more distressing than losing my life.”

<sup>47</sup> Meslier actually signed with initials: J. M., C. d’Est.