

## A Christian Defense of Religious Freedom

Adapted from an “Occasional Paper” written for the World Evangelical Fellowship

by Paul Marshall, July 1996

Religious freedom is not an easy subject to address, especially when we realize that religion is not an isolated area of human existence. It is not merely what people do with their solitude. It is not merely acts of worship on a Sunday, or a Sabbath, or a Friday. It is not merely adherence to creeds or doctrines. Religion is the fundamental shaper of human life, sometimes positively so, sometimes not. Likewise religious freedom can have both constructive and destructive consequences. It is not simply a good thing; it may have costs.

While most Christians correctly accept some view of religious freedom, it is important to remember that this is only a recent development. The Orthodox Churches often still have questions about it. Anglicans usually accept the idea of an established Church. The Roman Catholic Church did not in principle accept the idea of the equal treatment of religions until the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960's.

Protestants have usually led the way in religious freedom, but this too is a recent development. It was not a major feature in the Reformation, except among those being persecuted, and is largely a development of the last two centuries.

### The Old Testament and Religious Freedom

Even the Bible itself does not, at first glance, seem to be fertile ground for defending religious freedom. The core of God's instruction for Israel's life, the Ten Commandments, opens with the words: *“You shall have no other gods before me, you shall not make for yourself an idol, you shall not worship them or serve them; for I am a jealous God”* (Ex. 20:1-3). The worship of other gods was expressly forbidden. In fact, so central was this for Israel that its violation could be capital punishment (Ex. 22:20). However, this apparently inauspicious beginning for a defense of religious freedom can be misleading. Even the Old Testament is not as negative about the subject as it might at first appear.

Religion—whether biblical or unbiblical—is never purely a matter of participating in religious ceremonies or embracing a set of purely theological beliefs. It is not just carrying out a formal act of worship to God or an idol. Religion is about what we do with our lives.

Religion and worship, whether true or false, are intimately tied to living out good and evil in our lives. This connection was evident very early in Israel's history. When the Israelites entered Canaan, they were not to worship the Canaanite gods, *“nor serve, nor do according to their deeds”* (Ex. 23:24). For *“if you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you”* (v. 33). The idea of idolatry as a “snare” recurs throughout Israel's life (cf. Ex. 34:12; Deut. 12:30; Joshua 23:13; Judges 2:3; Ps. 106:36; and cf. Heb. 12:1). It is linked continually to the results of worshipping false gods.

The book of Judges recounts the cycles of Israel's history as it falls into idolatry, then subsequent enslavement, then deliverance by God. Here the Bible repeatedly emphasizes Israel's practical actions: *“Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord”* (2:11; 3:7,12; 4:1; 6:1; 13:1). God's judgment fell because of what they did with their lives, not simply because of their formal worship.

This emphasis was in turn tied to Israel's special vocation as a nation. The commandments are directed to “You,” the people of Israel: the injunctions are given to the nation of Israel as God's elect nation. That is why God stresses His jealousy for them.

Israel was called to be a special nation whose entire political and social order rested on belief in Yahweh, an order that would be disrupted if other religious ways of life intruded.<sup>1</sup> But, while this went on, God left the surrounding nations free to follow their own faiths. Israel's neighbours, even with their often detestable religious beliefs and practices, such as

infanticide, religious beliefs and practices, were to be left in peace.

When Israel first occupied the territory beyond the Jordan River, God commanded that Israel cleanse the land of all foreign nations, together with their idol worship, that threatened Israel's hegemony. Israel was to consider itself holy, dedicated to Yahweh only. The rejection of idolaters and those who followed false religions was a spiritual and political imperative necessary for preserving the spiritual and moral life of the chosen nation in the land of Israel.

Yet God never demanded that Israel conduct a crusade against foreign nations beyond its borders. Later commands to root out false worship were directed against the idolatrous practices of the Israelites themselves but were not occasions for offensive actions against foreign nations. Freedom to order their communal religious life was extended to those other nations. This was true in spite of the fact that their religious beliefs and practices were specifically and categorically branded as false.

The story of Naaman, for instance, suggests a degree of toleration for false worship practices outside Israel. Naaman comes to Israel to be healed of a skin disease and is converted to Yahwism. In a remarkable passage, he explains to the prophet Elisha the predicament he now finds himself in:

“...your servant will no longer offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god except the LORD. But may the LORD pardon your servant on one count: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow down in the house of Rimmon, when I do bow down in the house of Rimmon, may the LORD pardon your servant on this one count.” [Elisha] said to him, “Go in peace.” (II Kings 5:17-19)

The pattern of resisting foreign religious practices within Israel's territory but not beyond continued when Israel was held in captivity in Babylon. Daniel and others put their lives at risk rather than bow to Nebuchadnezzar's idol, but they did not try to stop the Babylonians from doing so. The prophet Jeremiah exhorted the captives in Babylon “seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jer. 29:7).

In any case, we may say that Israel's goal did not extend beyond the preservation of its own role before God to any general attempt coercively to stamp out idolatry.

## Religious Freedom in the New Testament

These patterns come to fruition in the New Testament, where religious freedom simply seems to be taken for granted. The

cross-cultural nature of the new Christianity – embracing both Jews and Gentiles – and the actual task of missionary witness itself rested on the assumption that people are free with regards to their faith. The church was also divorced from any national, territorial, or ethnic ties—“*neither Jew nor Greek*” (Gal. 3:28). Since the church was not tied to a specific geographic location, as Israel had been, there was no basis for excluding other religious believers from a territory.<sup>2</sup>

These fundamental assumptions regarding the freedom of faith were also perfectly manifest in the vehicle for the expansion of the early Church: the preaching of the gospel. The sermons of Acts are appeals and invitations to turn to God. They are spiritually and verbally forceful presentations, but there is never a hint that they are accompanied by coercive force. The disciples followed Jesus, who attracted and invited those who would follow Him.

Jesus' example was borne out in his words. In the parable in which weeds are sown amongst the wheat, Jesus tells his disciples to let the weeds and wheat grow together until the harvest at the end of time, “for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them” (Matt. 13:29). When applied in the context of religious plurality, Jesus' parable suggests the principle of peaceful coexistence.

## Religious Freedom in Christian History

In the earliest days of the Church, both in Jerusalem and Rome, it was the Christians who were the marginalized and dissenting ones. This gave them a self-interested reason to appeal to religious freedom, since it was the ground for their own survival. But the early Christian fathers, such as Tertullian, Justin, Athanagoras, Lactantius and Origen, also consistently advocated religious toleration as a matter of Christian principle.

As the church spread, the Latin-speaking churches of the west (as opposed to the Greek-, and later Slavic-speaking, churches of the east), kept the role of the church and the role of the political order distinct. Even when Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire in 313, it was still understood that these were two distinct bodies.<sup>3</sup>

The two realms of *sacerdotium* (“church”) and *regnum* (“state”) began to emerge. There were henceforth two centres of authority in society, and neither could or should be reduced to the other.

It is vital to note that this was not anything like a split between religion and the political order. Both centres of authority were

seen as religious, that is, as divine institutions: but they were understood to have very distinct roles under God. Both were to be shaped by the gospel, but they had different tasks.

This differentiation into two realms of what was to become “Christendom” had wide, long-lasting and beneficial effects. However, it was anything but clear as to what the boundaries between the two should be, and how they were to be related properly to one another. It was more a framework in which people asked questions than it was a clear answer to those questions. Here we should remember that, even with the best will in the world, the problem is a fiendishly difficult one. One might ask the question, “In a conflict between church and state, who decides?”

As it was, there was very often not the best will in the world. Popes and Emperors fought over the division, aggressively seeking to expand their powers and assert control over each other. Despite this continuing confusion and conflict, the division between the two realms is probably the single greatest contributor to the later growth of religious toleration (and of free societies and, indeed, democracy). George Sabine wrote, “The rise of the Christian Church, as a distinct institution entitled to govern the spiritual concerns of mankind in independence of the state, may not unreasonably be described as the most revolutionary event in the history of western Europe, in respect both to politics and to political thought.”<sup>4</sup>

It’s not that the churches, or the political orders, directly advocated religious freedom: often they didn’t. Indeed, the inquisitions were defended under such a scheme.

But people always believed that there should be boundaries, and they struggled over centuries to define them. This meant that the church, whatever its lust for civil control, had always to acknowledge that there were forms of political power which it could and should not exercise. And the political orders, whatever their drive to subsume all of human life under their power, had always to acknowledge that there were areas of human life which were necessarily and properly beyond their reach.

However much the boundaries were muddled, there was an abiding sense that the political order could not be identified with the order of ultimate human concern; that the spiritual core of human life, and the authority this embodied, was a realm beyond civil control. As with Pontius Pilate, the political ruler always faced “another king.”

In this scheme, the key ingredient in the development of religious freedom was not, in the first place, a doctrine or an

explicit call for freedom. Rather, it was a view of the distinct roles of different institutions. This view, in turn, permeated the civilization with the belief that political and ecclesiastical jurisdictions were limited in their authority, and should always be kept so.

Also, before we are too hard on Christians in previous generations, we need to remember what they were actually fighting about. The stakes were very high. When they talked about religious freedom, they were not talking about retaining quaint folk customs, but about the fundamental commitments of human life. When they talked of the church, they were not concerned about interference with an apparently harmless First Methodist over on the corner. They were talking about the most pervasive institution in society—one with much more influence than the often weak state, which had a head and arms, but little body.

The church composed the “media,” since if any news got around, it did so via announcements from the pulpit, the only place where people gathered. The church was the intelligentsia: it ran the universities and the rest of the educational system. Canon law, the law of the church, was more pervasive than the dictates of kings. It governed marriage, and therefore shaped what people did with inheritance and property. The church also ran whatever welfare arrangements there might be.

It was this institution and its relation to the political order with which those Christians were concerned. It was a very difficult question. There are few modern states and few people who would want to relinquish political control over this whole swath of the social order without a very literal fight. In the same circumstances many modern people would do what some earlier Christians did.<sup>5</sup>

## Protestantism and Religious Freedom

The same question of “church and state” continued in the Reformation. It was further complicated by the fragmentation of the Christian world—there were now many more churches and states to fight about. In this situation, the earliest reformers did not directly advocate toleration. They did, however, wrestle with the questions of the limits of political power and of the boundaries of church and state. In doing this, they emphasized the role of conscience and the freedom of faith. Their spiritual children then took this up in an emphasis on freedom of conscience.

The Anabaptist groups, in particular, struggled against political coercion, and they formed the spring of one of the major streams of religious freedom. This tradition continued in

Robert Browne, the founder of Congregationalism. The English Baptists, headed by Hanserd Knollys, were consistent from the beginning, while Roger Williams defended religious freedom even for Catholics and atheists.<sup>6</sup>

Williams founded Providence as a religious refuge and, in 1663, the colony of Rhode Island received a Charter from Charles II sanctioning complete toleration for all religions, even non-Christians. Later, similar practices were followed by the Quaker William Penn in Pennsylvania. As Joseph Lecler, S.J. (the author of the best work on toleration in the Reformation period) notes, people who are themselves suffering from persecution are usually in favor of toleration. The crucial test is what they do when they themselves have power.<sup>7</sup> Luther failed this test, as did the Congregationalists in New England. It was the Baptists and Quakers who succeeded. Gradually, others came around. Catholic Maryland had the first decree from an assembly to give full religious liberty: the 1649 Act of Toleration. In this way, a truly biblical idea of religious freedom began to be introduced into the modern world.

## Conclusions

Treating different religious bodies equally before the law is not a departure from a Christian view of the modern state. Rather it is a Christian view. It does not denigrate the truth of the

Christian faith but simply makes the point that government officials, as God's ministers, have a specific and limited task. Their task is to do justice for all people within the borders of their country, regardless of who those people are and what they might believe.<sup>8</sup> As a matter of principle, a state shaped by the Christian faith does not give special privileges to Christians.

Although the parallel is inexact, the situation can be compared to a Christian family. Christian parents desire and seek that their children grow up to be Christians. Nevertheless, their calling as parents is to love all their children regardless of what path those children might follow.

If one of the children were to decide to follow another religion, the parents should try to persuade him or her otherwise, but if the parents were to refuse to feed dinner to that child, while still feeding his or her Christian brothers and sisters, the parents would be abdicating their God-appointed role.

The parents' task is to care for all the children that God has placed in their hands. Similarly, the task of governments is to deal justly and equally with all the people that God has placed in its authority. The promotion of religious freedom is an essential aspect of the government's role.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> F.F. Bruce describes this as "practical monotheism" in his *Israel and the Nations* (Grand Rapids: 1963):

<sup>2</sup> The separation of the Church from a particular territory needs more attention than it has received. Many treatments of Christian social ethics try to move from the land-based communal ethical life of Israel to our present situation. Cf. Walter Brueggeman, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Philadelphia: 1977). The result is often a communalism wherein the cohering Israelite nation is taken as normative for modern political structures. If we wanted to take the tightly woven Israelite life as our pattern for economics, we would probably also need to do so for politics, with dangerous results for religious freedom.

<sup>3</sup> Christianity at this phase also became intolerant. My point here is not to defend the practice of the Church during this period but to point out the features that allowed religious freedom to emerge more fully. A full history of religious freedom would, of course, have to point out the great evils done. Nevertheless, the church was not as bad as many of its modern critics say. On this, for example, see Edward Peters, *Inquisition* (New York: 1988).

<sup>4</sup> *History of Political Theory* (New York: 1961), 180. David Little adds "I would underscore that statement several times," *Religion, Order and Law* (New York: 1969), 36.

<sup>5</sup> Consider present fights over who should run schools.

<sup>6</sup> See his *The Bloody Tenent: Of Persecution* (London: 1644)

<sup>7</sup> *Toleration and the Reformation*, 2 vols. (New York: 1960), II: 483.

<sup>8</sup> Of course, there are some religious expressions that would need to be restricted. A resurrection of Molech worship involving child-sacrifice would need to be controlled, and there would always be borderline cases.