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Secularization and Tolerance

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Abstract. In this paper, starting from Condorcet's discussion on progress, the author analyzes the relationship between the decline of religions, the end of State paternalism and tolerance. The author underlines how history shows a different course with respect to illuminist provisions.

Two hundred years ago, shortly before his death in 1794, the great philosopher Condorcet wrote his famous *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (Condorcet 1798). In this discussion on progress, he attached particular importance to man's liberation from religion. According to Condorcet, the decline of Christianity was already well under way and soon reason would also triumph over non-Christian religions. Tolerance would reign supreme over the ruins of *fanaticism*. A great many progressive thinkers of that time shared this vision and continued to share it into the nineteenth century. An even greater number of conservative thinkers feared such a vision would be fulfilled if governments did not hold their peoples back from the precipice with a paternal hand. Different manifestations of the same belief have been held practically up to present times.

Two hundred years have passed since then and in part Condorcet's vision has proved true. Massive movements towards secularization have greatly reduced Christianity's influence. At least in China the influence of non-Christian cults has also drastically diminished. According to the authoritative *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, approximately a quarter of the world population can be classified as "atheist" or "unreligious."

As we know, in reality even the populations that officially practice a particular religion are becoming more and more secular. And yet, in spite of this, we have not seen that triumph of tolerance which should follow as a result of secularization. In the last eighty years we have seen Holbach's brand of atheism—which in Condorcet's times was free thinking par excellence—change into a state anti-religion of such ferocious intolerance that it sent Christianity back into the catacombs, so that it relived its past of persecutions of over a thousand years before. The intolerance of communist

governments has been followed elsewhere by instances of savage anticlerical persecution, in Mexico or Spain, for example, in the name of free thinking or perhaps even that of the anarchic ideal. As if this were not enough, we have seen an irreligion of such ferocity emerge with the motto "*Rasse, Blut und Boden*," that intolerance led to the systematic massacres of the Holocaust. In comparison, the burnings at the stake during the Inquisition or the Massacre of Saint Bartholemew seem harmless party games.

Condorcet's enlightened forecast has turned back on itself: Secularization is by no means a guarantee against the wild beast of fanaticism. There is not in fact the slightest certainty that even the collapse of fanatical Nazi or Communist movements will lead to the triumph of tolerance. In ex-Yugoslavia the collapse of ideology has led only the reciprocal massacres of Croatian Catholics, Orthodox Serbs and Bosnian Muslims.

The predicted collapse of non-Christian religions has also taken unexpected turns in the course of history. At least one of the great non-Christian religions, Islam, has in the recent past frequently seen instances of furious revival rather than of untroubled decline. It is somewhat disconcerting that whereas at one time the Islamic countries were often a model of peaceful cohabitation, with Muslims, Jews and Christians living together, in recent decades, including the present one, the Islamic revival has frequently been accompanied by the bloody spectre of *jihad*, the "holy war." Not a day passes nowadays without Muslim fundamentalism claiming new victims. We no longer even speak of the chronic horrors such as those in the Sudan or of the circumstances that are leading to the disappearance of the Christian minorities in the Middle East.

It is curious that the return of violence has often been particularly bloody in North Africa and the Middle East, where the colonial impact of France, the country of Voltaire and Condorcet, has been strongest. It could aptly be said of the Huguenots during the period of the Sun King in France that "the dragons were excellent missionaries." For some reason, in our century the Foreign Legion has not shown similar capacity for spreading French secularism in Algeria, Morocco and Syria.

In former times intolerance was religious intolerance almost by definition, above all in the Catholic Church but also in the Protestant and Orthodox Churches. In the same way, rationalism was by definition the principal opponent of intolerant fanaticism. History in the last century or two has usually confirmed this. If we are honest, however, we have to admit that in some cases history has followed a bizarrely different course.

In Catholic countries, especially in Latin countries such as Italy or Spain, religious intolerance has certainly been slow to die out. In Spain the last public execution of Protestant clergymen, to the delight of the Catholic clergy, does not date back to Philip II, but to Franco's Glorious Movement in 1936. In Italy the last massacre of Protestants dates back a little further—to the Barletta massacre in 1866. The use of the police to stamp out Evangelical

groups, however, only ceased around 1960. Yet history demonstrates that Catholicism has not always been a monolithic block in its attitude towards the problem of religious freedom. We cannot ignore the long and tenacious struggle of the liberal Catholics in the nineteenth century from Montalembert in France to Manzoni and Gioberti in Italy. Still less can we deny due historical consideration of the spiritual anguish which led to the Second Vatican Council.

In fact the Second Vatican Council was a very important turning point, also in relation to the question of tolerance. It cannot be claimed that the council fathers were inspired by Spinoza or Voltaire, but it certainly appears possible that they were influenced by the new theological and interpretative theories circulating in the Catholic world in the twenty years leading up to the council. Ill-reputed theology, therefore, *bête noir* of the *philosophes*, was of considerable weight in one of the major victories in the principle of tolerance this century. Which means that if we wish in the future to discuss tolerance, even more so in a context as difficult to ignore as the Catholic world, a little waffle and a few platitudes are not enough. We need to consider what direction theology is taking today.

In the Protestant world, the example of Holland in the seventeenth century is well-known—a pioneer of tolerance but also the scene of the clash between grim Calvinistic Orthodoxy and Arminian liberalism. Already in the seventeenth century things had become more complicated, with that kind of Reformation of the Reformation led by the English Non-conformists and the German *Stille in Lande*. It would be rather bold to attribute the pacifism of the Quakers and the Moravian Brethren to a sort of Voltairianism *avant la lettre*. Besides, the subsequent historical path of Protestantism until its virtual identification with the liberal cause—the path marked out by the illustrious minds of first Locke and Pufendorf and later John Wesley and Alexandre Vinet—was doubtlessly stimulated by theological reflection. It might be amusing to note that the ill-reputed Anglican, Lutheran or Reformed state church ended up by embracing the concept of tolerance with sufficiently good grace in the course of the 1800s, whereas certain popular groups in the so-called democratic United States, the country of Jefferson and the separation of Church and State, showed bad grace right into the twentieth century. To demonstrate this we have only to look at the not very edifying history of American anti-Catholicism, which lasted until the fear of the red Commies became stronger than the abhorrence of the papist *Scarlet Woman*. There is no guarantee, however, that the end of the *Red Scare* will not be followed by the return of anti-papist phobia, perhaps in the seductive dress of feminist fashion rather than the old rags of the Ku-Klux-Klan.

If Unesco has felt it necessary to propose a year of tolerance, it means that the problem is still alive today, that it is still a cause for serious concern. We must concern ourselves with the historical precedents of current problems: We can go back even further than Condorcet and the Enlightenment, as far

back as the religious wars or the Middle Ages or even, why not, to classical antiquity. If we wish to be honest, however, we should admit that this would only be a sophisticated way of beating about the bush in order to avoid seeing certain uncomfortable realities. Spinoza never had anything to do with the Holocaust, even though he was a Jew, and Voltaire, when he admired the wisdom of the Chinese, did not have the slightest inkling of what the Red Guard would later do during the Cultural Revolution or the Tiananmen Square massacre. We are on the threshold of the year two thousand and we historians should discuss what is concretely and directly relevant to the problem of tolerance today. We have a moral duty towards all those who have suffered and fought for the cause of tolerance and freedom, sometimes paying for it with their lives; we owe it to the memory of our illustrious forefathers such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King. To amuse ourselves with just a few good old platitudes would be to make a mockery of them, and this we have no right to do.

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Toleration and Law: Historical Aspects

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Abstract. Strictly speaking the law cannot admit toleration: It cannot tolerate ideas or behaviour which are contrary to its requirements. This logic explains why for centuries civilizations found no place for toleration. Then in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, philosophers and thinkers such as Spinoza, Locke, Bayle and later Voltaire or Malesherbes advocated tolerance, certain aspects of which were to be introduced into the legislation of many countries: freedom of opinion, the free movement of persons, freedom of assembly and of religion.

If the legal expert is well acquainted with the law, which is a rule established by the will of the State and a restrictive measure, he has more difficulty in defining toleration, a notion which lacks precision and which has been slowly moulded in the course of time. The philosophers tell us that "toleration consists of allowing the free expression of opinions, beliefs and behaviour, inasmuch as they concern the individual conscience" (Hasnoui 1990, 2611-12). The historian, for his part, observes the fury of intolerance, inquisitions, genocides, witch-hunts, ethnic cleansing, etc., which recur throughout the centuries: The question of toleration thus appears to him as an often belated examination of the unceasing repetition of intolerance (Borne 1985, 1709). For many long centuries, intolerance reigned supreme in our western civilisation: Law and right were alone triumphant and, according to a strict and rudimentary logic, the law—be it civil or religious—cannot accept the idea that individuals or groups of individuals do not match all their thoughts and acts to the rules laid down by society as a whole. To tolerate ideas or behaviour contrary to the law can only undermine the foundations of public order, even if the law leads to injustice as Cicero noted: *summum ius, summa injuria*.

It is hardly necessary to recall the ravages of the intolerance which reigned supreme until the sixteenth century. The roots of our civilisation are Greek and Roman. In Greece as early as 440 B.C., the philosopher Anaxagoras had to leave Athens because of his contention that the sun was composed