RELIGIOUS LIBERTY AND THE EARLY CHURCH

by

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Modern concepts of “religious tolerance” often view religion through a skeptical lens, ground during the Enlightenment, which magnifies the historical wrongs committed by organized religion. As Voltaire penned in his *Treatise on Toleration* (1763), “The less we have of dogma, the less dispute; the less we have of dispute, the less misery.” It is no wonder that Voltaire described theological controversy as a “plague” and an “epidemic illness.” For many historians, therefore, the Enlightenment plays the hero in the quest for religious freedom. As a corollary, “Constantinianism” (portrayed as the Christian utilization of the power of the state to accomplish religious purposes) is often seen as the inevitable outgrowth of the very essence of Christianity.

“But,” warns John Bowlin, “these assumptions of Enlightenment historiography cheat the truth.” The common interpretation does not

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4Another famous Enlightenment piece, although varying in tenor from Voltaire’s, was John Locke’s *Letter on Toleration* (1685).


6John Bowlin, “Tolerance among the Fathers,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 26 (2006): 11. Bowlin’s essay makes the point that the church fathers had to learn that “tolerance” was only extended to those who were already accepted as members of the community. “Christians could not be tolerated without first being regarded as members, and they could not be so regarded without forsaking the activities they hoped would be tolerated” (ibid., 23). “Refusal to participate is what Christians want tolerated, and it is precisely their refusal that makes their request
take into account the historic role of religious groups, such as Baptists, upon the development of "religious liberty." The common interpretation also overlooks the emphasis upon religious liberty in pre-Constantinian (‘ante-Nicene’) Christianity. In fact, the phrase "religious liberty" (libertas religionis) was actually coined by an early church author, Tertullian of Carthage (c. A.D. 197). Early church leaders defended religious freedom based upon the proper nature of religious belief, religious worship, religious persuasion, and religious defense. Moreover, the universal arguments underlying the early Patristic position were pertinent to all, not only to fellow Christians.

THE NATURE OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF AND RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

Philip Schaff, the renowned church historian, asserted, “The early Apologists—Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Lactantius—boldly claimed the freedom of religion as a natural right.” In the mid-second century, Justin Martyr resolutely argued that coercion is contrary to religious devotion. Several decades later, Tertullian similarly insisted that no

impossible to grant…. They ask to be tolerated as harmless outsiders, yet it is precisely because they are outsiders that they cannot be tolerated” (ibid., 16–17).


I will use the terms "religious freedom" and "religious liberty" interchangeably in this study. "Religious Liberty," according to Glenn Hinson, "means the freedom of every human being, whether as an individual or in a group, from social coercion in religious matters;... Religious liberty defined in this manner encompasses several freedoms. One is freedom of conscience, the right freely to determine what faith or creed to follow. Others are freedom of religious expression, freedom of association, and freedom for corporate and institutional activities" (Glenn Hinson, Religious Liberty: The Christian Roots of Our Fundamental Freedoms [Louisville: Glad River, 1991], 13; italics original).


one should “wish to receive reluctant worship,” nor “to do away with freedom of religion, to forbid a man choice of deity, so that I may not worship whom I would, but am forced to worship whom I would not.”¹² Not even a human would long to receive such unwilling homage.¹³

Tertullian explained in his *Apology*:

Moreover, the injustice of forcing men of free will to offer sacrifice against their will is readily apparent, for, under all other circumstances, a willing mind is required for discharging one’s religious obligations. It certainly would be considered absurd were one man compelled by another to honor gods whom he ought to honor of his own accord and for his own sake.¹⁴

In another work, *ad Scapulam*, Tertullian reiterated,

It is the law of mankind and the natural right of each individual to worship what he thinks proper, nor does the religion of one man either harm or help another. But, it is not proper for religion to compel men to religion, which should be accepted of one’s own accord, not by force, since sacrifices also are required of a willing mind. So, even if you compel us to sacrifice, you will render no service to your gods.¹⁵

A century later, Lactantius argued that religious persecution was a violation of both human and divine law.¹⁶ Lactantius queried, “Who is so insolent, so lofty as to forbid me to raise my eyes to heaven, to impose on me the necessity either of worshiping what I do not want to or of not worshiping what I wish?”¹⁷ Lactantius maintained that freedom ultimately dwells in religion, since religion “is a matter which is voluntary above all others, nor can necessity be imposed upon any, so as to worship that which he does not wish.”¹十八 individual may be physically forced to *pretend* he or she is worshiping, but the true desire

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remains absent.\textsuperscript{19} Lactantius further asserted that worship against one’s will, worship that is “without devotion and faith,” is “useless to God.”\textsuperscript{20} “If you wish, indeed, to defend religion by blood, if by torments, if by evil, then, it will not be defended, but it will be polluted and violated. There is nothing so voluntary as religion, and if the mind of the one sacrificing in a religious rite is turned aside, the act is now removed; there is no act of religion.”\textsuperscript{21} As Charles Freeman explains Lactantius’ views, “Belief imposed from outside is meaningless to God, who places greater value on conviction from within.”\textsuperscript{22}

How will God grant an answer to prayer, asked Lactantius, if one does not pray properly from the heart? When such faithless individuals “come to do sacrifice, they offer nothing intimate, nothing personal to their gods; they have no uprightness of mind, no reverence, no fear. And when the empty sacrifices have been gone through, they leave all their religion in the temple and with the temple, just as they had found it, and they do not bring or take back with them anything from it.”\textsuperscript{23} Such heartless religion, void of all conviction of faith and persuasion of conscience, is no more than “a ritualistic act.”\textsuperscript{24} A “sacrifice which is wrested from one against his will” is an oxymoron, since worship that is not “spontaneous and from the heart” is “an execration,” as “when men do it driven by postscription or injuries or prison or torments.”\textsuperscript{25}

\section*{THE NATURE OF RELIGIOUS DEFENSE AND RELIGIOUS PERSUASION}

In the mid-second century, Cyprian of Carthage contrasted physical coercion with proper religious persuasion. He asked the pagan authorities why they would ever use physical intimidation to accomplish religious purposes: “Why do you concern yourself with the weakness of the body, why do you contend with the feebleness of earthly flesh? Attack the vigor of the mind, break the strength of the mind, destroy faith; conquer, if you can, by discussion, conquer by reason.”\textsuperscript{26} Cyprian continued with a rational critique of religious

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Ibid. Libanius, a pagan rhetorician, also noted that policies of coercion led to religious hypocrisy (see Garnsey, “Religious Toleration in Classical Antiquity,” 22).
\item Lactantius, \textit{Divine Institutes}, 5.19; trans. McDonald, \textit{Lactantius: Divine Institutes}.
\item Ibid.
\item Charles Freeman, \textit{AD 381: Heretics, Pagans and the Christian State} (London: Pimlico, 2008), 37.
\item Ibid.
\item Ibid.
\item Lactantius, \textit{Divine Institutes}, 5.20; trans. McDonald, \textit{Lactantius: Divine Institutes}.
\item Cyprian, \textit{To Demetrian}, 13; trans. Roy J. Deferrari, \textit{Saint Cyprian: Treatises},
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coercion: “Indeed, if your gods have any divinity and power, let them
together rise to their vindication, let them themselves defend them-
Elad of their own majesty…. You should be ashamed to worship
whom you yourself defend; you should be ashamed to hope for
protection from those whom you protect.”27

Lactantius also noted the inherent contradiction of a deity worthy
of worship yet dependent upon followers to force “the unwilling to
sacrifice.”28 “If those are gods who are thus worshiped, assuredly, on
account of this alone, they ought not to be worshiped because they
wish to be worshiped in this way. They are truly deserving of the des-
tination of men to whom libation is offered with tears, with groans, with
blood pouring from all the members.”29 “We, however,” countered
Lactantius, “do not ask that anyone against his will should worship our
God.”30 “Therefore, when we endure wickedness, we make opposition
by not even a word, but refer vengeance to God, not as those do who
wish to seem defenders of their gods and rage savagely against those
who do not worship them.”31

Both Origen and Cyprian argued that Christians were not to en-
force religious conformity through capital punishment.32 “Christ con-
quers none who is unwilling, but he persuades.”33 “Religion ought to
be defended, not by killing but by dying,” proclaimed Lactantius, “not
by fury but by patience, not by crime but by faith. The former action
each time belongs to evil, the latter to good, and it is necessary that
good be the practice of religion, not evil.”34 Instead, religion should be
defended by patience, devotion, or even a faithful death. Such a sacri-
ficial response is “pleasing to God Himself, and it adds authority to re-
ligion.”35

Lactantius boldly criticized those who defended religion through


27Ibid., 14. Garnsey explains that “it was entirely logical for a pagan political
community in antiquity to be intolerant of nonconformity and protective of its gods.
The polis protected its gods because the gods protected the polis” (Garnsey, “Religious
Toleration in Classical Antiquity,” 3). Cyprian’s logical query went deeper by asking
whether a deity who had to be protected by humans was worthy of worship at all.

28Lactantius, Divine Institutes, 5.20; trans. McDonald, Lactantius: Divine
Institutes.

29Ibid.

30Ibid.

31Ibid.

32Origen, Against Celsus, 7.26; Cyprian, Letters 4.4.

33Origen, Sermons in Psalms, 4.1; cited in Everett Ferguson, “Voices of Religious

34Lactantius, Divine Institutes, 5.19; trans. McDonald, Lactantius: Divine
Institutes.

35Ibid.
force: “How the poor things err, though their intention is honest!”36 Although such combatants understood “that there is nothing in human affairs more important than religion,” they were deceived “in the manner of its defense.”37 Lactantius expounded, “There is no need of force and injury, because religion cannot be forced. It is a matter that must be managed by words rather than by blows, so that it may be voluntary.”38 He contrasted the truly Christian approach with a coercive approach: “But we teach, we prove, we explain.”39 “Poles apart are execution and piety, and truth cannot be joined with force, nor justice with cruelty.”

**RECENT USE OF THE EARLY CHURCH FATHERS**

An examination of the Patristic understanding of religious liberty has recently found a surprising home: a report by a Standing Joint Committee of the Parliament of Australia. The report, published in 2002, was entitled “Conviction with Compassion.” The document recognizes that “arguments against intolerance and for religious liberty can be traced back to ancient times.”41 Among the earliest church fathers, it highlights the perspectives of Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and Lactantius (although not Cyprian).

The report explains, “The majority of those arguing for religious freedom, however, were themselves victims of persecution at the time, seeking an end to this persecution and freedom to practice their own religion. There were relatively few advocates for a universal religious liberty until modern times.”42 Now certainly the discussion of religious liberty in nascent Christianity was hammered out upon the hot anvil of persecution.43 And there is no doubt that after Christianity’s affiliation with imperial power, many of its leaders eventually (and unfortunately) abandoned earlier notions of religious freedom.44 The formerly

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36Ibid.
37Ibid.
38Ibid.
39Ibid.
40Ibid.
42“Conviction with Compassion,” 3.5.
oppressed became oppressors. Nevertheless, the Australian Parliament did not fully or equitably portray the early church fathers’ concern for religious liberty. First, the Australian Parliament failed to appreciate the notion of universal human “natural rights” found in the early church fathers. The report asserted that “Medieval thinkers began to develop the idea that all people possess natural rights. This doctrine would also be important for later theories of religious freedom.”

Long before the Medieval thinkers, however, several Patristic authors had already described freedom of religion as a basic human right, “and did so in the name of a universal principle to which anyone could appeal.” The innovation of this early Christian position is accentuated by contrasting it with the intellectual milieu of its historical context: “To us this principle [of religious liberty] appears incontestable (though the history of our own times shows that it is still not universally accepted), but in that day it was not among the self-evident truths. In antiquity none assumed that religion rests on free decisions, which each must make for himself.”

The early Christians argued that religious freedom was founded upon universal tenets concerning the nature of humans and religion, the nature of the conscience and truth, and the nature of persuasion and apologetics. Tertullian argued from the “nature of religion” and the “natural right of each individual” to the freedom of worship. Lactantius believed that religious persecution was a violation of both human and divine law.


“Conviction with Compassion,” 3.56; cf. 3.50.


Ibid., 4–5.
that governs the nature we happen to share. It must be a matter of natural equity. As all have access to this truth about our nature, in potency if not in act, all should be able to follow the argument from natural equity to universal tolerance.⁴⁹ One is not required to be a persecuted early Christian in order to appreciate the early Christian defense of religious liberty. One must only be human.

Second, the Australian report criticized the Patristic perspective by appealing to a modern, relativistic notion of “religious tolerance.” On the one hand, the report highlighted the “eloquent plea for universal religious liberty” found in Tertullian’s *Apology* for the Christian faith.⁵⁰ Not satisfied with this positive appraisal, however, the document then laments that Tertullian, “despite his open-minded statements,” “actually concludes with an assertion of the absolute superiority of the Christian religion.”⁵¹ With the insertion of the word “actually,” we can almost hear the Australian jaws drop in shocked amazement. In this revealing sentence, the Australian committee has clearly confused the desire of religious freedom for all with the impropriety of making any religious value judgments. Their criticism suggests that religious liberty must not include the right to assert the superiority of one’s religion above all others. Obviously, competing claims to superiority are mutually exclusive, but the freedom to make such exclusive claims is part and parcel of *full* religious liberty.

**PORPHYRY AND LACTANTIUS**

Lactantius also argued for the superiority (and even exclusivity) of Christianity, although his similar outlook was not mentioned in the Australian parliamentary report. Lactantius declared of Christianity: “This road, which is a path of truth and wisdom and virtue and justice is the one source, the one force, the one seat of all these things. It is a single road by which we follow…and worship God; it is a narrow path—since virtue is given to rather few.”⁵² According to Lactantius, the philosophers did not recognize this only path to God, but followed the “false” road of “many paths” that led in the opposite direction.⁵³ Lactantius masterfully combined his personal conviction in the

⁴⁹Bowlin, “Tolerance among the Fathers,” 27.

⁵⁰“Conviction with Compassion,” 3.26. In this depiction, the Standing Joint Committee implicitly acknowledged Tertullian’s concept of natural rights.

⁵¹Ibid; italics added. Guy Stroumsa concurs, “Tertullian shows us how arguments in favour of religious toleration could be developed which did not entail a deep transformation of thought-patterns, a real internalization of the idea of tolerance” (Stroumsa, “Tertullian on Idolatry and the Limits of Tolerance,” 174). In Stroumsa’s view, this lack was inevitable since “Christian intellectuals were arguing for toleration, and yet they were unwilling (or unable) to accept the basic premise of religious toleration: a certain relativism in religious matters” (ibid.).


⁵³Ibid., 6.7.
exclusivity of Christianity with a call to virtuous “forbearance” toward other beliefs.\textsuperscript{54} Harold Drake has labeled Lactantius’ “plea for religious freedom,” which resulted from this creative union, as “the most elaborate and eloquent of its kind surviving from antiquity.”\textsuperscript{55} Elizabeth DePalma Digeser has also examined Lactantius’ “original and comprehensive argument for religious toleration.”\textsuperscript{56} She argues that Lactantius’ views contributed to Constantine’s own understanding of religious tolerance as early as A.D. 310.\textsuperscript{57}

The so-called “Edict of Milan” (A.D. 313) promised Christians “free and unrestricted opportunity to practice their religion.”\textsuperscript{58} But it did more. In accordance with “sound and upright reason,” it also guaranteed “all others” the freedom to observe their preferred religious commitments.\textsuperscript{59} “To others as well the freedom and full liberty has been granted, in accordance with the peace of our times, to exercise free choice in worshipping as each one has seen fit. This has been done by us so that nothing may seem to be taken away from anyone’s honor or from any religion whatsoever.”\textsuperscript{60} Drake declares that the Edict of Milan is a “landmark in the evolution of Western thought—not

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\item \textsuperscript{54} One emphasis of Lactantius’ overall perspective was to leave the punishment of religious offenses with God alone. Cf. Justin, \textit{Apology} 1.68; Tertullian, \textit{ad Scapulum} 2; Garnsey, “Religious Tolerance in Classical Antiquity,” 14–15.
\item \textsuperscript{57} Although Drake concurs, not all classical historians have agreed with Digeser’s conclusions (see Drake, \textit{Constantine and the Bishops}, 207–12). Constantine’s seemingly inconsistent religious perspectives and policies remain complex questions. See also Digeser, \textit{Making of a Christian Empire}, 115–43; Doerries, \textit{Constantine and Religious Liberty}; Robert Wilken, “In Defense of Constantine,” \textit{First Things} 112 (2001): 36–40; Peter J. Leithart, \textit{Defending Constantine: The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom} (Downers Grove: IVP, 2010), 106–10. Leithart affirms that “the story of Constantine’s religious policies is more complicated, and therefore more interesting, than is often supposed” (ibid., 106).
\item \textsuperscript{58} Licinius posted the edict in Nicomedia in his own name and that of Constantine.
\item \textsuperscript{60} As found in Lactantius, \textit{On the Death of Persecutors} 48; trans. Mary F. McDonald, \textit{Lactantius: Minor Works}, Fathers of the Church (Washington: CUA Press, 1992). “Such is the cunning of providence. An argument designed to convince the pagan elite to tolerate Christian dissenters is used to convince Christian bishops to tolerate traditional pagan worship” (Bowlin, “Tolerance among the Fathers,” 29).\
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because it gives legal standing to Christianity, which it does, but because it is the first official government document in the Western world to recognize the freedom of belief.  

Diggeser further maintains that Lactantius was opposing the views of Porphyry, a pagan philosopher, in “the first-known debate between Greek philosophy and Christian theology over the question of religious tolerance.” Porphyry denied that toleration was an appropriate response to Christianity, at least in the form he confronted it. He contended that Christians were not worthy of forbearance but should be justly punished, since they had abandoned the traditions of the fathers by “choosing impieties and atheism.” Although Porphyry believed that many paths led to the divine, not all paths did, including Christianity. He believed that people who abandoned traditional worship should be justly suppressed. For the pagan philosopher, the problem with Christianity was its stress upon the deity of this one particular human (the “God-man” in Christian teaching)—Jesus of Nazareth. Porphyry maintained that Christianity could be made compatible with traditional worship and philosophy by forsaking its worship of Jesus. In modern parlance, Porphyry was an inclusivist who excluded exclusivity.

Diggeser explains,

Unlike Porphyry’s proposal of many paths, Lactantius’ argument is a true theory of toleration: he understands that both Christians and the followers of the traditional religions strongly disapprove of and disagree with the other, but he also argues that neither group should use force against the other. And he advocates forbearance in order to achieve a greater good, nothing less than that of proper worship.

As quoted in Wilken, “In Defense of Constantine,” 37. Galerius had granted an “indulgence” to Christianity already in A.D. 311. But the so-called “Edict of Milan” went further in its religious concessions, and it had a more lasting influence. A Constantinian letter to the eastern provinces, issued in 324, reiterated a policy of religious toleration (see Freeman, AD 381, 38). On the other hand, Constantine became increasingly oppressive of dissenters as his reign proceeded, including those deemed to be heretics and schismatics. According to Craig Carter, Constantine squandered his opportunity to “promote religious liberty and increase respect for human life and dignity” (Craig A. Carter, Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Perspective [Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006], 96).


Ibid., 142.


Diggeser, “Lactantius,” 142.


Digeser is mistaken, however, when she claims that Tertullian, unlike Lactantius, did not include reciprocity in his description of religious toleration.\(^68\) Such an assertion seems odd in light of Tertullian’s own Apology: “Let one worship God, and another Jupiter; let one extend his hands in supplication to heaven, and another to the altar of Fides;...let one offer his God his own soul, and another the soul of a goat” (24).\(^69\) Tertullian’s ad Scapulam described a common ground for this reciprocity: “It is the law of mankind and the natural right of each individual to worship what he thinks proper.”\(^70\)

Similarly, Robert Wilken misleadingly declares that Lactantius’ work was “the first theological rationale for religious freedom, because it is the first rationale to be rooted in the nature of God and of devotion to God.”\(^71\) But Tertullian already expressed this argumentation in ad Scapulam 2: a genuine deity would not crave coerced “worship.”

**THE EARLY CHURCH FATHERS AND THE AMERICAN FOUNDING FATHERS**

Thomas Jefferson composed what came to be called the “Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom.”\(^72\) Although the bill was not immediately adopted upon its introduction in Williamsburg in 1779, James Madison later resuscitated and advocated the statute, and the Virginia Assembly finally passed it in 1786.\(^73\) John Leland, a Baptist leader in Virginia, corresponded with Madison and lobbied for Jefferson’s bill.\(^74\) Jefferson’s interaction with Baptists in the matter of religious freedom,

\(^68\)Ibid., 142.

\(^69\)Stroumsa quips, “With this lapidary plea Tertullian establishes himself as one of the earliest advocates of religious toleration in the Christian tradition” (Stroumsa, “Tertullian on Idolatry and the Limits of Toleration,” 173). Tertullian’s Apology 24 goes on to describe libertas religionis (“religious liberty”).

\(^70\)Tertullian, To Scapula 2; trans. Arbesmann, Daly, and Quain, Tertullian.


especially his Letter to the Danbury Baptist Association of Connecticut (1802), are well-known in early American studies. Few letters in American history have been as frequently quoted or have had as profound an impact on public discourse as Jefferson’s Danbury letter.76

Is it possible that the early church fathers in some manner—however slight—influenced the “Founding Fathers” of this nation in their understanding of religious liberty? Did Jefferson ever read relevant Patristic texts? I summon the fascinating evidence of the catalog of Thomas Jefferson’s personal library. In chapter 17 (“Religion”) of his catalog, with the entries numbered by shelf position, Jefferson listed #31: “Tertullianus”; #32: “Lactantius”; #33: “Lactantius on the death of Persecutors”; and #177: “Justinii Martyris opera.” Of course, we cannot know for sure if the erudite Jefferson, no adherent of orthodox Christianity himself, ever read these specific books in his library, much less if they directly impacted his views on religious liberty.78 If Jefferson did peruse the volumes at all, Lactantius’ lengthy discussion of religious liberty as found in book five of his Divine Institutes would have been especially hard to overlook. We do know from Jefferson’s essay “Notes on Religion” (written in 1776) that he could oppose Cyprian’s view of ecclesiastical polity, while leading into a discussion of “religious liberty.”79

Jon Meacham, the managing editor of Newsweek magazine, notes that James Madison objected to the notion of “religious tolerance,” because tolerance suggests that the majority had granted the minority a right that could be withdrawn at any time.80 Madison insisted on “the

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76Ibid., 457.


idea of religious liberty, the liberty to believe or not believe, to worship or not worship, liberty of conscience.” And it was that idea,” continues Meacham, “which is the central American insight that religion is hugely important in the life of the nation, but it has to be a matter of individual conscience.

Robert Wilken, a distinguished early church historian, has noted the similarities between Madison’s concept of “religious liberty” and the church fathers, without positing any theory of dependence. “It is not far-fetched to say that Lactantius’ view of religious freedom is echoed in James Madison’s defense of the free exercise of religion…. Madison quietly replaced the [proposed] term ‘toleration’ with the ‘full and free exercise of religion.’” Wilken then adds, “It is unlikely that Madison read Lactantius, though he was theologically well informed, but Lactantius’ insight, which is really an insight drawn from biblical religion, is confirmed by other Christian thinkers in antiquity and in the Middle Ages.

Everett Ferguson, another Patristic scholar, affirms, “In the modern era, in new circumstances, the principles of the early Christians have come into practice.” Although one cannot prove direct influence, therefore, such parallels at least demonstrate that these great thinkers (the church fathers and the Founding Fathers) came to similar positions, even if independently.

May 2012). Cf. the letter of the Danbury Baptists, who expressed concern that the religious privileges they enjoyed as a minority group were held as “favors granted” rather than as “inalienable rights.” The Danbury Baptists wrote Jefferson: “Our Sentiments are uniformly on the side of Religious Liberty—that Religion is at all times and places a matter between God and individuals—that no man ought to suffer in name, person, or effects on account of his religious Opinions—that the legitimate Power of civil government extends no further than to punish the man who works ill to his neighbor” (italics original). The letter is available at http://www.stephenjaygould.org/ctrl/dba_jefferson.html (accessed 7 May 2012).

81 Meacham, “Interview.” See also Chester Williams, Religious Liberty (Evanston: Row Peterson, 1941), 59–61. For a perspective that sees “religious toleration” and “religious liberty” as more synonymous, see Zagorin, How the Idea of Religious Toleration Came to the West, 5–7.

82 Meacham, “Interview.”


84 Ibid.

CONCLUSIONS

First, we have demonstrated that the call for religious liberty is not a modern phenomenon alone. Digeser cites the common yet mistaken "traditional view" that "theoretical conceptions" of religious toleration or liberty began in the sixteenth century. 86 This present examination reinforces those studies that have argued otherwise. 87 According to Wilken, "The true hero of this eventful tale is Lactantius, whose discussion of religion lays bare the spiritual roots of Western notions of religious liberty." 88

Second, we have argued that the recent report on religious liberty by the Australian Parliament includes two shortcomings. It fails to recognize the language of universal human rights found in the early Christian writers. And it fails to appreciate the compatibility between a defense of religious liberty and a belief in the exclusive superiority of Christianity as found among the Patristic authors. Wilken explains,

It is commonly assumed that because polytheism is not exclusive it must be tolerant. But the historical evidence will not bear this interpretation…. Christianity, on the other hand, is exclusive, for it claims not only that one can know the true God but that the way to God has been revealed in Christ. Hence it is often assumed that Christianity is inherently intolerant. But this confuses exclusivism and intolerance. Polytheism is not exclusive, but it can be intolerant as it was at the time of Diocletian’s persecution. Christianity is exclusive, but it can be tolerant (though of course it can also be intolerant, as later history will demonstrate). 89

Third, we have exposed Digeser’s mistaken claim that Lactantius argued from reciprocity but Tertullian did not. Tertullian, too, defended religious liberty by appealing to mutual forbearance as the only response intrinsically congruent with any genuine religious belief. This

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86Digeser, "Lactantius," 130. As an example, see Bernard Crick, Political Theory and Practice (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 63.


89Ibid., 38. It may be debated whether Lactantius fully preserved his own attitude after the rise of Constantine. Overall, "The Christian church, for its part, stands accused, and convicted, of intolerance towards pagans, Jews and nonconformists within its own ranks (heretics, schismatics)" (Garnsey, Religious Toleration in Classical Antiquity,” 2). Everett Ferguson has gathered some post-Constantinian denunciations of religious coercion among the church fathers (Ferguson, "Voices of Religious Liberty," 21). Cf. the case of Gregory Nazianzus in Freeman, AD 381, 170.
evidence adds further weight to Drake’s analysis, which was built upon the sole data of Lactantius: “The coercive Christian as normative is a modern construct—the worst sort of conceptual anachronism, one that has required every ounce of scholarly ingenuity to maintain.”

Finally, we have proposed the intriguing possibility that the writings of the church fathers as found in Thomas Jefferson’s library may have—and if so, perhaps only minimally— influenced at least one American Founder. Apart from this tantalizing (yet unverifiable) possibility of literary impact, the Founding Fathers manifest similar concerns and insights as the church fathers, but not direct dependence.

In any case, contemporary thinkers—both religious and non-religious—can learn from the early Christian plea for religious freedom. The Patristic defense of religious liberty was founded upon universal principles concerning the proper nature of belief, worship, and persuasion. These arguments should be attractive to all, not just to persecuted early Christians. Moreover, they should remain dear to Baptists, historic defenders of the principles of “religious liberty.”

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