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THE AMERICAN IDEA OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

by Philip Schaff

The American Idea of Religious Freedom

WHAT is the distinctive character of American Christianity in its organized social aspect and its relation to the national life, as compared with the Christianity of Europe?

It is a free church in a free state, or a self-supporting and self-governing Christianity in independent but friendly relation to the civil government.

This relationship of church and state marks an epoch. It is a new chapter in the history, of Christianity, and the most important one which America has so far contributed. It lies at the base of our religious institutions and operations, and they cannot be understood without it....

The relationship of church and state in the United States secures full liberty of religious thought, speech, and action, within the limits of the public peace and order. It makes persecution impossible.

Religion and liberty are inseparable. Religion is voluntary, and cannot and ought not to be forced.

This is a fundamental article of the American creed, without distinction of sect or party. Liberty, both civil and religious, is an American instinct. All natives suck it in with the mother's milk; all immigrants accept it as a happy boon, especially those who flee from oppression and persecution abroad. Even those who reject the modern theory of liberty enjoy the practice, and would defend it in their own interest against any attempt to overthrow it.

Such liberty is impossible on the basis of a union of church and state, where the one of necessity restricts or controls the other. It requires a friendly separation, where each power is entirely independent in its own sphere. The church, as such, has nothing to do with the state except to obey its laws and to strengthen its moral foundations; the state has nothing to do with the church except to protect her in her property and liberty; and the state must be equally just to all forms of belief and unbelief which do not endanger the public safety.

The family, the church, and the state are divine institutions demanding alike our obedience, in their proper sphere of jurisdiction. The family is the oldest institution, and the source of church and state. The patriarchs were priests and kings of their households. Church and state are equally necessary, and as

inseparable as soul and body, and yet as distinct as soul and body. The church is instituted for the religious interests and eternal welfare of man; the state for his secular interests and temporal welfare. The one looks to heaven as the final home of immortal spirits, the other upon our mother earth. The church is the reign of love; the state is the reign of justice. The former is governed by the gospel, the latter by the law. The church exhorts, and uses moral suasion; the state commands, and enforces obedience. The church punishes by rebuke, suspension, and excommunication; the state by fines, imprisonment, and death. Both meet on questions of public morals, and both together constitute civilized human Society and ensure its prosperity.

The root of this theory we find in the New Testament.

In the ancient world religion and politics were blended. Among the Jews religion ruled the state, which was a theocracy. Among the heathen the state ruled religion; the Roman emperor was the supreme pontiff (pontifex maximus), the gods were national, and the priests were servants of the state.

Christianity had at first no official connection with the state....

For three hundred years the Christian church kept aloof from politics, and, while obeying the civil laws and paying tribute, maintained at the same time the higher law of conscience in refusing to comply with idolatrous customs and in professing the faith in the face of death. The early Apologists-Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Lactantius- boldly claimed the freedom of religion as a natural right.

The American System Compared with Other Systems

The American relationship of church and state differs from all previous relationships in Europe and in the colonial period of our history; and yet it rests upon them and reaps the benefit of them all. For history is an organic unit, and American history has its roots in Europe.

1. The American system differs from the ante-Nicene or pre-Constantinian separation of church and state, when the church was indeed, as with us, self-supporting and self-governing, and so far free within, but under persecution from without, being treated as a forbidden religion by the then heathen state. In America the government protects the church in her property and rights without interfering with her internal affairs. By the power of truth and the moral heroism of martyrdom the church converted the Roman Empire and became the mother of Christian states.

2. The American system differs from the hierarchical control of the church over the state, or from priest government, which prevailed in the Middle Ages down to the Reformation, and reached its culmination in the Papacy. It confines the church to her proper spiritual vocation, and leaves the state independent in all the

temporal affairs of the nation. The hierarchical theory was suited to the times after the fall of the Roman Empire and the ancient civilization, when the state was a rude military despotism, when the church was the refuge of the people, when the Christian priesthood was in sole possession of learning and had to civilize as well as to evangelize the barbarians of northern and western Europe. By her influence over legislation the church abolished bad laws and customs, introduced benevolent institutions, and created a Christian state controlled by the spirit of justice and humanity, and fit for self-government.

3. The American system differs from the Erastian or C'saro-Papal control of the state over the church, which obtained in the old Byzantine Empire, and prevails in modern Russia, and in the Protestant states of Europe, where the civil government protects and supports the church, but at the expense of her dignity and independence, and deprives her of the power of self-government. The Erastian system was based on the assumption that all citizens are also Christians of one creed, but is abnormal in the mixed character of government and people in the modern state. In America, the state has no right whatever to interfere with the affairs of the church, her doctrine, discipline, and worship, and the appointment of ministers. It would be a great calamity if religion were to become subject to our ever-changing politics.

4. The American system differs from the system of toleration, which began in Germany with the Westphalia Treaty, 1648; in England with the Act of Toleration, 1689, and which now prevails over nearly all Europe; of late years, nominally at least, even in Roman Catholic countries, to the very gates of the Vatican, in spite of the protest of the Pope. Toleration exists where the government supports one or more churches, and permits other religious communities under the name of sects (as on the continent), or dissenters and nonconformists (as in England), under certain conditions. In America there are no such distinctions, but only churches or denominations on a footing of perfect equality before the law. To talk about any particular denomination as the church, or the American church, has no meaning, and betrays ignorance or conceit. Such exclusiveness is natural and logical in Romanism, but unnatural, illogical, and contemptible in any other church. The American laws know no such institution as 'the church,' but only separate and independent organizations.

Toleration is an important step from state-churchism to free-churchism. But it is only a step. There is a very great difference between toleration and liberty. Toleration is a concession, which may be withdrawn; it implies a preference for the ruling form of faith and worship, and a practical disapproval of all other forms. It may be coupled with many restrictions and disabilities. We tolerate what we dislike but cannot alter; we tolerate even a nuisance, if we must. Acts of toleration are wrung from a government by the force of circumstances and the power of a minority too influential to be disregarded.

In our country we ask no toleration for religion and its free exercise, but we claim it as an inalienable right. 'It is not toleration,' says Judge Cooley, 'which is established in our

system, but religious equality.' Freedom of religion is one of the greatest gifts of God to man, without distinction of race and color. He is the author and lord of conscience, and no power on earth has a right to stand between God and the conscience. A violation of this divine law written in the heart is an assault upon the majesty of God and the image of God in man. Granting the freedom of conscience, we must, by logical necessity, also grant the freedom of its manifestation and exercise in public worship. To concede the first and to deny the second, after the manner of despotic governments, is to imprison the conscience. To be just, the state must either support all or none of the religions of its citizens. Our government supports none, but protects all.

5. Finally- and this we would emphasize as especially important in our time,- the American system differs radically and fundamentally from the infidel and red-republican theory of religious freedom. The word freedom is one of the most abused words in the vocabulary. True liberty, is a positive force, regulated by law; false liberty is a negative force, a release from restraint. True liberty is the moral power of self-government; the liberty of infidels and anarchists is carnal licentiousness. The American separation of church and state rests on respect for the church; the infidel separation, on indifference and hatred of the church, and of religion itself.

The infidel theory was tried and failed in the first Revolution of France. It began with toleration, and ended with the abolition of Christianity, and with the reign of terror, which in turn prepared the way for military despotism as the only means of saving society from anarchy and ruin. Our infidels and anarchists would reenact this tragedy if they should ever get the power. They openly profess their hatred and contempt of our Sunday-laws, our Sabbaths, our churches, and all our religious institutions and societies. Let us beware of them! The American system grants freedom also to irreligion and infidelity, but only within the limits of the order and safety of society. The destruction of religion would be the destruction of morality and the ruin of the state. Civil liberty requires for its support religious liberty, and cannot prosper without it. Religious liberty is not an empty sound, but an orderly exercise of religious duties and enjoyment of all its privileges. It is freedom in religion, not freedom from religion; as true civil liberty is freedom in law, and not freedom from law. Says Goethe:

'In der Beschrnkung erst zeigt sich der Meister,
Und das Gesetz nur kann dir Freiheit geben.'

Republican institutions in the hands of a virtuous and God-fearing nation are the very best in the world, but in the hands of a corrupt and irreligious people they are the very worst, and the most effective weapons of destruction. An indignant people may rise in rebellion against a cruel tyrant; but who will rise against the tyranny of the people in possession of the ballot-box and the whole machinery of government? Here lies our great danger, and it is increasing every year.

Destroy our churches, close our Sunday-schools, abolish the

Lord's Day, and our republic would become an empty shell, and our people would tend to heathenism and barbarism. Christianity is the most powerful factor in our society and the pillar of our institutions. It regulates the family; it enjoins private and public virtue; it builds up moral character; it teaches us to love God supremely, and our neighbor as ourselves; it makes good men and useful citizens; it denounces every vice; it encourages every virtue; it promotes and serves the public welfare; it upholds peace and order. Christianity is the only possible religion for the American people, and with Christianity are bound up all our hopes for the future.

This was strongly felt by Washington, the father of his country, first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen'; and no passage in his immortal Farewell Address is more truthful, wise, and worthy of constant remembrance by every American statesman and citizen than that in which he affirms the inseparable connection of religion with morality and national prosperity.

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