

The Promotion of World Peace and Harmony: State and Religion: Must the two be separate to have hope for peace?

It seems simple enough, keep government out of the churches and the churches out of government and everyone can get along peacefully. However, human nature and human institutions are never simple.

This paper will address the question above through examples from history, developing certain relevant themes and bringing them forward to the present age. Peace is defined as social harmony, not just the absence of violent strife.

Keeping the apparatus and power of the state separate from the influence and apparatus of an organized religion is one way to bring about social peace but it is not the only way. Moreover, separation of state and religion may be a necessary but not sufficient condition to bring about social peace.

Throughout history societies have tried variations on three basic approaches to dealing with the discord and strife caused by religious differences. These are:

Established state religion: The state establishes a chosen faith as its official religion.

Orthodoxy is enforced and dissent and heresy are suppressed.

Official separation of church and state: Religious organizations are independent of the state and the government is legally prevented from establishing or supporting religious organizations and beliefs. Governments may take a range of measures, from the limited to the extreme to ensure that religious groups do not benefit from government support to disseminate their influence through society.

Limited state protection and support to multiple religious groups: The government affords protection and support to a number of religious groups to maintain a balance among them, to maintain their comfort levels and minimize feelings of insecurity that could lead to or intensify conflict.

Established state religions have been the norm through much of world history and certainly the history of Europe and the western hemisphere. The enforcement of religious orthodoxy and the persecution of heresy, while they may have provided social stability and the veneer of peace, engendered misery and suffering among marginalized groups and often led to reactions ranging from unrest and emigration to rioting, civil war or rebellion. The reaction against established state religious orthodoxy gave rise eventually to official separation of state and religion in some jurisdictions and to a gradual evolution toward limited state protection to multiple religious groups in others.

Both official separation of church and state and limited state protection, when taken too far, can be counter-productive and result in increased disharmony and conflict, although

that conflict is generally milder than that experienced under energetically applied established state orthodoxy.

More than the choice of an appropriate formula for government-religious relations, the true key to social harmony and peace is the prevalence of a spirit of toleration and mutual respect.

Unfortunately, toleration and mutual respect among individuals and groups cannot be considered in a one dimensional perspective of the relationship of state and religion.

Language, culture, race and social and economic class must be considered as well.

Where these differences reinforce religious differences, toleration and mutual respect are harder to achieve. Where religious differences do not occur along racial, linguistic or economic lines, or some combination of those, religious tolerance and harmony have proved easier to achieve. The relations among the Protestant Christian dominations of white English speaking people in 19th and 20th century Britain and North America became more harmonious as time passed, even if some antagonisms were turned outward toward non-Protestant, non-Christian and non-white peoples.

In evaluating the success of societies and nations in achieving harmony and religious tolerance one must also consider the increasing secularization of societies in the industrial and post-industrial eras. As societies have become more rationalist and materialistic, religion has become less important; in some societies so have ethnic (racial, cultural and linguistic) differences. Assimilation, even to the point of inter-marriage, has increased.

Such societies may enjoy social peace and harmony because they truly believe in mutual respect and toleration of different religious beliefs and practices or because they no longer care much about religion at all.

Returning to the three basic approaches to state-church relations, we start with established state religion in our examination of how societies attempted to address and minimize religious conflict. Repression of religious minorities and dissenters is a constant theme through the history of Western Europe from the late Roman Empire to the age of enlightenment in the eighteenth century. The state worked closely with ecclesiastical authorities and enforced religious orthodoxy. To be sure there were struggles between governments and powerful religious interests, the Roman Catholic Papacy or national bishops. Generally government and church worked together to suppress divergent religious views, termed heresies.

Monarchs and religious leaders may have thought that enforcing religious orthodoxy and homogeneity was not only morally and spiritually correct but also practical in that state and church each used the other to further its own ends. The results of this approach, the persecution of the Albigensians in 13th century France¹, the expulsion and forced conversions of Jews and Moors in post-1492 Spain, and the machinations of the Inquisition during the counter-reformation, were far from peaceful or harmonious.

A result of the Protestant reformation in the sixteenth century was the ending of the monopoly of religious legitimacy of the Pope and the Roman Church in Western Europe.

¹ *The Albigensian Crusades (1209-1255)* <http://www.xenophongroup.com/montjoie/albigens.htm>

Heads of state in sixteenth century Western Europe chose their brand of state Christianity, enforced it internally and went to war with neighbouring states to strengthen and expand the influence of their church or to rally their own people against others by emphasising differences.

Domestic religious differences became political conflicts and inter-state religious differences became international political conflicts. Domestic religious disputes were viewed as local manifestations of foreign conflicts. In the British Isles from the late sixteenth century to the eighteenth century the Roman Catholic Church was viewed not only as a rival and challenger to the established Church of England but, as the established religion in Spain and France, the agent of foreign enemy powers.

Governments zealously persecuted religious dissenters. In France thousands of Huguenots were massacred on St. Bartholomew's Day in 1572². In the British Isles Roman Catholics and Protestant dissenters were persecuted. The struggles between King and Parliament and between the Anglican Church and dissenters culminated in a Parliamentary rebellion and the overthrow of the monarchy by a Puritan Congregationalist regime under Oliver Cromwell. Cromwell and his army proceeded with brutal suppression of Roman Catholic resistance in Ireland. The Stuart Restoration returned the Church of England to its pre-eminent position in Britain and the Revolution of 1688 confirmed it. At the end of the seventeenth century the relationships among religious groups and between church and government in the states of Western Europe presented a dismal picture of conflict and repression. In France the Edict of Nantes had

² *St. Bartholomew's Day massacre* From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

been revoked and the Huguenots exiled. Spain and her American empire were uniformly Catholic as were France and her colonies. In England and Ireland the government enacted a series of Penal Laws to codify the suppression of the Roman Catholic religion and the disenfranchisement of its members. These laws effectively placed the Catholic majority of the Irish population under the complete domination of a minority Anglican elite.

However, over the next two centuries in Europe and America, thinking evolved toward the approaches of official separation of church and state and limited state protection and support to multiple religious groups. New ideas were already in the air. Political thinkers developed new theories of government that included a role for the people, as represented by the elites in the Parliament. The political and religious struggles of the preceding century showed the need for a more flexible approach to religious orthodoxy. Just as absolute monarchy could be replaced by a more responsive government of King in Parliament in England so could religious orthodoxy be tempered. The Toleration Act of 1689 allowed religious freedom to certain dissenting Protestant denominations although they were not to enjoy full political rights. Religious sects regarded as dangerous and subversive, such as the Roman Catholic and the Unitarian, were excluded from the benefits of the Toleration Act.³

The religious persecutions during the seventeenth century in England and Europe had also led to an exodus of religious minorities who set up colonies in North America under the English Crown. The English Crown did not enforce the degree of religious orthodoxy

³ *Act of Toleration*, from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

in its colonies that France and Spain did in theirs. The result was a hodgepodge of provinces, some officially puritan Congregationalist in the North, others nominally Anglican like the mother country, and one, Maryland, that welcomed Catholics. Religious conflicts and tensions existed in these colonies but orthodoxy and uniformity proved hard to enforce on a wide basis, because neither colonial governments nor churches had the authority, structure or resources to ensure religious conformity over large, sparsely settled territories.

When these colonies gained their independence from Britain in the 1780s and set themselves up as a federal union under the United States Constitution their leaders remembered the religious struggles that had led to emigration to America and wished to preserve the somewhat *laissez faire* approach to the plurality of religious practices that had been allowed in the colonies. The Virginia *Statute for Religious Freedom*, written by Thomas Jefferson in 1779 provided that:

[N]o man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested or burthened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer, on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities.⁴

⁴ *Freedom of religion* from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

The founders of the United States wished to formalize freedom of religion and separation of church and state. The First Amendment to the Constitution codified a number of principles of individual liberty, among them freedom of religion. This principle was expressed in the form of legal separation of church and state.

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.⁵

This experiment in legal separation of church and state proved to be a qualified success. In more than two centuries as a nation, the United States has not been free of religious prejudice, conflict and even strife but major collisions between religions or between government and religious sects have been avoided. Political - religious conflicts in the United States have tended to be not about religious beliefs and practices per se, but about the effect of those beliefs on social behaviour and norms (polygamy in the Church of Jesus Christ Latter Day Saints), on education (the banning of teaching about evolution from local public school curricula a hundred years ago; attempts to insert creationism or intelligent design into school curricula more recently), or on reproduction and medical practice (the struggles over abortion). However, there have been disputes about prayers in public schools, a direct church-state issue.

The next experiment in separation of church and state occurred as the ink was drying on the First Amendment to the American Constitution. The French Revolution not only

⁵ Ibid.

attempted to divorce the state from the Roman Catholic Church but to eradicate the church and its influence from French society. Of the three estates upon which the *ancien regime* was constituted, the Jacobins tried to destroy two, the nobility and the church. Priests, nobles and those suspected of sympathizing with them were hunted down, charged with treason and guillotined. The pendulum soon swung back, first with an attempt to co-opt the clergy into the First Republic, the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, then with Bonaparte's Concordat with the Vatican, and finally with the fall of Bonaparte and the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy. However, France was never the same after the Revolution and anti-clerical sentiments persisted and grew. Anti-clericalism flourished as a political philosophy and practically a civic cult ⁶ under the Third Republic, 1870 to 1940. Through such measures as secular public schools, universal military service for men and active promotion of a French civic and cultural tradition, the French state sought to assimilate regional attitudes and even languages and create a stable and progressive homogeneous French society speaking a common language. This is not to say that French society was completely harmonious and experienced no sectarian strife, as the anti-Semitic sentiments unleashed by the Dreyfus affair showed.

The Russian Bolshevik revolution and the Chinese communist revolution each included the eradication of religion from society as a fundamental principle of the new regime, as the French Revolution had done before. In each case a totalitarian anti-democratic system persecuted religious believers. There was no peace or harmony. In both Russia and China the eventual rightward swing of the pendulum changed the relationship of church and state. In the extreme urgency of the Great Patriotic War Stalin relented in the

⁶ Pagnol, Marcel *La gloire de mon père*, Paris : Éditions de Fallois, 1988, pp. 15-16, 114-116.

state persecution of religion and tried to make an ally of the Orthodox Church to stimulate patriotic fervour in the struggle. This official tolerance of the church was a wartime expedient. Religion and churches only came into official government favour in Russia after the break-up of the soviet system and the birth of a nationalist, kleptocratic capitalist state. The government shifted from the separation of church and state model to the model of limited state protection for diverse religious groups. Churches have been required to register and non-registered churches, including foreign ones, have been forbidden to operate or proselytize. Much the same has happened in the Chinese Communist state's shift toward capitalism without democracy. The state tolerates certain religious groups that must be approved by the government. Religious movements that are deemed politically dangerous, such as Falun Dafa / Falun Gong⁷ and the Tibetan nationalist Buddhist movement, are suppressed with considerable brutality.

While the United States and France were developing political systems that included the principle of complete separation of church and state, Britain and some of her remaining colonies embarked on a less doctrinaire and more pragmatic approach to achieving harmony among differing religious groups, Limited state protection and support to multiple religious groups, the third of the approach identified at the beginning of this paper.

The Quebec Act of 1774 allowed the French-speaking inhabitants of Canada to worship in the Roman Catholic Church and to retain the seigniorial system of landholding and

⁷ *Falun Gong & Falun Dafa: History of the Movement* www.religioustolerance.org – website maintained by the Ontario Consultation on Religious Tolerance

other French colonial institutions. Through this pragmatic law the Crown obtained the loyalty, or at least the passivity, of the French population of Canada during the upheavals of the American Revolution. With their religion and their institutions protected the francophone inhabitants felt less threatened by English rule. Social and political upheaval was avoided for two generations, until 1837.

In the home country, the British Parliament began a slow dismantling of the legal restrictions oppressing Roman Catholics, starting with a Catholic Relief Act in 1778. Various other Catholic relief laws were enacted over the years, culminating in the Catholic Relief Act of 1829 that removed most of the remaining legal disabilities applying to Roman Catholic men. Catholics were still obliged to pay tithes to the Church of England and legally barred from ascending the throne or marrying the sovereign.⁸

Nineteenth century colonial regimes in British North American colonies, including Canada East, Canada West and Newfoundland, established separate schools for Roman Catholics and various protestant denominations. By the 1840s a denominationally based school system was an accepted fact in Newfoundland.⁹ This system kept the various denominations feeling more secure about their survival. Similar school systems in the Canadas provided the same sense of security to French-speaking Catholics and to English-speaking Protestants. With the arrival of large numbers of English-speaking Catholics from Ireland, these systems were expanded to provide both English and French language Catholic schools, supported by the state.

⁸ *Catholic Emancipation* From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

⁹ O'Flaherty, Patrick, *Lost Country, The Rise and Fall of Newfoundland 1843-1933*, St. John's: Long Beach Press, 2005, p. 11.

After Confederation in 1867, Article 93 of the British North America Act protected denominational schools in the provinces where they already existed.¹⁰ Denominational schools, funded by provincial governments, existed in a number of Canadian provinces until the late twentieth century and still exist in some today. Two exceptions are Quebec and Newfoundland and Labrador. By the late twentieth century language and culture had replaced religion as the major distinction causing cultural and political friction in Quebec. The government transformed a denominationally-based school system with English Protestant and Catholic schools and French language Catholic schools to a dual system of English and French language public, basically non-religious schools. Considerations of demographics and economics caused Newfoundland and Labrador to scrap its denominationally-based school system in the 1990s and replace it with a unified non-sectarian system. Nevertheless, for nearly two centuries, provinces in British North America and then Canada used state-supported denomination schools as a mechanism for providing a peaceful *modus vivendi* among rival Christian churches.

In Britain herself, the state and the established Church of England remained officially linked but through the 19th century more and more liberty and rights were afforded to non-Anglicans and in the twentieth century the established Church tended to play a lesser role in society. Britain could be said to be observing the spirit of religious toleration and separation of church and state while keeping the letter of established religion.

¹⁰ *The Constitution Act, 1867*, Department of Justice, Canada, website.

Britain ran its overseas empire in the 19th and 20th centuries in a similar manner. In colonies in Africa, Asia and Oceania local religions and cultures were not interfered with except where exceptionally objectionable practices were concerned, e.g. suttee in India. In that country British rule kept an uneasy peace among Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims and other religious sects. The privileged positions of local princes and religious leaders were protected provided they supported the political status quo.

It can be argued that the paternalistic approach of state protection and support for major religious groups worked well to maintain political balance and keep the peace in the British North American and then Canadian provinces and elsewhere in the British empire and Commonwealth. In Canada and Britain there was as much freedom of conscience and social harmony among religions as there was in the United States.

The approach of providing limited state protection for diverse religious groups was not effective in preserving peace and harmony in Northern Ireland. There separate schools and institutions failed to instil a sense of security and confidence in the Roman Catholic minority. The minority viewed the social and political institutions of Ulster as a form of segregation or apartheid designed to deny them full economic and social participation in society. There was little peace and harmony and eventually long campaigns of tit-for-tat terrorism lasting almost thirty years.

In recent years religious and political convulsions in Islamic societies have sharpened sectarian tensions around the world. This recent history is well known. Part of it

occurred in war-torn Afghanistan. The Taliban movement established an old-fashioned theocratic regime reminiscent of Inquisition-era Spain or Puritan Massachusetts. A strict interpretation of Islamic scripture was applied to every facet of personal life in Afghan society. The result was social and economic misery, especially for women. The Taliban ruling clique made the mistake of giving shelter to international Islamic terror groups. The whole edifice came crashing down after September 11, 2001, to use a clumsy metaphor. With the fall of the Taliban, the demonisation of al Qaeda in the western news media and copy-cat bomb attacks in various countries, fear, loathing and religious prejudice directed at Muslims spread around the world.

Western governments and societies regarded with some trepidation the large Muslim minority populations they had allowed to settle in their midst but had not made to feel truly welcome and included. Governments enacted anti-terrorism laws that encroached upon civil liberties and were perceived by Muslim residents to be persecution directed at them and their beliefs. The reactions of both western societies and governments and Muslim minority populations should have come as no surprise.

The French government, realizing perhaps how unassimilated and alienated the Muslim minority in the country was, decided to try a little old-fashioned coercive assimilation. Hence the recent law or policy forbidding pupils to wear obvious manifestations of religious belief, crucifixes, Stars of David, head scarves, etc. in public schools. Ostensibly this was a measure applying to all but in reality it was directed at Muslims. Whatever the motivation the law appeared crude and paternalistic.

In a sense, the French law banning crucifixes and head scarves turned the logic of inter-sectarian harmony, tolerance and mutual respect on its head.

If laws guaranteeing and protecting freedom of conscience and freedom of religious practice can be enacted, and if the civic culture of a polity respects democracy, freedom of choice and religious and cultural diversity, then an environment of mutual tolerance and respect can be created and nurtured. This does not happen overnight. It existed, without democracy, in some of the Islamic caliphates around the Mediterranean during the golden age of Islamic civilisation during the Middle Ages. The state was officially Muslim but religious and cultural minorities were tolerated provided they respected the dominant government, religion and institutions. It has taken the three centuries since the beginning of the Age of Enlightenment for this kind of political, social and religious environment to take hold in western cultures in Europe, the Americas and Australasia. Progress was made with fits and starts and many a traumatic reversal, the holocaust in World War II being undoubtedly the worst.

An environment of democratic political values, religious freedom and mutual respect and tolerance can lead to the breaking down of distrust and prejudice. Adherents of different religions can mix more or less freely in schools, workplaces and recreational settings. Religion becomes a facet of a person's life that may distinguish him or her from people of other religions but it does not have to set him or her completely apart. With increased toleration and mutual respect for people of other religions, races and cultures may come

the social mixing called assimilation. The majority and minority cultures change and a new culture evolves.

There is a risk that in a rationalist, secular and materialistic culture assimilation is not the same as mutual respect and tolerance of diversity but simply the erosion and disappearance of religious belief.

The line in John Lennon's *Imagine*, "Nothing to kill or die for, And no religion too," is profoundly sad if it means that we can only have peace and harmony by getting rid of religion entirely, as the Jacobins, the Bolsheviks and the Chinese Communists tried to do.

The yearning to know and understand a deity, to search for explanations of creation, the beauty of myth and the ethical precepts one can draw from religious tradition are some of the reasons why humans have been drawn to religious belief and ritual through the ages. Must these be cast aside because time and again some people take them too far and insist on uniformity of belief and practice? Is not the misuse of religion the problem and not religion itself? Is not extremism in religious belief the problem and not the existence of religious belief? One cannot blame the deity for the misdeeds and hatreds of his, her or its followers. That would be to bring God down to the level of a human being and so deny His divinity.

We have seen how over the past 300 years or so societies and states have tried to come to grips with the divisiveness and conflict caused by divergent religious beliefs in an effort

to achieve peace and harmony. Two promising approaches, separation of church and state and limited state protection of religious groups and institutions, have achieved certain measures of success in various times and places but history shows that there is no easy mechanical fix. The juridical and institutional structures put in place have of themselves been insufficient to ensure peace and harmony. The spirit and will to understand the other's point of view or at least respect the right of the other to have that point of view must exist. Can we hope that people around the world will continue to increase their understanding and respect for the beliefs of others?

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