

Voltaire's House

and The Bible Society

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There is a popular anecdote among Christian apologists that Voltaire (1694-1778) once remarked that the Bible would soon become a forgotten book, but the house in which he made this prediction later became the headquarters of a Bible Society who used it to publish or distribute Bibles.

This ironic tale has been repeated in many books and web sites [1], frequently with contradictory details. The location of the house is usually given as Geneva [2], sometimes as Paris [3], and there are even occasional references to Germany and Austria.

The Bible society in question is variously identified as the Geneva Bible Society and the British and Foreign Bible Society. And the date this society is said to have occupied Voltaire's house ranges anywhere from twenty years to a hundred years after the death of Voltaire.

It is also noteworthy that the more ill-advised versions of the anecdote refer to Voltaire as an Atheist when he was in fact a Deist.

Voltaire Vindicated?

Most writers give no sources or citations for the anecdote; if Voltaire ever made such a predication about the fate of the Bible I was unable to trace it while researching this article.

But was Voltaire's house used by a Bible society? As a first step to

the Bible Societies of France, Switzerland and the UK to seek verification of the story.

A categorical denial was received from Pierre Barreto, Communications Officer of the Alliance Biblique Française:

That absurd rumor [was] born some time ago in the US but it is completely false: no house where Voltaire lived is currently or has been occupied by a Bible Society, and not even by a printing company working for a Bible Society, neither in France nor in Switzerland.

Dolly Clottu, Secretariat of the Société Biblique Suisse, wrote that:

We don't have and can't find any other information about this popular anecdote. I have asked a former General Secretary who lives in the surroundings of Lausanne and he is definite: he has never heard about this story.

Rosemary Mathew, Librarian of the UK Bible Society, responded, "the question of Voltaire's house is one that crops up every so often and we have a couple of documents which prove the story false".

These little-known documents held by the UK Bible Society include a record of correspondence between Margaret T. Hills (1898-1972), Librarian of the American Bible Society, and Voltaire's biographer,

who was director of the Institut et Musée Voltaire in Geneva. In response to a query from Hills about the Voltaire anecdote, Besterman wrote:

... None of Voltaire's homes is or ever has been connected in any way with any Bible Society. This applies to all Voltaire's homes, whether in France, Germany, Switzerland, or anywhere else. [4]

Hills concluded by expressing her hope that "none of the present American Bible Society folks are guilty of propagating this tale".

And according to another report on the anecdote:

...the closest affirmation of this version of the story is that the British and Foreign Bible Society depot in Paris stands on a site once occupied by a prison for those convicted of minor offences (embezzlement, debt, etc.) in which, according to the choice of sources, Voltaire may or may not have been confined. No other residence of his has been an office of any Bible Society. [5]

In the face of such authoritative denials, how did the anecdote originate? The earliest mention I have found occurs in Sidney Collett's *The Scripture of Truth*, originally published in the UK in 1905:

Voltaire, the noted French infi-

in one hundred years from his time Christianity would be swept into history. But what has happened? Only twenty-five years after his death the [British & Foreign Bible] Society was founded. His printing press, with which he printed his infidel literature, has since been used to print copies of the Word of God; and the very house in which he lived has been stacked with Bibles of the Geneva Bible Society. [6]

The Scripture of Truth (later published in the USA under the title *All About the Bible*) remained in print for many years; and if the Voltaire myth did not begin with Collett he was at least responsible for giving it widespread circulation. Although he gives no sources or references for the anecdote, his book continues to be quoted uncritically by latter-day apologists. [7]

The origin of the myth?

The available evidence suggests that the entire story probably arose from a misunderstanding of the 1849 Annual Report of the American Bible Society (ABS). In the appendix of that report we find an account of a speech given by William Snodgrass, an officer of the ABS:

...The committee had been able to redeem their pledge by sending \$10,000 to France, the country of Voltaire, who predicted that in the nineteenth century the Bible would be known only as a relic of antiquity. He [Snodgrass] could say, while on this topic, that the Hotel Gibbon (so-called from that celebrated infidel) is now become the very depository of the Bible Society, and the individual who superintends the building is an agent for the sale and receipt of the books. The very ground this illustrious scoffer often paced, has now become the scene of the operation and success of an institution established for the diffusion of the very book against which his efforts were directed. [8]

An inattentive reader of the above

en it to mean that the Bible Society had acquired a property formerly owned by Voltaire. The building referred to by Snodgrass was in fact a hotel in Lausanne, Switzerland, named after a completely different sceptic, the historian Edward Gibbon (1737-1794).

It seems reasonable to conclude that someone misread this 19th century document and began the Voltaire myth that continues to be "commonly reported until this day".

The Hotel Gibbon

A word needs to be said about the Hotel Gibbon, which appears to be the source of the myth. This hotel was constructed in Lausanne in 1839, not far from the site of La Grotte, the villa in which Gibbon completed his famous *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* [9]. The hotel served as a depot of the British & Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) from 1846-1858. An officer of the BFBS, James Graydon, "...established depots at Neuchatel, Berne, Zurich, Chur, St. Gall, Schaffhausen, Geneva, the Hotel Gibbon at Lausanne (in the garden of which Gibbon wrote the last line of his History in the moonlit night of the 27th June 1787) ..." [10]

A letter from Graydon published in the 45th Annual Report of the BFBS states:

I believe that the Gibbon Hotel is already quite a brilliant and truly rejoicing exception, as it respects the dissemination of holy writ, in the multitudinous list of hotels throughout Europe, if not the world. And is it not an extraordinary exception when we consider that the hotel bears the name, and is built in the very ground so long and often paced by him who so thoroughly hated the Gospel and did so much injury to its blessed cause? ... Some 4,000 copies of His word have now been sold in that very hotel. [11]

Gibbon was unpopular with devout Christians because of his sceptical treatment of Christianity in his *Decline and Fall*.

The Hotel Gibbon ceased to be a depot of the BFBS in 1858. The BFBS Annual Report for 1859 states:

The Committee regret to state, that the depot so long established at the Hotel Gibbon, Lausanne, has been necessarily withdrawn, in consequence of the new proprietor, after a brief experiment, declining to charge himself with the responsibility of superintending the sales. This depot has existed for nearly twelve years, and during that time, not fewer than 15,000 copies had been sold to travellers and others frequenting the hotel. Arrangements have been made for transferring the depot to a well-known bookseller's, situated in a frequent part of the town. [12]

It should be noted that although Voltaire and Gibbon both lived in Lausanne at various times in the 18th century [13], neither man lived on the actual site of the Hotel Gibbon.

Conclusion

By now readers may be curious to know the real fate of the various houses where Voltaire resided during his life:

Voltaire's mansion in the town of Ferney-Voltaire, France, is today a museum and arts centre.

His mansion in Geneva, Switzerland (Les Delices) is the headquarters of the Institut et Musée Voltaire.

Voltaire lived in two different houses in Lausanne. Neither of these houses is standing today. [14]

Voltaire died at what is now No. 27 Quai de Voltaire in Paris, France. This building is today occupied by a restaurant (Le Voltaire) and an antique dealer.

As to La Grotte, Gibbon's villa in Lausanne, the house was demolished in 1896 to make way for Lausanne's Central Post Office.

The Hotel Gibbon in Lausanne ceased to operate in 1920. The

quarters of the Société du Banque Suisse. [15]

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Notes

[1] "Voltaire declared over a century ago that God is dead, but his house today is headquarters of the Bible Society" - Letter to *The New Zealand Herald*, 3rd August 2003 by Wyn Fountain of Kohimarama, Auckland. Here we find a confusion within an error: it was Nietzsche, not Voltaire, who pronounced the death of God.

[2] "Voltaire, the skeptic, predicted that the Bible and Christianity would be swept into obsolescence, but only fifty years after his death the Geneva Bible Society used his press and house to produce stacks of Bibles." Norman Geisler & William Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press), 1968, p124. The Voltaire anecdote has been removed from the revised edition of this work (1986).

[3] "It was Voltaire, the French sceptic, who wrote in his study in Paris: 'I will go through the forest of the Scriptures and girdle all the trees, so that in one hundred years Christianity will be but a vanishing memory.' But the very room in which he wrote those words was later purchased by the British and Foreign Bible Society, and was packed from floor to ceiling with Bibles." David John Donnan, *Treasury of the Christian World*, edited by A. Gordon Nasby (New York: Harper & Brothers), 1953.

The quotation here attributed to Voltaire bears a suspicious resemblance to a

Paine (1737-1809) in his *Age of Reason* (1795):

I have now gone through the Bible, as a man would go through a wood with an axe on his shoulder, and fell trees. Here they lie; and the priests, if they can, may replant them. They may, perhaps, stick them in the ground, but they will never make them grow.

[4] Margaret T. Hills, *Voltaire Did NOT Say It!* Unpublished and undated article (?c.1960) held by the UK Bible Society. Besterman was evidently unaware of the existence of the Hotel Gibbon, as he goes on to incorrectly state that "there is no such place; this is obviously a mis-translation of 'hôtel Gibbon,' which simply means Gibbon's house".

[5] *Did Voltaire Say It?* Unpublished article dated 28 March 1972 with apparent signature 'M. B.', held by the UK Bible Society.

[6] Sidney Collett, *The Scripture of Truth*. London: S W Partridge & Co. Sixth Edition, 1910, p.63.

[7] See for example Geisler and Nix, op. cit.; Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (San Bernadino: Here's Life Publishers, 1979, p. 20). In correspondence with the present writer, secretarial staff representing Geisler and McDowell acknowledged that these apologists could not provide independent verification of Collett's account.

[8] Annual Report of the American Bible Society, 1849. Appendix, p. 98.

[9] Louis Polla, "Lausanne D'Hier et D'Aujourd'hui", *24 Heures*, 2nd August 1994.

[10] William Canton, *A History of the British and Foreign Bible Society*. London: John Murray, 1904. Some sources incorrectly state that Gibbon had lived on the actual site of the hotel, or that La Grotte was converted into the hotel after his death. The hotel was built long after Gibbon's death, and was in a different location from La Grotte.

[11] Cited in *Did Voltaire Say It?* Op. Cit.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Louis Polla, *Rues de Lausanne* (Lausanne: 24 Heures), 1981.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Louis Polla, "Lausanne D'Hier et D'Aujourd'hui" Op Cit.

Are Atheists dangerous? Apparently so, according to Ron Sims, the Democratic candidate for the governorship of Washington State. Sims was asked at a televised debate if he would appoint Atheists to a judgeship. Sims responded "I think it's important for a person to feel they are not the only answer and that if they don't have to account for what they say and what they do, those people are very dangerous. People who think they are the beginning and end of every question and answer are very dangerous people. Anyone who does not hold a belief in a higher authority is a very dangerous person "

Not only are we dangerous, but atheists are not competent to be journalists, if we are to believe one Dominic Steele, who works with an organisation called Christians in the Media in Sydney. Writing in the Sydney Anglican newspaper, Southern Cross, Steele said "it isn't enough for a report to be strictly accurate in that there are no false quotes or sentences. The whole story needs to be packaged and presented in such a way that it accurately describes reality". This is something atheists cannot do, "because the foundation of their universe - their basic worldview - is faulty, and ultimately they will never portray reality accurately".

Apparently, "the only way that we can be holistically truthful is if we grasp what lies at the base of all reality...the message that Jesus is the Son of the Father." An absence of this knowledge did not stop several Australian journalists uncovering some very unpleasant truths about the activities of clergy in both the Anglican and Catholic churches in Australia in recent years.

Which leaves us wondering, would these people dare say the same thing about Muslims or Jews?