Candide as a Criticism of Organized Religion

*Candide* is a story about optimism, overcoming obstacles, love, and philosophy. In this satire, the author Voltaire uses the plot to criticize organized, Christian religion. How he does this can be seen throughout the text, but specifically in his STD carrying Jesuit, the Anabaptist death, the reference to auto-da-fe, and in Eldorado.

The first occurrence of this criticism is when Candide is reunited with a very sickly Pangloss. To begin, Voltaire announces that Pangloss received syphilis from a long chain of lovers including a Jesuit novitiate (106). This implies that the Jesuits are not devoted to their faith and instead choose to sleep with others. Voltaire added this note about the Jesuits to suggest that those leaders of the church should not be praised in the way that they are praised because they do not take their jobs seriously. Particularly in the time period *Candide* was written, it was quite risky to criticize the church and its clergy members. This very direct insult to the Jesuits lets the readers know that the author does not take respecting the clergy seriously.

On their sea voyage, Jacques the Anabaptist gets pushed overboard during a storm while attempting to help one of his own passengers. Pangloss, the idealized philosopher, “prevented him (from saving Jacques’ life) by proving that the bay of Lisbon had been formed expressly for this Anabaptist to drown in (107).” Pangloss, a man who allowed murder of Jacques, is given a second chance at life while Jacques, a completely selfless and helpful man, is left to die. Pangloss ends up creating justifications for this murder and is then rewarded for it with his life. Voltaire adds this scene and the character of Jacques in to suggest that we should not live our lives in the same way that Jacques did, a way in which we help others in the name of God. Voltaire seems to be poking fun at the way religious people are so kind to others, that they clumsily lose their lives for it. Voltaire suggests that we should instead only perform actions that benefit ourselves, in the way that the sailor who pushed Jacques overboard and the way that Candide refused to help him.

Following their arrival on land and an earthquake, the readers find out that auto-da-fe is an act of faith that was used in Lisbon as a way of repenting and “averting total destruction” following an earthquake (109). Voltaire uses these auto-da-fés to belittle the way Christians respond to situations like natural disasters. He makes it appear that this is a very irrational way of handling the situations by his sarcastic and blunt tone.

A final example which Voltaire criticizes religion is in Eldorado, the utopian society in which everyone lives in complete happiness. In Eldorado, the people respond to questioning about their religion by saying that “we do not pray to him at all. We have nothing to ask him for, since everything we need has already been granted (129).” They also do not have an organized clergy. Voltaire wrote that the people of Eldorado “should have to be mad” to have monks, whose purpose is to argue and kill those who disagree with them (129). Not only is Voltaire criticizing the structure and organization of the church, but he is also saying that in a perfect society, there would not be one. However, the people in this society do have and worship a God, therefore Voltaire may also be suggesting that it is the organization and clergy of the church that are corrupting and harming it, not the idea of God.

Voltaire, throughout *Candide*, made quite a few subtle, and not so subtle satirical attacks on the Christian church and organized religion as a whole. He did this in different ways, particularly in his insult to the Jesuits, the life of the character of the Anabaptist, making fun of auto-de-fe, and the lack of a clergy in the utopian town of Eldorado.