

40. "*Eighteenth Century . . . Most Honorable  
to Human Nature*"

To Thomas Jefferson

Quincy, November 13, 1815

The fundamental article of my political creed is that despotism, or unlimited sovereignty, or absolute power, is the same in a majority of a popular assembly, an aristocratical council, an oligarchical junto, and a single emperor. Equally arbitrary, cruel, bloody, and in every respect diabolical. Accordingly, arbitrary power, wherever it has resided, has never failed to destroy all the records, memorials, and histories of former times, which it did not like, and to corrupt and interpolate such as it was cunning enough to preserve or to tolerate. We cannot therefore say with much confidence what knowledge or what *virtues* may have prevailed in some former ages in some quarters of the world.

Nevertheless, according to the few lights that remain to us, we may say that the eighteenth century, notwithstanding all its errors and vices, has been, of all that are past, the most honorable to human nature. Knowledge and virtue were increased and diffused; arts, sciences, useful

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to men, ameliorating their condition, were improved more than in any former equal period.

But what are we to say now? Is the nineteenth century to be a contrast to the eighteenth? Is it to extinguish all the lights of its predecessor? Are the Sorbonne, the Inquisition, the Index expurgatorius, and the Knights-errant of St. Ignatius Loyola to be revived and restored to all their salutary powers of supporting and propagating the mild spirit of Christianity? The proceedings of the allies and their Congress at Vienna, the accounts from Spain and France, and the Chateaubriands, and the Genlis, indicate which way the wind blows. The priests are at their old work again; the Protestants are denounced, and another St. Bartholomew's day threatened. . . .