

Is Liberalism Good for Religions?

Liberalism, a political philosophy that grew out of the Enlightenment and that champions reason, freedom, and equality, has lately been criticized by some religious thinkers in the West. Liberalism, in their view, atomizes individuals, weakens society, and ultimately corrodes all faiths. To discuss these challenges, Cato hosted a policy forum in April on the question “Is Liberalism Good for Religions?” Participants included JOSEPH LOCONTE, associate professor of history at The King’s College, and Cato senior fellow MUSTAFA AKYOL, who specializes in the Islamic case for liberty.

JOSEPH LOCONTE: There are a lot of people on the cultural left who think that political liberalism is, and ought to be, the enemy of traditional religion. And they’re happy about that. I think many on the left want their particular vision of liberalism to render religious belief irrelevant and to keep people of faith confined to their little sanctuaries. That’s a view that’s out there. Others, though, especially some on the cultural religious right, also believe that liberalism erodes traditional religious belief. And they think this is what liberalism was designed to do. Catholic political scientist Patrick Deneen argues that the liberal project was essentially steeped in sin from its birth. Deneen argues that when liberalism dissolves our moral commitments to one another and stigmatizes our faith communities, it is being true to itself.

I think that both sides in this debate, on the left and on the right, misconstrue the foundations of liberal democracy. And I don’t think they’ve got a strong-enough grip on the nature of authentic religious belief. Maybe that’s intellectual laziness, maybe it’s something else, but I think both sides have embraced a thoroughly false and, ironically, militantly secular view of the historic rise of the liberal democratic project. The liberal democratic project helped to make possible the renewal of religious belief in the West, I would argue. It was this liberal democratic project that, properly understood, en-

shrined the concept of religious freedom, freedom of conscience, in the culture and institutions of the West. The conservative critics of liberalism—I don’t think they’ve taken their historical task seriously enough. And by failing to attend carefully to the past, they can’t really understand the current predicament. Let me just take a moment with this history about the liberal project.

It began as a response to the sins of Christendom. What sins? Let me just name a few here. The denigration of individual conscience. The criminalization of dissent. The corrosive entanglement of church and state. The hedonism of clerical leadership, and the deeply rooted anti-Semitism. I would argue that the Catholic medieval project, for all of its achievements (and some of them are truly remarkable and positive), failed to uphold one of the most transformative ideas of the Jewish and Christian tradition: the freedom and the dignity of every human soul. And that was a catastrophic failure. That failure, I would argue, generated a robustly Christian response. The liberal project began as an attempt to build a more just society. How? By appealing, believe it or not, to the life and teachings of Jesus.

Listen to John Locke on this one, in his *A Letter Concerning Toleration*: “If the Gospel and the apostles may be credited, no man can be a Christian without charity and without that faith which works, not by force, but

by love.” This was the Lockean basis for religious freedom, an appeal to the moral example of Jesus. Combined, yes, with the principle of equal justice under the law regardless of religious belief. So, the father of political liberalism renewed our commitment to authentic Christianity, uncoerced Christianity, as the foundation for pluralistic society. For thinkers such as Locke, the problem wasn’t religion. The problem was the decline of genuine faith, a spiritual corruption aided and abetted by a culture of coercion. And what were the results of that culture of coercion? The Europe of Locke’s day was a persecuting society. Here’s how Locke put it in his letter: “No peace and security, no, not so much as common friendship, can ever be established or preserved amongst men as long as this opinion prevails, that dominion is founded in grace and that religion is to be propagated by force of arms.” No peace, no security, not even friendship, with that idea. So, the liberal project, by insisting on the separation of church and state, offered the pathway toward religious renewal and to a more just and humane society.

So then, what has the Lockean vision of a just commonwealth produced, particularly in the United States? What effect has it had on religion? I’d like to quote a few lines here from Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*: “There is a certain European population whose disbelief is equaled only by their brutishness and ignorance, whereas in America one sees one of the freest and most enlightened peoples in the world equally fulfill all the external duties of religion. On my arrival in the United States it was the religious aspect of the country that first struck my eye. . . . Among us [the Europeans], I had seen the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom almost always move in contrary directions. Here [in America] I found them united intimately with one another: they

reigned together on the same soil.” The spirit of freedom and the spirit of religion, on the same soil. That’s what he saw, one of the most careful observers of the American scene. All the ministers he spoke to said the vitality of religion in America is due to the separation of church and state.

Locke was initially attacked as an atheist. One critic compared Locke to one of those locusts that arose from the smoke of the bottomless pit. And the amazing thing is that by the 18th century, Locke’s combination of Christian piety, Christian faith, and natural rights was being sounded from the pulpits on both sides of the Atlantic. And yet today, we hear Christian conservatives—or at least some of them—rejecting liberal democracy with its emphasis on individual freedom. Let me quote again from Patrick Deneen: “Locke writes that the law works to increase liberty, by which he means our liberation from the constraints of the natural world.” [See “Inescapable Liberalism? Rescuing Liberty from Individualism and the State,” ABC Religion and Ethics, May 20, 2013.] R. R. Reno, editor of the Catholic journal *First Things*, says, “Locke’s ideal society is a free association of individuals, unbound by duties that transcend their choices.” [See Joseph Loconte, “The War over Liberal Democracy,” *The National Interest*, February 11, 2019.] In other words, radical individualism is what they believe Locke was setting out to try to achieve. I think they’ve got it completely wrong. I, like some of these conservatives, am steeped in this nostalgia for a premodern, medieval world. And they blame our modern social problems on the wicked, corrosive ideas of Lockean liberalism. So, I would put the question to them—which Lockean liberal ideas, exactly, are so corrosive of religious belief and moral commitments? Is it the idea of human equality and human freedom based on the proposition that every person bears the image of God? Is it the idea that the rights of conscience are sa-

cred and can’t be coerced by church or state? Is it the idea that impartial justice, the golden rule, must be the cornerstone of any democratic society? Or how about the idea that the desire to know God, to find peace with God, is inherent in every human soul, and that the state must respect this desire or forfeit its legitimacy?



“Grace and freedom can defeat bigotry and oppression.”

These are the ideas that threaten religious belief and have somehow shipwrecked the liberal order?

Friends, as a historian I can tell you, it was these concepts, on the contrary, that helped the West to recover its Christian conscience. John Locke, a founding father of political liberalism, defended all these ideas, as did James Madison. The American Revolution was, in many ways, a Lockean revolution, and it still has the power to inspire. Writing in the *New York Times*, my dear friend Mustafa Akyol, in a nod to Locke, wrote an op-ed called “A Letter Concerning Muslim Toleration.” Here’s what Mustafa wrote a couple of years ago: “If Islamic thought is to liberalize today, it

must take a Lockean leap.” When I read that line a few years ago, I just wanted to crack open a bottle of prosecco! Exactly right, a Lockean leap. Now more than ever, we need that Lockean leap both at home and abroad. Although he’s considered a modern thinker, Locke helped to retrieve one of the historic gifts of Christianity. What’s the gift? A narrative of grace and freedom that can defeat a culture of bigotry and depression. Locke reminded us that every human heart whispers its desire for the mentions of the blessed, for a glimpse of that bright kingdom that lies beyond the sea. We could use another John Locke, ladies and gentlemen, or someone like him, in our latest hour of crisis.

MUSTAFA AKYOL: Thank you, Joe, for referencing my article. It’s a pleasure to hear from you. Now, I was reading Joe’s article a few days ago [“The War over Liberal Democracy”], and especially the parts about the persecutions done in the name of Christianity in premodern, preliberal Europe. It reminded me of a trip I had to Montepulciano, in Tuscany. It’s a beautiful place, up on a hill, with great food and architecture and everything. But they also have something called the Museum of Torture, and when you go in there, you see all these rusty iron devices that were used to tear bodies into pieces in the most horrible ways. I don’t want to describe it in any more detail than that. Some of these were used by church authorities, against heretics and the like.

When I saw these devices in the museum, I remember thinking: well, it’s not just us Muslims who have a problem with religious fanatics, or religious persecution and authoritarianism. Of course, that’s history. In Christianity, all that’s long gone. But that progress was made possible, at least in the Protestant world, by people like John Locke. It was Enlightenment thinkers like him who said heretics should not be persecuted. It was a very progressive idea

at the time! Now, looking at this history from the perspective of Islam is important today, I think, because I have always felt that religion can be used for persecution, for authoritarianism, but religion can also be compatible with a free, open society. It happened in Christianity. It can happen in Islam. We should work on it. That has been my vision. But now I read intellectuals like Deneen who are saying liberalism is so bad, liberalism is so terrible. First of all, I want to take them to visit the Museum of Torture, so they can get a better sense of what we're talking about here.

And, of course, there are problems in modern societies as well. But we should compare the modern liberal order to its alternatives. Just like there are problems in capitalist societies—but compared to Stalin, capitalism still looks pretty good.

From the Islamic perspective, here's what I can say on this topic. In the premodern era, Islam actually wasn't that bad at all in terms of human rights and toleration. At times it was better than its Christian contemporaries. Because from the very beginning, Islam had rejected the idea of forced conversion. That's why Christians and Jews remained as who they are in predominately Muslim lands for centuries. Middle Eastern Christians are now being wiped out by groups like ISIS and other terrorists. But they were present for centuries, and there's a reason for that. It is the same reason why, at times, Jews fled from Europe to the Ottoman Empire and other Islamic lands.

However, with the advent of modernity, with the advent of the ideas of human rights, religious freedom, and freedom of speech, and with the stagnation of Islamic law in most Muslim societies, the gaps between the West and Islam on these things became very clear. In spite of those setbacks, liberalism has made some advances in the Muslim world in the past two centuries. That's why there are constitutional governments in many parts of the Muslim world.

The Ottoman Empire began imple-

menting some remarkably liberal reforms in the 19th century. They changed the penal code. Corporal punishments were abolished, for example. However, these reforms were only a half success, and today there is certainly a resistance in the Muslim world against liberalism, in the very basic sense of the word. In Malaysia, for example, my



MUSTAFA AKYOL

“I see this coming in the Muslim world. It is a good thing.”

book has been re-banned just this week because it promotes liberalism. In Malaysia, the religious authorities give sermons in the mosques condemning liberalism and “human rights-ism.” The two always go together in their vernacular: liberalism and human rights-ism.

As they view it, human rights-ism is an idea that promotes falsehoods like people are equal, or that people should have the freedom to change or reject their religion. So, why is this happening in Islam? Because we have something that the Christians don't have, or at least not nearly as much of, which is the legal aspect of the religion: shari'a. In Christianity, there were church laws, but they're not as integral. In Judaism,

the legal aspect was integral. But in Judaism, the religious law wasn't state law for most of Jewish history.

So, in Islam, how do we approach shari'a, and how do we change it? Or, how do we change the interpretation of shari'a through jurisprudence? This is the big issue. And there are people who say we should understand that it's contextual; that it's God's word but God spoke in a context, and we can go forward from that. There are people who are making that argument, exploring how we can reconcile shari'a with the perspective of freedom which you can find in the Quran, for example, in Quranic verses like “there is no compulsion in religion.” (Al-Baqara 256).

However, a lot of Muslims are still hesitant to take this Lockean leap. I think one reason is that they fear that if you enter liberalism there will be freedom, and then you will be free from religious morality itself. You will abandon everything you believe in because there is freedom. You will be doing cocaine parties and orgies every day, to put it in a caricaturized way. Well, we should put it right. Freedom doesn't compel you to abandon your religion. It doesn't even advise you or encourage you to do that; freedom just gives you a vacuum, and it is your job to fill that vacuum.

You can be a very pious conservative Muslim and live fully in a free society. You might have problems in France under *laïcité*, which is maybe not full freedom when it comes to the wearing of headscarves and issues like that. But in a fully free society, you can live like the Amish if you want! You can even create a community that is conservative, but you don't have to define the whole overarching structure of society. However, there are some people who say we need coercion for sustaining our religion, because our religion can only thrive if it dominates all of society rather than merely having a space within society where it can be freely exercised.

Echoing this view, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a

conservative Egyptian cleric, once said in a TV program: “If we didn’t execute apostates, Islam wouldn’t be here as it is here today.” He probably said this without thinking about how it would sound. But to a lot of people, including myself, it looks very bad. If you’re saying that without coercing people we can’t keep them in our religion, that doesn’t reflect very well on our religion, does it? Our religion should be keeping people in because it’s convincing them, it’s inspiring them. There are people like that cleric in the Muslim world, but there are others who see this problem, and they are growing in number and influence.

I think we should all understand that liberalism brings a new responsibility to religions. Liberalism says to a religion that you must defend yourself, articulate yourself, revitalize yourself, in a more energetic way. In an illiberal society, you can try to ban all the atheist books, you can jail all the atheists, and perhaps your children will never hear about somebody who says there is no God. So they won’t be confused about that. But that world is not possible any more in the modern world, so it’s just a los-

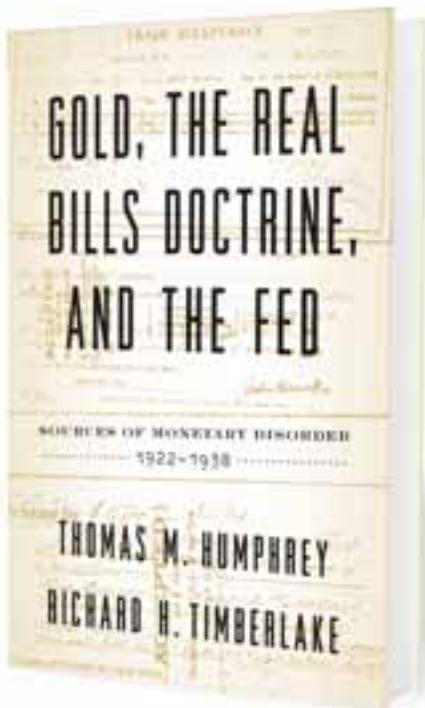
ing strategy. But in a liberal society, in an open society, atheist books will be there, atheist people will be there, critics of religion will be there, alternative religions will be there. Then you, as a religious person, have a job to do! You have to argue against them. With reason, you have to show why your religion is more persuasive. Perhaps you can’t convince everybody, but that’s your job. And actually, religions flourish intellectually in environments like that. We had a great intellectual flourishing in early Islam, when Muslim scholars read Aristotle, Plato, and Greek philosophy. They struggled with those works and tried to find arguments, and developed syntheses. There was a great intellectual flourishing in the late Ottoman Empire and in the 19th century Arab world as well thanks to the intellectual encounter with modernity.

When you close yourself down, yes, you can remain religiously conservative, but you will actually be deintellectualizing the faith. You’ll be losing your sophistication and ability to defend the religion in the realm of ideas. So, I think that’s a choice ahead for religious communities. But I

think, especially in this day and age, there is no reason to retreat from the liberal accomplishment that saves us from persecution in the name of religion.

Finally, one can ask, why would Muslims need to get into this modern liberalism? Why don’t they just live in their premodern world? First of all, it’s not possible, but second, there is a great motivation to accept liberalism in the Muslim world today, and it’s coming. It is precisely the motivation that triggered liberalism in Europe, which is seeing all the persecution, all the violence, all the bigotry done in the name of religion. I see this coming in the Muslim world. It’s a good thing. I mean, it’s a horrible thing that ISIS is killing people in the name of Islam, but be aware that a lot of Muslims are seeing this and saying there is something deeply wrong with this.

So they will either go fully secular, or maybe they will embrace a more liberal Islam. And I think Muslims who are conscientious about their faith should work on the latter option. Otherwise, the alternative isn’t liberal religion, but rather the loss of religion. ■



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