

# The American Understanding of Religious Liberty

By William A. Galston

The Grand Mosque  
Muscat, Oman  
December 21, 2009

*As-Salamu Aleikum.* I am grateful for the invitation to visit your country, with its rich and distinctive history, and especially for the opportunity to engage in dialogue in this remarkable hall of learning and center of religious faith. I am here in Oman to learn more about your traditions, and also to contribute to mutual understanding between our two peoples and ways of life.

My goal today is to explain one aspect of America that is often misunderstood—namely, the relation between politics and religion. In describing this relation, it is not my intention to recommend it as the right and proper course for other countries with very different traditions. My intention, rather, is to remove some misunderstandings so that you may see my country more clearly. Whether you like what you see is not for me to say.

During my many conversations with Muslim scholars during the past decade, I have often encountered the view that America is much like France—that is, strongly secular and determined to exclude religion from public life. That is not the case.

Just as there is diversity in the Muslim world, so too is there diversity in the West. The United States is by far the most religious of the Western nations. We have worked for centuries to create and safeguard civil spaces where all religious communities can freely practice their faith. And the impact of religion on American politics has been profound, throughout our history and down to the present.

To explain this diversity, I must talk about the concept of "enlightenment"—both the public role of reason and the complex interaction between reason and faith. Both the Muslim world and the West have had epochs of enlightenment. Yours came long before ours and helped make ours possible. The great Muslim philosophers al-Farabi, ibn-Rushd, and ibn Sina profoundly influenced Jewish thinkers such as Moses Maimonides and Christians such as Thomas Aquinas, who in turn set the stage for the great dialogue of reason and faith that dominated three centuries of European culture and politics.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century, in particular, is known in the West as the "Age of Enlightenment." It is the age that generated two great political revolutions—the French and the American. But it is a mistake to think of the European Enlightenment as a single, unified historical phenomenon. We may identify a *radical* Enlightenment, atheistic in theory and aggressively secularist in practice. The early days of the French Revolution revealed the political implications of radical Enlightenment,

leading many who initially sympathized with the revolutionary impulse to recoil. In the two centuries between the onset of the French Revolution and the fall of the Berlin Wall, the legacy of the radical Enlightenment helped cause some of the bloodiest violence the world has ever seen.

But there was also a *moderate* Enlightenment that wished to open a social space for free inquiry and religious diversity without denigrating faith or wholly expelling it from public life. The majority of the men who drafted the U.S. Constitution were of this sort. They believed that faith and reason represented two different forms of legitimate authority, neither of which should entirely dominate the other. As they saw it, the challenge of constitution-writing was two-fold: first, to ensure that different faiths could peacefully coexist within the same political community; and second, to work out the terms of peaceful and mutually supportive relations between secular and religious authorities. This approach led to a dramatic reduction in the violence conducted in the name of religion.

This outcome was essential because religiously-based violence has had a decisive impact on the development of the West. As you probably know, the Western enlightenment was preceded by the period known as the Reformation, which destroyed the unity of European Christianity and led to a split between Catholics and Protestants as important as that between Shi'a and Sunni Islam.

By 1640, a century of religious conflict had left Europe exhausted and disillusioned. Ordinary people as well as leading thinkers were moving toward the conclusion that coercion in matters of religion was unacceptable, even in the name of individual salvation and religious truth. Their experience had led them to an historic judgment: violence in the name of religion was a greater problem than the political, moral, and spiritual ills it purported to cure.

While this judgment was at its core moral rather than theoretical, it sparked the development of new conceptions of religious toleration. Some argued that coercion in matters of faith was a contradiction in terms and therefore bound to fail. Others contended that Christianity, rightly understood, precluded such coercion. A few brave souls even speculated that precisely because it is given to mortals to see the divine only through a glass, darkly, there was more than one path to God and that religious controversies over which so much blood had been spilled should be regarded as matters of "indifference."

I want to underscore, however, that America's political institutions do not rest on the proposition that religious beliefs are all false, or equally true. This helps explain why, from the very beginning of our nation, pious Americans have endorsed and participated in our nation's politics. Religious believers in America are required to accept only two principles. First, while our constitution allows all believers to practice their religion freely, it cannot grant any one religious a preferred or official status. Therefore, although about three-quarters of all Americans regard themselves as Christians, Christianity is not the official religion of the United States. We have no official religion.

The second principle religious believers in America must accept is that genuine religion is incompatible with coercion and that there can be no compulsion in matters of religion. It is my

understanding that all the Abrahamic faiths endorse this principle, which can serve, therefore as a basis for unity among us.

There are some disagreements, however, about the meaning of the prohibition on religious coercion. In the United States, we take the position that every citizen should remain free, not only to enter a particular religion, but also to leave it and join another. We make no distinction between liberty of entrance and liberty of exit. Government cannot force citizens to accept a particular faith, or to remain in it once they have accepted it. And neither can the leaders of religious communities. Although apostasy may be a sin before God punishable in the world to come, we do not regard apostasy as a crime subject to legal punishment in this world. Moreover, an individual's standing as an American citizen is not affected by his religious affiliation, or by changes in that affiliation.

This endorsement of religious liberty, to which all Americans now subscribe, was a matter of intense disagreement earlier in our history. As you may know, my country grew through waves of immigration. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, millions of immigrants were Catholics. And at that time recently as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Catholic Church rejected the principle of religious liberty, and also democracy and the Enlightenment.

In 1864, the head of the Catholic Church, Pope Pius IX, promulgated an authoritative document rejecting democracy, freedom of speech, and freedom of religion. He also issued a "Syllabus of Errors"—a list of beliefs that he condemned as absurd and sinful. Here are some examples: Error 15: "Every man is free to embrace and profess that religion which, guided by the light of reason, he shall consider true." Error 18: "Protestantism is nothing more than another form of the same true Christian religion, in which form it is given to please God equally as in the Catholic Church." Error 77: "In the present day, it is no longer expedient that the Catholic religion should be held as the only religion of the State, to the exclusion of all other forms of worship." In short, the Pope maintained, there is only one true religion, which individuals are not free to reject, and that religion must be the official state religion.

Since then, Catholicism has made its peace with constitutional democracy, rights of religious conscience, and individual liberties generally. In the Second Vatican Council's "Declaration on Religious Liberty" (1965), we find the Church invoking principles such as the "dignity of the human person" and the "human conscience" to support religious freedom and pluralism. We read that "the human person has a right to religious freedom." This means, in particular, that "all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that no one is to be forced to act in manner contrary to his own beliefs, . . . within due limits." This stance carried broad consequences for the Catholic Church's stance toward political life. Its leaders now seek, not public recognition as the official religion of the country, but only the only the freedom to conduct its worship, communal life, and charitable activities without government interference.

How was such a radical transformation possible? How did a church that began by demanding total power over politics and society end by accepting the authority of civil power and peacefully taking its place as one religion among many in religiously diverse societies?

A part of the solution can be traced to the Church's encounter with what I have called the "moderate Enlightenment" in the United States. The leaders of the growing Catholic community in the United States had to come to grips with a polity that rejected official religions but not religion itself. As the great French sociologist Alexis de Tocqueville noted, in post-revolutionary America (unlike post-revolutionary France), faith and freedom were not opposed. America was the land of religious liberty but not militant secularism. While American Catholics experienced more than their share of bigotry, they also learned that religious pluralism at least allowed them the social space they needed to build their own systems of worship, education, and charity.

As American Catholic leaders reflected on these experiences, they grappled with the relation between democratic constitutionalism and traditional Catholic thought. American Catholic thinkers developed new understandings of social and religious liberty. John F. Kennedy's election as our first Catholic president symbolized the full acceptance of Catholics as American citizens. Just a few years later, American Catholics brought their interpretation of religious liberty to Rome and, with the encouragement of Pope John XXIII, helped persuade the entire Church to embrace it.

While America changed the Catholic Church, it is equally the case that the Catholic Church changed America. More than most Protestants, Catholics focus on the institutions of civil society and on the need for social justice. Their vision of society helped to shape the New Deal—America's response to the Great Depression of the 1930s. Catholic thinkers endorsed trade unions, social welfare programs, and a "living wage" that would allow workers to support themselves and their families, and Catholic religious leaders participated in public political dialogue concerning these matters.

The relation between religion and politics in America is one of reciprocity, not antagonism. Religious authorities acknowledge that no religion will be given official status and that coercion in religious matters is forbidden. Political authorities acknowledge that religion has political implications and that religious citizens may seek to shape the outcome of political debate. Religious participation in public debate often leads to controversy. Not only do some secular citizens object; but also, and more importantly, America's great religions do not always agree among themselves.

For all its flaws and imperfections, America's distinctive beliefs and institutions have allowed religion and politics to coexist, usually peacefully and productively, for more than two centuries since the adoption of our Constitution. This is a major accomplishment. But whether my country's experience has implications outside our borders is for the citizens and leaders of other countries to judge.