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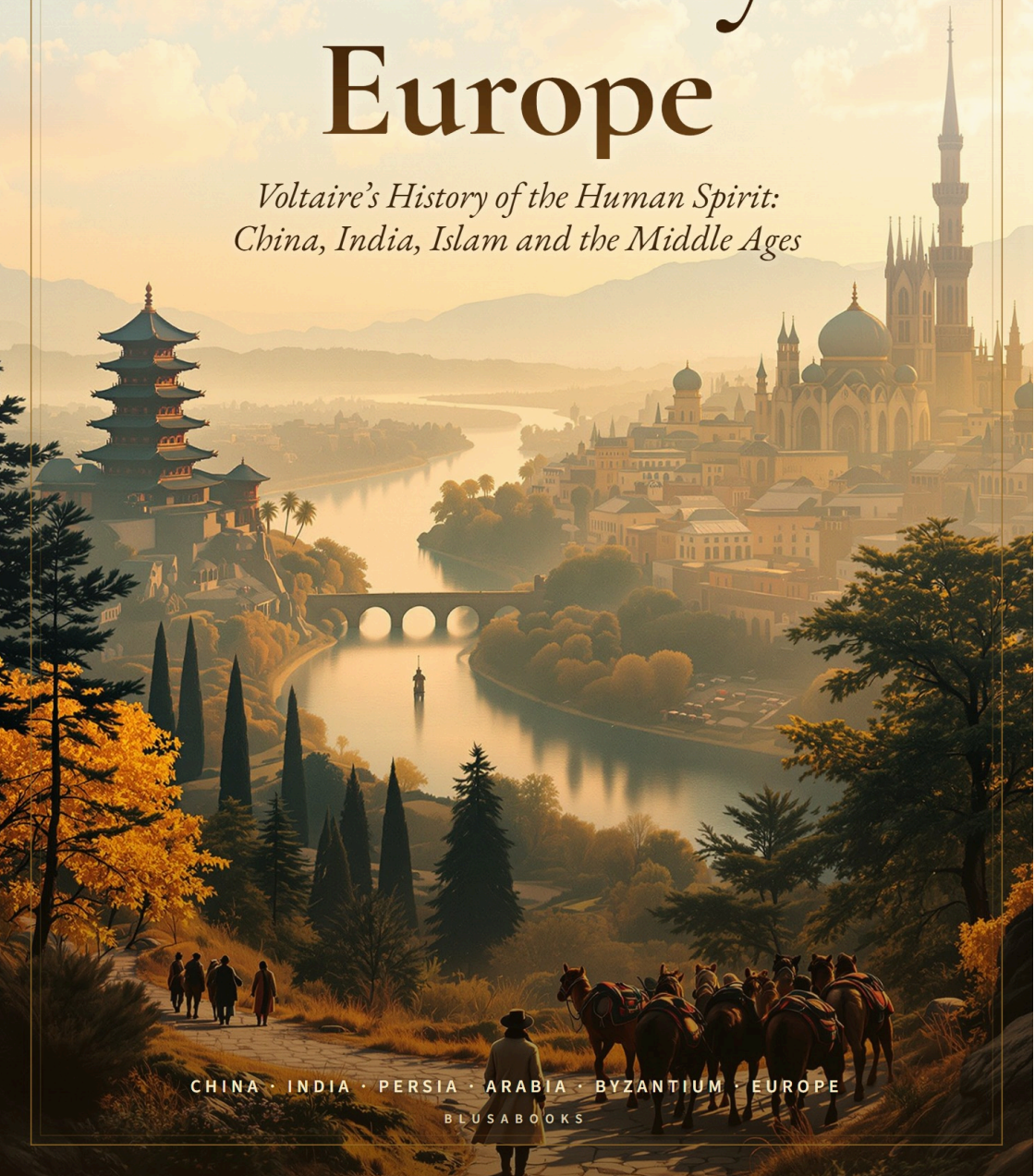
Not Only Europe

Voltaire's History of the Human Spirit: China, India, Islam and the Middle Ages



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Not Only Europe

Voltaire's History of the Human Spirit — China, India, Islam and the Middle Ages (1752)

Voltaire's New Plan of the History of the Human Spirit — from China, India and the Arab world to Europe around the year 1100. Complete in modern English

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Modern English text, foreword, notes and commentary © 2026 SIA "Blusa Entertainment".

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FOREWORD

A history of the world that does not begin in Europe. In the middle of the eighteenth century an educated French reader who opened a "universal history" usually found the same story: the Creation, Adam, Noah, Abraham, the people of Israel, Assyria, Persia, Greece, Rome, and then Christian Europe. The rest of humanity appeared only in passing, if at all. Voltaire deliberately turned this order upside down. He begins his history of the human spirit not with the Bible but with China, a state that had laws, officials, astronomical records and a continuous history more than four thousand years ago. From there he travels to India, Persia and Arabia, and only then returns to Europe. The title of this book, *Not Only Europe*, is ours, but the idea is his.

Why China? For Voltaire, China was an argument. He knew it from the reports of the Jesuit missionaries: from the *Edifying and Curious Letters* that they sent back to Europe for decades, and from Jean-Baptiste Du Halde's great *Description of China* (1735). Jesuit astronomers had recalculated the ancient Chinese records of eclipses and judged many of them reliable. If Chinese chronology reached further into the past than the usual reckoning based on the Bible, then the history of the world could not begin with a single people. More important still, China was for Voltaire an orderly and virtuous society whose morality rested on the teaching of Confucius about justice, respect for parents and duty to the state, without revealed religion and without the power of a priesthood. It was a quiet but pointed question to his contemporaries: does virtue really belong to Christians alone?

The East as teacher. In India Voltaire sees an ancient land of wisdom that gave the world numerals, chess and many fables. In the Islamic world he sees a civilisation that preserved Greek science and carried it further: Arab astronomers

who measured a degree of the meridian, physicians and chemists, the learned men of Baghdad and Córdoba, to whom people from Christian Europe travelled for centuries in order to learn. In this book "barbarism" lives not in the East but in Europe after Charlemagne, where Vikings lay waste the coasts, feudal lords make war on one another and learning almost disappears. This change of perspective, that Europe is not the centre of the world and that its civilisation inherited a great deal from other peoples, is the central idea of the book and the reason it is still worth reading today.

A quarrel with Bossuet. On his very first page Voltaire mentions "eloquent geniuses" who had written universal history as far as Charlemagne. His contemporaries knew whom he meant: Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, Bishop of Meaux, and his *Discourse on Universal History* (1681), written for the education of the heir to the French throne. Bossuet presented history as the plan of divine Providence, with the Jews, the Church and Rome at its centre. Voltaire takes up the story where Bossuet stopped, but asks a completely different question: not how God guided empires, but how people lived, what they invented, how they thought and how their customs changed. He is not interested in learning "in what year a prince who is not worth knowing succeeded some barbarian prince." He is interested in the human spirit.

The beginning of a great work. This text is an early version of Voltaire's largest historical work, the *Essay on the Customs and the Spirit of Nations* (*Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations*), which appeared in full in 1756 and was enlarged later still. He began working on it in the 1740s; it is often said that one of his reasons was his companion Émilie du Châtelet, a mathematician and physicist, who found ordinary history books a tedious list of kings and battles. The *New Plan of the History of the Human Spirit* is one of the first attempts in Europe to write a history of the world rather than of Europe alone, and modern cultural history and the history of ideas can trace some of their first steps to it.

What the book covers. After Voltaire's own foreword comes China; then India, Persia, Muhammad and the caliphs; then Europe after Charlemagne: the

Normans and the Danes in Normandy, England in the age of Alfred the Great, Spain and the Muslims, the empire of Constantinople, the Western Empire and Italy, the conquest of England by William the Conqueror, the state of Europe in the tenth and eleventh centuries with the rise of Venice, and finally Spain up to the beginning of the twelfth century, the taking of Toledo and the Cid. The text ends around the year 1100; nothing further was printed in the edition of 1752. The part titles are Voltaire's.

How to read it today. Voltaire wrote before critical historical scholarship, archival research and archaeology. He sometimes confuses names and dates, sometimes repeats legends, and he deliberately painted China in brighter colours so that it would show up the fanaticism of Europe. We have not corrected these mistakes in the text: the translation follows him, but the footnotes calmly say what historians know today. His judgements remain his own. He wrote about religions, Christianity and Islam included, in the voice of an Enlightenment author of his time, sceptical and often ironic; we render him neither more gently nor more harshly, and the notes explain where his view differs from the understanding of believers. At the end of the book each part has a commentary: a short summary in plain words and what modern historians say about its subject.

Our edition. This is a complete translation of the edition of 1752 whose title page names London as the place of printing. The same volume also contains Voltaire's philosophical tale *Micromégas* and his *History of the Crusades*, both of which we publish as separate books. It has been rendered into modern English sentence by sentence from images of the original pages, with nothing left out or abridged. In one place a page of the original is torn, and where text has been lost we print an ellipsis "…". Explanations of people, places and events, and corrections of Voltaire's factual errors, are given in footnotes at the foot of the page.

PART I

VOLTAIRE'S FOREWORD

Several tireless minds had untangled the chaos of antiquity as far as it can be untangled, and a few eloquent geniuses had written universal history down to Charlemagne; I regretted that they had not run a longer course. To gather up what they have neglected, I wished to set before my eyes a summary of the history of the world, a history that concerns us more the nearer it comes to our own times.

My chief aim is to learn, as far as I can, the manners of men and the revolutions of the human mind. I shall regard the order of the successions of kings and chronology as my guides, but not as the goal of my work. That work would be thankless indeed if I limited myself to learning in what year some prince unworthy of being known succeeded some barbarian prince.

In reading histories, one would think the earth was made only for a few sovereigns and for those who served their passions; almost everything else is abandoned. In this the historians resemble some of the tyrants they write about: they sacrifice the human race to a single man.

Has there then been nothing on earth but kings? And must nearly all the inventors of the arts remain unknown, while we have chronological lists of so many men who did no good, or did a great deal of harm?

As much as we need to know the great deeds of those sovereigns who changed the face of the earth, and above all of those who made their peoples better and happier, so much must we neglect the common run of kings, who would be only a burden on the memory, just as they were to their peoples. They serve as epochs in the registers of time, and anyone may consult them; but a traveler in a city seeks only the leading citizens, who in some manner represent the spirit of the nation. That is how I proceed in this vast roll call of the masters of the earth. I intended to conduct my study century by century, but I feel that if I presented to my mind

only what happened precisely in the century I had before my eyes, I would be forced to divide my attention too much, to cut into too many parts the connected ideas I wish to form, and to abandon the study of a nation, an art or a revolution only to resume it much too long afterward. I shall therefore sometimes go back to the source, far removed from an art, an important custom, a law, a revolution; I shall anticipate some facts and reserve others for later times, but as little as I can, and only to avoid, as far as my weakness permits, confusion and the scattering of ideas. I shall try to present to my mind a faithful picture of what deserves to be known, for good or for ill, forced as I am to witness a crowd of cruelties and betrayals in order to arrive at a few virtues scattered here and there through the centuries, like shelters in immense deserts.

Before considering the state of Europe around the time of Charlemagne, and the debris of the Roman Empire, I first examine whether there is nothing worthy of my attention in the rest of our hemisphere. That remainder is about ten times as vast as the Roman dominion, and it teaches me at the outset that those monuments of the Roman emperors, loaded with the titles of Masters and Restorers of the Universe, are immortal testimonies of vanity and ignorance no less than of grandeur.

Dazzled by the splendor of that empire, by its growth and its fall, we have until now, in most of our universal histories, treated other men as if they did not exist. Greece and the Romans have taken up all our attention, and when the celebrated Bossuet[1] says a word about the Muslims, he speaks of them only as a flood of barbarians. Yet many of these nations possessed useful arts that we have inherited from them; their countries supply us with comforts and precious things that nature has denied us; and, clothed in their fabrics, fed on the produce of their lands, instructed by their inventions, even amused by games that are the fruit of their ingenuity, we are neither just nor wise to ignore them.

1. Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet (1627–1704), Bishop of Meaux, author of the "Discourse on Universal History" (1681); in it world history is presented as the wise guidance of Providence, and the Arabs and Islam are mentioned only in passing.