

Enlightened Outrage: The Three Impostors¹

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When I lecture my students on the topic of the three impostors, I begin by expressing regret that I may offend some of them. They might not appreciate hearing that in the 18th century a semi-clandestine book argued that Jesus, Moses, and Mohammed were the three. I start out by explaining how such an argument, against all prohibitions and largely clandestinely, had made its way into public discussion.

The story begins during the 1970s when I was working at the British Library in London. There, amid the manuscripts of the free-thinker John Toland (1670–1722), a remarkable document caught my attention (Figure 1). Written in French, it was labeled as a “register” of one meeting of “Chevaliers de la Jubilation” (the Knights of Jubilation) dated November 24, 1710 (Figure 2). Most important, it was signed by the secretary, Prosper Marchand, and his friends—among them, Bernard Picart, who within two decades would become a very prominent engraver (Figure 3). All were at the time resident, or doing book business, in The Hague, where Toland was also visiting, probably as an agent of the Whig party. As the War of the Spanish Succession raged then in the Low Countries, Whigs passionately favored the British-Dutch alliance against Louis XIV.²

The signatures—of men who called one another *frère*—were crucial. They belonged to a cast of characters mostly involved in the book trade and led eventually to a vast collection of manuscripts eventually given by the secretary of the Knights, Prosper Marchand (d. 1756), to the University Library in Leiden. His correspondence was both business and personal, and he had also saved his handwritten additions to books he then edited and published, among them a 1720

1 Read 9 November 2019.

2 British Library, MSS ADD 4275, ff. 18–19. In the period, 9bre means November. For another discussion of the manuscript, see Lynn Hunt, Margaret C. Jacob, and Wijnand Mijnhardt, *The Book that Changed Europe: Picart and Bernard's Religious Ceremonies of the World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 25–26.



FIGURE 1. The only known portrait of John Toland, by J. D. Philippin, born Syang (1729–1791). He holds a copy of his book, *Pantheisticon*, published in 1720. Public domain.

edition of Bayle's *Dictionnaire*.³ The richest set of letters Marchand received were from Jean Rousset de Missy (d. 1762). Another refugee, Rousset became a leader of Amsterdam freemasonry and a radical participant in the Dutch Revolution of 1747–1748. He and Marchand were fast friends.

Some of the original signers and brothers of the 1710 “register” that Toland must have brought back to London with him are Charles Levier, a writer and publisher; Michael Böhm, Gaspard Fritsch, and G. Gleditsch (probably of German origin), all publishers; and M. De Bey, who may have been an editor.⁴ Thus there suddenly appeared in London and Leiden an entirely new source for the early Enlightenment, unexplored by previous scholarship. In 1981, I published a book based on the Marchand manuscripts and various other sources, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans*.⁵

Here I do not mean to recount the thesis argued in that book, but rather bring to your attention one of the more remarkable discoveries

3 Pierre Bayle, *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, ed. Prosper Marchand (Rotterdam: Chez Michel Bohm, 1720). Bayle published the first edition in 1697.

4 Two guides exist to the complex world of Dutch publishing: Jean Sgard, *Dictionnaire des journalistes* (Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1976); and I. H. van Eeghen, *De Amsterdamse Boekhandel te 's-Gravenhage tot het eind van de 18e eeuw* (Amsterdam: Scheltema-Holkema, 1962–1967).

5 Margaret C. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981; second editions, revised, 2003 and 2006).

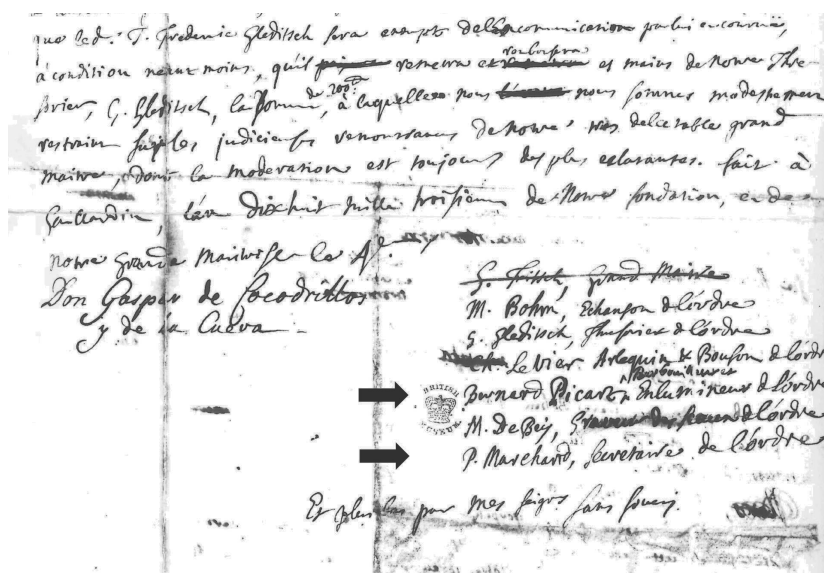


FIGURE 3. The signed document with arrows indicating the signatures of Bernard Picart and Prosper Marchand.

coming out of the Marchand collection. By common consent the most outrageous text created in the age of Enlightenment—and there were many candidates for that dubious honor—was first published in 1719 with the title, *La vie et l'esprit de Spinoza*, but then republished and retitled by Böhm in 1721 as *Le Traité des trois imposteurs* (*The Treatise on the Three Impostors*). Most of the Knights of Jubilation were deeply involved in its creation; in short, they were at the forefront of what became known as the Radical Enlightenment.⁶

The treatise labeled Jesus, Moses, and Mohammed as the three and elaborated at some length on their perfidy. The Knights created the enlightened outrage of the century: blasphemous, atheistic, and offensive to all the great religions of the East and West. We know about their bringing to the public this most outrageous text because the evidence can be found in Marchand's correspondence with Gaspard Fritsch, who originally signed himself as the "Grand Master" of the Knights. Over 25 years after that 1710 meeting, Fritsch wrote from Leipzig to his old friend to gossip about the book trade. The reminiscence turned to *Le Traité* and its original title as *La vie et l'esprit de Spinoza*. Fritsch tells Marchand that one of the Knights, Charles Levier, copied *La vie* in 1711 from a manuscript found in the library of

6 For a handy copy of part of *The Treatise on the Three Impostors*, see Margaret C. Jacob, *The Enlightenment: A Brief History with Documents*, second edition (New York: Bedford, 2017), 81–99.

Benjamin Furly (in Rotterdam): “this sort of book was his particular hobby horse. If he has had some contact since then with Rousset, then I should think that all the uncertainties surrounding it are answered.” But *L’esprit* had been “touched up and added to . . . It would satisfy my curiosity to know whether it was Rousset who was the author of the *Réponse* etc.”⁷

The letter needs some unpacking. Exiled from England after 1660 with his father, a regicide, Furly was a prominent Quaker refugee living in Rotterdam. He was a friend to John Locke, and he knew Toland. When Furly died in 1714, two of the Knights, Fritsch and Böhm, handled the sale of his library.⁸ Like so many of the Knights, another Protestant refugee, Levier, had a personal correspondence with Toland’s friend and fellow freethinker, Anthony Collins, and was involved with various Whig agents.⁹ Rousset had written a famous *Réponse* that laid out in precise detail the sections in *Le Traité*. Fritsch implies that Rousset may have authored *Le Traité*, or just possibly it was a work of various hands, perhaps “brothers” who shared a special bond. Fritsch’s letter locates the origin of the most outrageous text of the age without telling us precisely who—if any one person—authored it.

Fritsch goes on in the letter to Marchand to declaim that “it is sad to think this sort of thing [such an outrageous book] goes on in a civilized and Christian nation.” Then he explains to Marchand: “you have to look to the behavior of priests for the source of all the trouble: men full of religion comprising fables and self-interested dogmas which are both absurd and useless, who fasten on to purity and innocence. It is intellectually abhorrent, but it gives credence to impostors to hold sway . . .” We can conjecture that Fritsch is writing cautiously in a letter that will cross through several post offices with their prying and then commonplace censors. He clearly does not want to be directly associated with the outrageous assertions in *Le Traité*.

But what about the rest of the merry Knights? I say merry because their 1710 meeting record is filled with an account of the prodigious amount they ate and drank, and the details of an “infraction”

7 For a more complete text of this letter of September 7, 1737, see Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment*, 277–79; the original is in the University Library, Leiden, Marchand MS 1. For another discussion of the manuscript, see Hunt, Jacob, and Mijndhardt, *The Book that Changed Europe*, 25–26.

8 For the sale catalog, see Benjamin Furly, *Bibliotheca Furliana, sive Catalogus librorum* (Rotterdam, 1714); the British Library copy has the notes by Furly’s son telling prices and who bought what, BL, 11901.a.11.

9 University Library, Leiden, Marchand MS 2, 3 November 1711, Collins to Levier; also, 5 January 1713, and 1 October 1713; for one of Levier’s writings, see Rasiel de Selva [i.e., Levier], *Histoire de l’admirable dom Inigo de Guipuscoa, Chevalier de la Vierge* (The Hague, 1736); and for the original, see Marchand MS 43. For Marchand’s heavily annotated copy of Spinoza’s *Tractatus*, see MS 77.

committed by one of the brothers who is about to get married. In short what we have here is an 18th-century version of a stag party with masonic overtones. Other letters talk about their “secret” without going into detail. But is this also a coterie given to outrage and blasphemy? Or, I ask my students, could this book have been a joke in extremely bad taste?

We do not have a window into men’s souls, but we do have the private writings of a few of the merry brothers. Marchand is classified as a Huguenot refugee, but in fact he was a late convert away from the Catholicism of his birth, who made that rash move well after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes (1685) had made Protestantism illegal. His friend, Bernard Picart, experienced a similar religious journey and together they decided in the winter of 1709–1710 to leave Paris for the religiously diverse Dutch Republic. In 1713, Marchand penned a letter to an unnamed Catholic correspondent, and it outlined his religious beliefs. He reveals that he believes in no particular religion and asserts that anyone reasonable will conclude that the Roman Catholic Church has fallen into “the most gross and contemptible idolatry.” Marchand continues that men must go back to the New Testament and circumvent “all the superstitions and criminal innovations” introduced in the last 1700 years. Perhaps we can now better understand why the Dutch father-in-law of Bernard Picart wrote to a friend to lament that his new son-in-law is a man of “no religion.”¹⁰ If Marchand and Picart were unchurched, did it also mean that—just like Rousset and Levier, as they busily worked on touching up *Le Traité*—they too thought Jesus, Moses, and Mohammed had been tricksters and impostors?

The charge was actually an old one. It had circulated since the Middle Ages when in 1239 the Pope accused the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II, of being “a scorpion spitting out poison from the stinger on its tail . . . stating . . . the whole world has been fooled by three impostors, Jesus Christ, Moses, and Muhammad.” Frederick responded by calling the pope a heretic. Pagan philosophers accused Jews of saying the same, and in his *Dictionnaire* Bayle recounted in detail—far more than was necessary—who had said what about the supposed impostors.¹¹ Were these refugees so alienated from the experience of religion that only a pox on all the houses and their founders would suffice? *Le Traité* used large extracts from Spinoza and endorsed

10 The letter to the Catholic is found in University Library, Leiden, MS 28, Rotterdam, 27 October 1713. On Picart’s lack of religion, see Museum Plantin, Antwerp, Moretus MS 641.360, 27 June 1712.

11 For a recounting of the various insults hurled over the centuries, see Georges Minois, *The Atheist’s Bible: The Most Dangerous Book that Never Existed*, trans. Lys Ann Weiss (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

Hobbes's contention that fear was the source of the religious impulse, "this chimerical fear of invisible powers is the source of the Religions . . ." The book then concluded that the judgments of God "were incomprehensible." People persist in the error "we would still be in, if mathematics, physics & some other sciences had not destroyed it."¹²

The founders of religions depend on the ignorance of people abetted by the priests "who boasted of having with the Gods." In a final insult the writer or writers of *Le Traité* conclude: "as the number of fools is infinite, Jesus Christ found Subjects everywhere." And let our readers understand, in a bow to Spinoza, that "God, as we have seen, being but nature, or if one wishes, the assemblage of all beings, of all properties and of all energies, is necessarily the immanent & not distinct cause of all effects." The last words of *Le Traité* are straightforward: "in all times there have been solid intellects and sincere men, who despite persecution have decried the absurdities of their century as we have done in this little Treatise."¹³ This does not read like a joke.

It seems reasonable to conclude that these men of the book trade took the enormous risks involved in copying, circulating, and even publishing a text that everywhere in Europe would have meant arrest and punishment because they had something important to say. To date, only three or four copies of the original 1719 edition of *Le Traité* have survived; the only one in this country is at UCLA.¹⁴ Marchand held on to about 300 copies but then had them burned. In some places in southern Europe, had he been caught with those copies, he might have met the same fate. Yet the sentiments about religion that lay at the heart of *Le Traité* remained at the extremes of enlightened beliefs in the 18th century—and well beyond. Understanding the circumstances that made this coterie of "brothers" act as they did, I tell my students, may bring us closer to understanding the nature of the early Enlightenment.

12 Jacob, *The Enlightenment*, 85–86.

13 Ibid., 98–100.

14 *La vie et l'esprit de Mr. Benoit de Spinoza* (Amsterdam: Charles Le Vier, 1721). Young Research Library, B3997.L96v 1719. Sometimes attributed incorrectly to Jean Lucas but he is the author only of the life. See also Françoise Charles-Daubert, ed., *Le "Traité des trois imposteurs" et "L'Esprit de Spinoza": Philosophie clandestine entre 1678 et 1768* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1999); and Silvia Berti, Françoise Charles-Daubert, and Richard H. Popkin, eds., *Heterodoxy, Spinozism, and Free Thought in Early-Eighteenth-Century Europe: Studies on the Traité des Trois Imposteurs* (Boston, MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996).