

VOLTAIRE

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*Treatise on Tolerance*

TRANSLATED BY  
BRIAN MASTERS

*The Story of Elisabeth Canning and the Calas Family*  
*An Address to the Public concerning the Parricides imputed*  
*to the Calas and Sirven Families*  
*An Account of the Death of the Chevalier de La Barre*  
*The Cry of Innocent Blood*

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CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK [www.cup.cam.ac.uk](http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk)  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA [www.cup.org](http://www.cup.org)  
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia  
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain

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First published 2000

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset in Ehrhardt 10/12 pt [VN]

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

ISBN 0 521 64017 2 hardback  
ISBN 0 521 64969 2 paperback

## Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	<i>page</i> vi
<i>Chronology</i>	xx
<i>Further reading</i>	xxii
<i>Note on the texts</i>	xxiv
Treatise on Tolerance	I
The Story of Elisabeth Canning and the Calas Family	107
An Address to the Public concerning the Parricides imputed to the Calas and Sirven Families	117
An Account of the Death of the Chevalier de La Barre	137
The Cry of Innocent Blood	149
<i>Index</i>	157

## I

### A brief account of the death of Jean Calas

The murder of Calas, sanctioned by the sword of justice on 9 March 1762, in the city of Toulouse, is one of the most extraordinary events to claim the attention both of our own age and of posterity. The masses of corpses fallen in numberless battles are apt quickly to be forgotten, not only because such fatalities are inevitable in war, but also because those who perish by force of arms might as easily have killed their enemy, and in no sense died without the opportunity to defend themselves. When danger and advantage meet in equal measure, there is less cause for astonishment, or even pity. But if the innocent father of a family is delivered into the hands of prejudice, or ignorance, or fanaticism; if, once accused, he has no other defence but his good character; if those who control his fate run no other risk, in putting him to death, than that of making a mistake; if they may kill by decree with impunity; then public opinion is outraged and each man fears for himself. As soon as we realise that no one's life is secure before a tribunal which was established precisely for the protection of us all, the entire population must rise in unison to demand vengeance.

At issue in this remarkable affair were religion, suicide and murder; whether a father and a mother had strangled their own son in order to please God; whether a brother had killed his brother, a friend his friend; and whether magistrates had cause to reproach themselves for having condemned an innocent father to death on the wheel, or, on the other hand, for having spared a guilty mother, brother and friend.

Jean Calas, aged sixty-eight, had been a merchant in Toulouse for more than forty years and was acknowledged by all who had lived with him to be a good father. He was a Protestant, as were his wife and all his children, save one who abjured the heresy and to whom he made a small allowance. So far removed was he from that absurd fanaticism which ruptures all the bonds of society that not

only did he approve the conversion of his son Louis Calas, but he had entrusted the care of all his children to a servant who was a devout Catholic.

Another of his sons, Marc-Antoine by name, was a man of letters. He was known to be broody, saturnine, and prone to violence. Having failed to enter into business, for which his personality was not suited, or to be received at the Bar, because he was unable to obtain the necessary certificates of catholicity, this young man resolved to end his life, and gave some indication of his intention to one of his friends. He further strengthened his resolution by reading everything that had ever been written on the subject of suicide.

At length, having one day lost money at the gambling table, Marc-Antoine decided to put his design into effect. One of his friends was the nineteen-year-old son of a famous Toulousain lawyer, an open-hearted and sweet-natured youth called Lavoisette; he was also a friend of the family. Lavoisette had arrived from Bordeaux the night before<sup>1</sup> and was, by chance, dining with the Calas family that evening. The company included the parents, Marc-Antoine, the eldest son, and Pierre, the second son. After dinner they retired to a small drawing-room and Marc-Antoine absented himself. Some time later, when young Lavoisette desired to leave, he and Pierre Calas went downstairs and there found Marc-Antoine, in shirt and breeches, hanging from the door of the storeroom. His coat and waistcoat were neatly folded on the counter. His shirt showed no signs of disorder, his hair was well combed, and there was not a mark or bruise upon his body.<sup>2</sup>

We shall pass over some of the details of which the lawyers have given sufficient account. Nor shall we describe the grief and despair of the parents, whose lamentations were heard by neighbours. Lavoisette and Pierre Calas, beside themselves with terror, ran to fetch a surgeon and a magistrate.

While they were about this, and while the parents were racked with weeping, the people of Toulouse gathered outside the house. They are a superstitious and hot-headed race, who regard as nothing short of monstrous those of their fellow men who follow a different religion from their own. It was in Toulouse that solemn thanks were offered to God for the death of Henri III, and that oaths were sworn to cut the throat of any man who dared recognise the great and good Henri IV. It is in Toulouse that processions and bonfires still mark the anniversary of the day, two centuries ago, when four thousand heretics were massacred.

<sup>1</sup> 12 October 1761. [Voltaire's note]

<sup>2</sup> The only marks found on the body after its removal to the town hall were a tiny scratch on the end of the nose and a small bruise on the chest, no doubt caused by carelessness when carrying it. [Voltaire's note] There were folding doors between the shop and storeroom. The young man had placed a heavy rod across the top of the door and hanged himself from that. It was contended that suicide was not feasible, because the rod would not hold and the man's feet would anyway touch the ground, but some local boys re-enacted the death and proved it possible; no matter how much they squirmed and shook, the rod did not give way.

## Chapter 1

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In vain have six Orders in Council prohibited this odious festival; the people of Toulouse have continued to treat it as a celebration.

Some fanatic or other in the crowd shouted out that Jean Calas had murdered his own son, and within no time the cry became unanimous. Others added the information that the deceased had been due to recant the following day and that his family and Lavoisier had conspired together to strangle him out of hatred for Catholicism. The rumour immediately became a certainty. The whole city was persuaded that it was an article of faith among Protestants for parents to slaughter their offspring if ever they evinced a desire to convert.<sup>3</sup>

Once passions like these are aroused it is impossible to contain them. Word soon got about that the Protestants of Languedoc had assembled the night before and had selected one of their number, on a majority vote, to be executioner; that the choice had fallen upon young Lavoisier; and that, within twenty-four hours of the receipt of this news, he had travelled from Bordeaux in order to assist Jean Calas, his wife and their son, in the murder of their son and brother, and his friend – Marc-Antoine Calas.

Upon hearing these reports, a *Capitoul*<sup>4</sup> or Senior Magistrate of Toulouse, Sieur David, immediately recognised an opportunity to advance his reputation by prompt action and thereupon initiated a prosecution contrary to all custom and precedent. He had the Calas family, the Catholic servant and Lavoisier all arrested and placed in irons.

He caused a Monitory, no less defective than the prosecution itself, to be published.<sup>5</sup> He went even further. Marc-Antoine Calas died a Calvinist; had he committed suicide, his body should have been dragged through the streets in

<sup>3</sup> The belief that Protestants were required to murder their recalcitrant sons derived in part from Calvin himself, who had written in his *Institution de la religion chrétienne*: 'All those who resist the authority of a father, whether through lack of respect or through rebellion, are monsters and not men. For this reason our Saviour has ordered us to put to death all those who disobey father or mother.' On the other hand, Marc-Antoine was so far from being a potential convert that it was he who habitually led the family in prayer.

<sup>4</sup> The *Capitoul* was a title peculiar to Toulouse, given to municipal magistrates of that city from the Middle Ages until the Revolution. Each district of Toulouse provided its own *Capitoul*, the total number varying at different times between four and twelve. They were not usually men versed in law, and dealt only with minor offences such as disorderly conduct. Sometimes, however, growing too powerful and too self-satisfied, they usurped the functions of the higher-court judges in parlement; the Calas affair was one such instance.

<sup>5</sup> Sponsored by the Church, a Monitory was an effective means of finding witnesses to a crime. It was first read out from the pulpit and then posted up, and it demanded that anyone with material information should come forward. The law required that it should be scrupulously impartial, and should not name a suspect who might still be innocent. The Monitory in the Calas case was first read out on 18 October, five days after the death of Marc-Antoine, then repeated on 25 October and 8 November. It was disgracefully biased, assuming in every article that Marc-Antoine had been murdered by his family. There followed a Fulmination, which threatened anyone withholding information with instant excommunication. This produced only hearsay and innuendo. There never was any evidence against Jean Calas.

shame. And yet he was interred with great pomp in the church of St Etienne, in spite of the priest's objections against such profanation of sanctified ground.

In Languedoc there are four brotherhoods of penitent – the white, the blue, the grey and the black. The friars wear a long cowl with a woollen hood pierced with two holes for the eyes. They had ambitions to enlist the Governor of the Province, the Duke of Fitzjames himself, among their number, but he declined the honour. The white friars accorded Marc-Antoine Calas the most solemn obsequies, as befitted a martyr. Never had any church celebrated the feast of a true martyr with greater display. Yet there was something dreadful about this ceremony. Above a magnificent catafalque they placed a skeleton, which they contrived to move and jerk. It bore in one hand a palm, and in the other a quill. The skeleton represented Marc-Antoine Calas, the quill the instrument of his supposed recantation; except that it signed instead the death warrant of his father.

This unfortunate suicide lacked only the glory of canonisation. The entire populace considered him a saint; some invoked his name; others prayed on his tomb; still others besought him to work miracles, or told of those he had already accomplished. A monk tore some teeth from the corpse as relics. A devout but somewhat deaf woman declared she could hear the sound of bells. An apoplectic priest was cured after taking an emetic. Official reports on these wonders were commissioned and duly written. The present writer has in his possession an affidavit to the effect that a young man of Toulouse lost his sanity for having prayed several nights in a row on the tomb of the new saint without procuring the miracle for which he craved.

Some of the magistrates belonged to the fraternity of the white penitents, a fact which may well have rendered the death of Jean Calas inevitable.

His fate was sealed by the approach of that odd festival which the Toulousains celebrate annually to commemorate the massacre of four thousand Huguenots; 1762 was the bicentenary.<sup>6</sup> When the trappings for this solemn ritual were erected in the town, they further worked upon the already overheated imaginations of the populace. It was publicly stated that the scaffold upon which the Calas family would perish was to be the festival's most glorious ornament. It was said that Providence herself had delivered these victims to be sacrificed unto our most sacred religion. Twenty witnesses overheard these utterances, as well as others yet more violent in tone. And this in our own day! In an age when Enlightenment had made such progress! When a hundred academies have devoted their energies to the promotion of decency and gentleness in public affairs! Fanaticism, infuriated by the advance of Reason, is thus seen to thrash about in an agony of frustration and renewed spite.

<sup>6</sup> The massacre referred to here took place ten years before the massacre of St Bartholomew, i.e. in 1562. The victims were unarmed and singing psalms.

## Chapter 1

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Thirteen judges assembled every day to hear the case for the prosecution. There was no evidence against the family, nor could there be, so injured religion was served up instead. Six of the judges were obdurate in demanding the wheel for Jean Calas, his son and Lavoisier, and the stake for his wife. The seven others, more moderate, thought that at least the defendants might be heard. Debate was long and laboured. One of the judges, convinced both that the accused were innocent and the crime impossible, argued warmly in their favour; against the passion of intolerance he opposed the zeal of his humanity. He became the public defender of the Calas family in all those households where religious fervour, feeling itself threatened, clamoured for the blood of these wretched people. Another judge, of harsh reputation, harangued the citizens against the Calas family with as much vigour as the former showed eagerness in their defence. The scandal was finally so great that they were both obliged to disqualify themselves from the case and withdrew to the country.

By a most unfortunate chance, however, while the judge who had defended Calas observed the restraint imposed upon him, the other resumed his attacks against people he no longer had a right to condemn. It was his voice which was eventually responsible for the sentence of death, for there were eight votes against five, but one of the judges in favour of acquittal, at the last moment and after much dispute, switched his vote to the harsher faction.

In a case of parricide, when it might be necessary to condemn the father of a family to the most appalling agonies, it seems right that the verdict should be unanimous, because the proofs of so outlandish a crime<sup>7</sup> must be derived from evidence which may satisfy everyone and anyone; the slightest doubt in such a case must be sufficient to stay the trembling hand of any judge poised to sign the death warrant. The fragility of our reason and the inadequacy of our laws are daily made manifest; what more terrible instance could be offered than the sight of a man being broken alive on the wheel on the strength of a single casting vote? The citizens of Athens required a straight majority plus fifty votes before they permitted themselves to pass sentence of death. And what do we learn from that? Only the bootless reflection that the Greeks were wiser and more humane than we are.

<sup>7</sup> I know only two instances in history of fathers being charged with killing their children on account of religion. The first is the case of the father of St Barbara. He had had two windows made in his bathroom. Barbara, in his absence, had a third made to honour the Holy Trinity. She made the sign of the cross on the marble columns with the tip of her finger, and it was deeply engraved on the stone. Her father came angrily upon her, sword in hand; but she escaped through a mountain which opened to receive her. The father went round the mountain and caught her. She was stripped and flogged, but God clothed her in a white cloud. In the end her father cut off her head. So says the *Flower of the Saints*. The second case is that of Prince Hermengild. He rebelled against his father, the king, engaged him in battle in 584, was defeated and killed by an officer. As his father was an Aryan, he was regarded as a martyr. [Voltaire's note]

It was clearly impossible that Jean Calas, an old man of sixty-eight who had long suffered from weak and swollen legs, should have strangled and hanged his son of twenty-eight, whose strength, moreover, was above the average; it would have been absolutely necessary for him to be assisted in the crime by his wife, by his son, Pierre, by Lavaisse, and by the servant. Besides, on the evening of the fatal event they had not left each other's side for one moment. Yet this latter proposition is as absurd as the first. For how could one conceive that an ardent Catholic servant should suffer Huguenots to assassinate the young man she had brought up all his life, precisely to punish him for embracing the religion she herself professed? How could it be imagined that Lavaisse should make the journey from Bordeaux expressly to kill his friend when he was totally ignorant of his supposed conversion? How could one suggest that a tender-hearted mother should stain her hands with the blood of her own son? And how did one suppose that they could join forces to strangle a young man who was more robust than all of them put together, without a long and violent struggle, without screams to alert the entire neighbourhood, without blows, bruises or torn clothing?

It was obvious then, if the murder were to be at all possible, that all the accused must be equally guilty because they had not separated all evening; it was obvious that they were not guilty; it was obvious that the father alone could not be guilty; yet despite all this, the father alone was condemned to be broken on the wheel.<sup>8</sup>

The grounds for this sentence were, like all the rest, quite beyond belief. The judges who had determined that Jean Calas should die managed to persuade the others that this feeble old man, being unable to withstand the torture, would break down and confess his crime and that of his accomplices. They were therefore somewhat abashed when he, with his dying breath, summoned God as witness to his innocence and asked that His forgiveness be extended to his misguided judges.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The sentence, which was never made public, was divided into four parts: (1) that Jean Calas be subjected to the Question, both ordinary and extraordinary, until he confess his crime and his accomplices; (2) that he should be taken barefoot in a cart to the cathedral and make *l'amende honorable* before the hangman, asking forgiveness of God and the King; (3) that he should then be taken to the scaffold, where his arms, legs, thighs and loins would be broken; (4) that he should finally be laid upon a wheel with his face to the sky to spend his last hours in pain. The Question Ordinary consisted in slowly stretching the victim; the Question Extraordinary involved suffocation, the victim's nose pinched while great quantities of water were poured through a funnel into his throat. Records show that Jean Calas withstood this torment without once submitting to the torturers' threats, and consistently denied that any crime had taken place.

<sup>9</sup> Eye-witness accounts agree that Jean Calas met his end with extraordinary heroism. As his limbs were broken he let out one cry with each blow, but was otherwise serene and calm. On the wheel his cracked bones mingled with the spokes, yet still he resisted bitterness or recrimination. He would not ascribe his sentence to wickedness or religious fanaticism; the magistrates had been misinformed, he said. David de Beaudrigue (Sieur David), beside himself with anger and obviously assailed by doubts, shouted at Calas to confess, but to no avail. Two hours after being

## Chapter 1

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Thus did they find themselves obliged to pass a second sentence which contradicted the first, according to which they set free the mother, Pierre Calas, Lavoisier and the servant. When it was pointed out to them that this new decision invalidated the other; that they had thereby passed judgement upon themselves and stood condemned; that, as all the defendants had remained together throughout the time of the alleged murder, the release of the survivors proved beyond doubt the innocence of the one who had been executed, they then made the decision to send Pierre Calas into exile. This banishment was as inconsistent and absurd as everything that had preceded it, for Pierre Calas was clearly either guilty or innocent of the murder; if guilty, he should have been broken on the wheel like his father; and if innocent, he should not be banished. The judges were so taken aback by the father's agony and the touching piety with which he died, that they thought to save their honour by showing mercy to the son, not realising that their display of mercy was, at that point, yet another miscarriage of justice. No doubt they thought that it was a matter of little consequence to send an impoverished young man into exile without support of any kind, and being unimportant, was but a tiny injustice compared with those they had already had the misfortune to commit.

They visited Pierre Calas in his cell and threatened to treat him as they had his father, unless he renounced his religion. The young man has testified to this on oath.<sup>10</sup>

As he was leaving the city, Pierre encountered a priest specialising in conversions who obliged him to return to Toulouse, where he found himself locked up in a Dominican monastery and forced to observe all the customs of the Catholic faith. Part of their objective in so doing was to make him avenge their religion as the price of his father's blood; religious feeling was thereby appeased.

The daughters were then taken from their mother and likewise locked in a convent. As for this wretched woman, who had been virtually bathed in her husband's blood, who had held the body of her eldest son in her arms and seen another sent into exile, who had been robbed of her daughters and stripped of all her goods, she was now quite alone in the world, without subsistence or hope and almost dead with the weight of her misery. Now there were certain persons who, bringing mature examination to bear upon this frightful affair, were so struck by the horror of it that they pressed the widow Calas to emerge from her solitude and demand justice from the King himself. She was, by this time, in no state to comply, being weak and drained by her experience. Besides which,

placed on the wheel, he was manually strangled in a gesture of mercy, a pitiful but noble sight to all who were present, many of whom had known and respected him for forty years.

<sup>10</sup> 'A Dominican monk came into my cell and threatened me with the same manner of death unless I abjured. This I attest before God, 23 July 1762. Pierre Calas.' [Voltaire's note]

having been born in England and moved to a French province at an early age, the very name of Paris struck fear into her heart. She imagined that the capital of the kingdom must be even more barbarous than Toulouse. But in the end her sense of duty towards the memory of her husband overcame her fragility. When she eventually arrived in Paris she was close to death, and amazed to find herself greeted with warmth, succour and sympathy.<sup>11</sup>

Reason is more powerful than Fanaticism in Paris, whereas in the provinces it is generally Bigotry which prevails.

M. de Beaumont, the celebrated lawyer of the Paris Courts of Justice, was the first to champion her cause; he drew up a legal opinion to which fifteen of his colleagues put their signatures. The no less eloquent M. Loiseau prepared a statement on behalf of the family. M. Mariette, advocate of the Council, composed a judicial paper on the case which carried universal conviction.

These three noble defenders of justice and innocence surrendered to the widow all profit from the published editions of their views.<sup>12</sup> Not only Paris, but the whole of Europe was moved to pity by her plight and joined her in demanding justice. Thus was public opinion notably in advance of the actual signature in Council which would restore common sense.

Compassion reached even to the seat of government despite the perpetual press of business which often must exclude it, and despite also that familiarity with misfortune which can harden the heart still further. The daughters were soon reunited with their mother, and all three, dressed in mourning, wept before their saviours.

Nonetheless, this family still had enemies. Why? Because religion was involved. Several of those people known in France as *dévots*<sup>13</sup> loudly proclaimed that it was better an old Calvinist, albeit innocent, should die on the wheel than that eight councillors of Languedoc should be obliged to admit that they were in error. It was even said that 'there are more magistrates than Calases', the inference being that the Calas family should be sacrificed to preserve the honour of the judiciary. These people did not reflect that the honour of judges, like that of other men, lies in correcting their mistakes. No one in France believes that the Pope, assisted by his cardinals, is infallible;<sup>14</sup> it might be fair to suggest that

<sup>11</sup> It was said Mme Calas was received by both Mme du Deffand, Walpole's friend, and Mme de Geoffrin, and she was eventually presented to the Queen. From across the Channel messages of support came from the Archbishop of Canterbury and no fewer than twelve dukes.

<sup>12</sup> Since the texts were pirated in many towns, the widow Calas did not receive the benefit intended by this act of generosity. [Voltaire's note]

<sup>13</sup> *Dévo*t comes from the Latin *devotus*. The *devoti* of ancient Rome were those who sacrificed themselves for the good of the Republic, such as the Curtii or Decii. [Voltaire's note] In France the word came to signify passionate dedication to faith and carried a pejorative connotation.

<sup>14</sup> The doctrine of papal infallibility was not defined until 1870 at the Vatican Council. Voltaire refers to the more general belief in the freedom from error which St Peter and his successors enjoyed, as Bishops of Rome, by the action of divine grace.

## Chapter 1

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neither are eight judges of Toulouse. Sensible, unprejudiced men declared that the Toulouse verdict would be quashed anywhere else in Europe, notwithstanding that there might be special circumstances to prevent its being overturned in Council.

Such was the state of affairs in this astonishing story when certain impartial and sensitive persons conceived the notion of presenting before the public some reflections on tolerance, on clemency, on compassion, those values which the Abbé Houtteville,<sup>15</sup> in an inflated and misinformed harangue, recently called a 'monstrous dogma', and which men of Reason affirm to be the natural prerogatives of Humanity.

Either the magistrates of Toulouse, led astray by the fanaticism of the populace, have caused an innocent man to perish on the wheel – which is without parallel; or the man and his wife squeezed the life from their eldest son, aided and abetted in this appalling act by another son and his friend – which is against nature. In either case, the abuse of the most holy religion has resulted in a terrible crime. It is therefore in the interest of mankind to examine whether the true religious spirit is more consistent with charity or with cruelty.

<sup>15</sup> Claude-François Houtteville (1686–1742), author of *La Vérité de la religion chrétienne prouvée par les faits* (1722), which was widely criticised and had to be seriously revised for its second edition in 1740. Houtteville taught ecclesiastical history at Tours and became secretary to Cardinal Dubois.