

7. Europe: Although Voltaire is highly critical of the achievements and beliefs of Judeo-Christian cultures, he does devote by far the majority of his universal history to discussion of European civilisation. His point of view is therefore resoundingly Eurocentric and despite his many misgivings regarding intolerance and fanaticism, he certainly sees France and its close neighbours as the most civilised nations of the world at the time of writing.

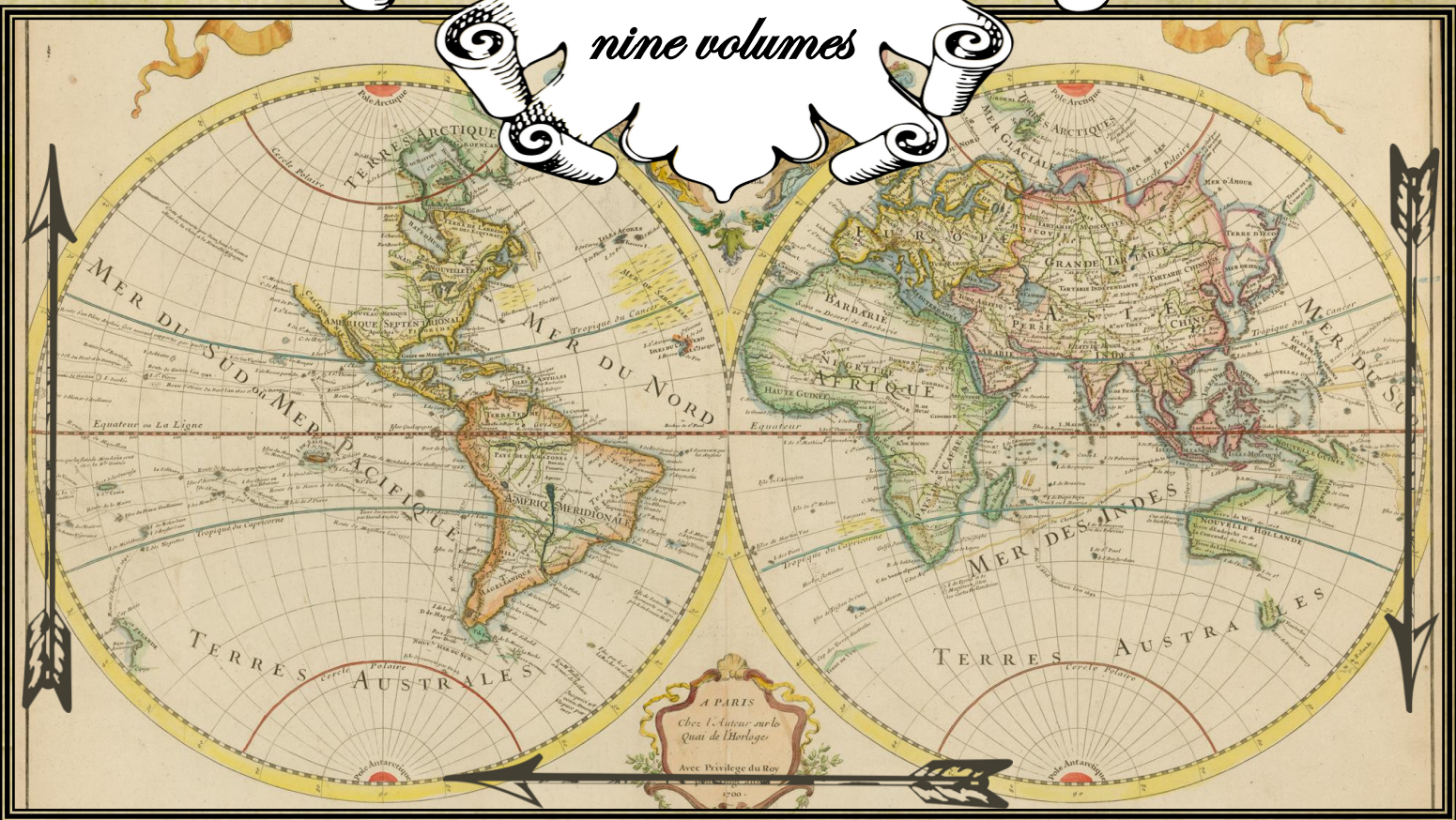
This conclusion is confirmed by his decision to end his narrative of civilisation close to home.

6. The Americas:

Voltaire's depiction of the Aztec and Inca Empires of Mexico and Peru is civilised and idyllic, taking a deliberate stance against their depiction as bloodthirsty savages in Spanish colonialist accounts and downplaying the importance of human sacrifice. He declares Peru the most civilised nation of the New World, describing it as industrious and commercial, terms he previously used in relation to India. He even shows an admiration for Peruvian architecture and art. (Chapters 145-48)

5. African countries:

Apart from his substantial discussion of Egyptian history, Africa plays a minor role in Voltaire's narrative, mainly serving as a place to be invaded and conquered by various different civilisations throughout history. Voltaire repeats the all-too-common racist point of view that the natives of countries such as Guinea, Ethiopia and the Congo are unintelligent, animalistic and built for servitude. As such, according to Voltaire, they are incapable of reason and therefore cannot be civilised. (Chapters 141, 144, 159)



4. Arabia:

One of the most controversial aspects of the *Essai* was Voltaire's open admiration for the Islamic world, interpreted by many of his readers as anti-Christian sentiment. He heaps praises on the many scientific advances and the flourishing arts and literature seen in the early Islamic world. He later condemned the barbaric treatment of the Muslim people by the Crusaders. Voltaire's praise for Islam and Mohammed in the *Essai* is a notable contrast to his tragedy *Mahomet*, written in 1736, which characterised the Prophet as a villainous charlatan and a fraud. (Chapters 6-7, 54-57)

3. Persia:

The inclusion of Persia in the early part of the *Essai* serves two main purposes. The first is to confirm Voltaire's hypothesis that many Christian practices originated in the East by providing the example of baptism. The second is to link the quality of artistic production with the participation of women in society. After a discussion of the artistic merits of Persepolis, he says that women are permitted to participate more in Western society, and so Western art is of better quality than Eastern art because women bring a delicacy to society. (Chapters 5 and 82)

Start: Voltaire's Avant-propos states his objective of travelling the globe in the same order in which it appears to have been civilised. What does he find?

1. China: Voltaire begins his journey with China, which he claims is the oldest civilised country in the world. This choice was made in part to discredit Biblical Creationism and universal historians like Bossuet who take a

Christocentric world view. He praises Confucianism as a religion without fanaticism or intolerance and returns to China many times in the *Essai* as an ideal example of human civilisation. His main criticism is that he doesn't care for Chinese fine art or literature.

2. India:

Voltaire's agenda becomes even clearer when he discusses India. He compares many of its religious customs, good and bad, to those of Christianity, implying that they originated in India and were diffused to European nations who now see them as their own. He says that the Brahmins are undeserving of their bad reputation in the West and that the arrival of Islam in India caused great progress to be made. (Chapters 3-4, 143)