



УДК 316.647,5:2  
342.731:2(37)"03"  
322(37)"313"

DOI:10.5937/sabornost7-4867  
Оригинални научни рад

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## Political Aspects of Religion, Religious Freedom and Religious Tolerance at the Time of the Emperor Constantine and Today

**Abstract:** The author in this paper considers, compares and analyzes the religious tolerance of the Equal to the Apostles Emperor Constantine, expressed in the Edict of Milan along with the current understanding of religious tolerance. A sketch of reasons for emergence of modern religious tolerance is exposed, and its relationship and dependence on political aspects of religion, both in ancient and medieval societies, as well as today. The author also discusses specific contemporary relationship to the truth which gives rise to the transformation of religious tolerance into religious freedom of an individual that is characteristic for modern society but not that of Constantine. In conclusion, the author believes that the beginning of the road that leading to today's social achievements in the field of religious freedom, is the Edict of Milan of the year 313.

**Key words:** political aspects of religion, religious tolerance, Emperor Constantine, religious freedom, truth.

Freedom of conscience and religion is today one of the fundamental rights of an individual and as such is guaranteed by legislation in most modern countries. The clause 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly on the 10<sup>th</sup> of December in 1948<sup>1</sup>, says that "everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to replace one's religion or belief.."

Many centuries before this Declaration, in the Edict of Milan of 313 we read similar thoughts: "...two of us (Constantine and Licinius) have decided to allow Christians and all others, the freedom to follow the religion of devotion that

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<sup>1</sup> Forty eight countries voted for the Declaration, none of them were against, while the eight were abstained. Among others, Yugoslavia was restrained along with the Soviet Union just because of this clause on freedom of conscience.

they want, so that whatever the heaven holds let it be sympathetic towards us and all those who are under our authority”.<sup>2</sup>

More than 16 centuries divide these two exceptionally important documents brought in two different epochs. These epochs are undoubtedly different but their request for the religious tolerance is the same. This gives us the right to try to analyze this claim of the two periods, by answering questions whether the religious tolerance of the two periods was identically understood. Does the Equal-to-the-Apostles Emperor Constantine provide the same content to this notion in comparison to the modern writers of the Declaration of Human Rights, and above all, whether the request for religious tolerance is solely a wishful thinking socially never realized, as it needs to be reiterated age after age?

### **Religious Tolerance Today**

Modern idea of religious tolerance derives from the period of humanism. It arises as a consequence but also as an exit from the tragic events of the Western Schism and religious wars that shook the Western Europe in the 16 and 17 century. It was seen as a way of overcoming a specific crisis situation at the time, so that it, initially, did not imply an ideological basis, but was rather seen as a necessary appeal to establish peace and security in a religious war-torn West European social landscape. As a first step in the realization of religious tolerance, the separation of church and state was emphasized as a necessity. This becomes a framework for establishing conceptual foundations of religious tolerance, which can be traced through the whole series of events as well as through a series of socially engaged works of prominent philosophers — from “A Letter Concerning Toleration” by John Locke, of the late 17 century, through the Voltaire’s “Treatise on Tolerance” (1763), all the way to the present day. In the contemporary secular states a principle of the first educators on separation of political and ecclesial communities is mainly accomplished today, which creates preconditions for the realization of contemporary demands for religious tolerance, which includes the religious neutrality of the state.

The second step in realization of religious tolerance is the above mentioned Universal Declaration of Human Rights by which the fundamental rights of individuals are established and guaranteed, including freedom of religion. Let’s remind ourselves that in this case too, a specific historical moment in which it was finally formulated, was also tragic.

Their wish that the horrors of the Second World War happen never again, the writers of the Declaration express in the introductory words — *disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind...* The conscience of mankind was certainly

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted according to Радић, 2013, p. 23.

offended, but apart from it, it was concrete people that also suffered by the barbaric practices along with the millions of people who did not have any available tool or means to counter the ideological civil war machine with which, in the highest percentage, they had nothing in common. The questions that were desperately looking for an answer were how to save a person from the destructive power of the state? Did individuals, obediently serving the states, fail to remember the higher law of humanity and could they, after all, call upon it?

The twentieth century was a century of such totalitarianism which the history of mankind has never witnessed before. As a response to the cultural and social pessimism that emerged after the World War I, facing the threat of communism, many European countries created authoritarian governments. The emergence of fascism in about twenty European countries was a sign that many Europeans believed that liberalism was bankrupt, that parliamentary governments were fruitless, longing for military dictatorship and a *firm hand*. Totalitarianism that followed and led the world into to a new, even more severe than the previous conflict, was fully achieved, and in this sense it was exclusively a phenomenon of the 20 century. Previous despotic organizations did not possess technological means nor particularly desired to establish a complete control over the people, as fascism and communism did. A full control and obedience, the obligation of accepting the dominant ideology, left no room for an individual privacy and freedom of expression. The individual had no rights which the state was supposed to respect. This social trends and insights led the mankind to a lowest point of existence.<sup>3</sup> “Despite the value that the Westerners assigned to reason, they shown a frightening tendency to an irrational behavior and mythical ways of thinking — the ideas that defy reason, logic or even common sense” (Пери, 2000, p. 536). Europe was faced with the horror of its own heritage embodied in the idea that an individual, a little man, cannot defend himself from the destructive power of the collective, in this case the state, due to not having a single effectively available tool. Being aware of this the writers of the Declaration, immediately after the war, started to work on formulating the basic human rights. The Universal Declaration is a dam and the end of the understanding of the nation-state as the greatest and an exclusive value, to which people must unconditionally obey and unquestionably serve as to some a sort of sacred idol. By having the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted and ratified by countries around the world for the first time in history an individual has been given a means by which they can fight the big systems, such as the state, family or religious institutions by protecting their rights, reassuring themselves that the struggle was not hopeless.

The two afore mentioned elements appear to be the most important ones in the realization of all human rights, including religious tolerance. So, the former is a religious neutrality of the state, while the latter remains a broader demand

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<sup>3</sup> See more in Крстић, 2012, p. 97 onwards.

and understanding that individuals have certain rights, including the right to freedom of conscience and religion, which must be guaranteed and also protected by the state. Individuals have the right to protection from the state if it imposes any kind of ideology or religious beliefs. This would be a sketch of the bottom line of the development process and understanding of the modern idea of religious tolerance where, in fact, it turns into an absolute religious freedom. Now let's ask ourselves: is this the notion that we can extend to the ancient times, especially to the Roman Empire, and seek elements of religious tolerance or intolerance right there?

### **Religious Tolerance in the Roman Empire**

A fascinating political and cultural unity of the Roman Empire was not manifested alongside in the religious unity. In their conquests the Romans never imposed their religion nor a unique form of worship upon the subordinated nations. Viewed from this approach we can talk about a particular form of religious tolerance that existed in the Roman Empire. However, the very Roman understanding of the social role of religion turned this principled tolerance into a creation of a zero-tolerance attitude towards Christians. In fact, in the ancient world, religion was the exclusive domain of a community, not an individual. Its role was to contribute to the stability and prosperity of the state, and any failure of gods worshipping was considered as a dangerous act against the state. This brought forth extreme politicality in the ancient understanding of religion thus obliging the subordinate nations to worship their gods, and in that way contribute to the prosperity and peace in the country. Pax Romana was unbreakably connected to the Pax Deorum (peace of gods). Respecting gods asserted the religious identity of each city or area in the Roman Empire, and it seemed to be a cohesive element of the social and political life of citizens. The degree of citizen participation in the local religious practices was a reflection of their experience. Conversely, refusal to participate in such activity meant the marginalization of an individual. However, the matter did not end on a personal level, as it would have been the case today, but this act deemed dangerous to the social life because it could cause the wrath of gods, and thus ruin the city. Furthermore, on the level of the entire empire, a social and political unity was secured by an obligation, even formal, to respect the local gods in addition to the gods of the capital. The opposite practice was considered a dangerous act against the state. This was the first level of the conflict between the government and Christians who refused to participate in public religious ceremonies and were therefore considered "ungodly" and threatening to the survival of the state. The new faith, winning more and more supporters, especially during the second half of the third century, disrupted the usual relationship between society and religion. The acceptance of Christianity uprooted the neophytes (newly baptized) from the Roman society, which was

also considered as a political practice. Attempts by various emperors to rebuild an authentic Roman religiosity which, as the time was passing by, increasingly was losing its “substance”, had the same political motives. The Roman state ideology implied an unbreakable link between politics and religion.

The second element of the Roman religiosity which was also another level of conflict with Christians, was the existence of a religious cult of the emperor. This cult came from the East where it was considered as an imperial power with a religious basis. In contact with the conquered eastern territories these understandings were conveyed to Rome in which each individual ruler manifested god himself. In 27 BC the Roman Senate proclaimed Octavius as August and a divinity by which a new stage of the Rome’s religious policy started. The Roman emperor, who was an incarnation of divinity, received some allegorical epithets such as *Invictus* (invincible), *Cosmocreator* (creator of the world), *Sol Invictus* (unconquerable Sun), etc. Religious and divine cult of the rulers of the earth was a corner stone which irremovably separated Hellenistic pagan religiosity from the Christian faith.

### Intolerance against Christians

In the Roman Empire, Christians of the first period were understood as a Jewish dissident sect and the attitude toward them was similar to the treatment of the Jews. They too were accused of being atheists, godless people who do not participate in local and state cults. Christians were considered enemies of human kind and were accused of incest and cannibalism. In many historical occasions troubles in the Empire were interpreted as a punishment from the gods for atheism and immorality of Christians.

The first procedure of the Roman government against the Christians came after the burning of Rome in 64. Although the Roman citizens felt that it was the emperor Nero who was responsible for the fire, he shifted the blame to the Christians. This marked the beginning of the persecution against Christians driven by the desire to exterminate them. Let’s be reminded that in the foremost in the ranks Holy Apostles Peter and Paul V died during Nero’s persecution. At the time of the Emperor Domitian (81–96) Christians were convicted of godlessness. A mere belonging to the Church was enough to launch criminal proceedings. The emperors Trajan and Hadrian also punished Christians if they would not officially renounce their faith before the court. Trajan considered that it was just because of their stubbornness and unbreakable persistence that Christians had to be punished. Since the mid second century the situation was slightly improved for Christians during the kings Antoninus Pius (138–161), Marcus Aurelius (161–180) and Commodus (180–192), but in general, they were far different from others in their lives and conduct, and their relationship to the state, religious and social life was perceived as a

provocation that explained their hatred and contempt for the people, which deserved punishment.

The first half of the third century witnessed long periods of peaceful coexistence and positive tolerance when compared to the periods of persecution. A hope in the possibility of a final agreement between Church and State was appearing among Christians in this period. However, the situation drastically changed with the coming to power of Emperor Decius (249–251). Decius took power with a firm conviction and determination to bring back to the Roman Empire its former glory and unity, and, above all, by insisting on keeping the old Roman religion he wanted to clean up of all of foreign sediments created along centuries. Following this line of reasoning, he undertook measures against the Christians that were by far beyond the actions of his predecessors. In 250 he issued the edict which demanded from all the citizens of the empire to participate in a general sacrifice to the gods. Sacrificing rituals were strictly controlled by the government. Those refusing to offer a sacrifice were punished. By that time this was a largest attack on the Church in which some Christians, in order to save their lives were giving in, while others were martyred for the faith. Decius's reign was short so he could not work out his plans, and after him, for Christians commenced a period of sporadic persecutions with longer periods of peace. Since the time of the Galien's (260–268) edict, a period of peace began for Christians, which lasted for about 40 years and included the first decade of the reign of Diocletian. Then, in 303 began a last fiercest persecution of Christians, again with the aim of restoring the ancient Roman religion. The emperor Diocletian ordered to destroy all the churches that had been raised in the past, to burn all the books and to ban all gatherings of Christians. The emperor set to Christians only two options — the sacrifice to the pagan gods or martyrdom.

After the reign of Diocletian (305 AD) the kings who came to power were made clear that Christianity had become a power in the kingdom that could not be broken, which called for co-existence and thus, through the Edict of Galerius of 311 we come, regarding the issue of tolerance, to the much better known the Edict of Milan of 313, written by the emperors Constantine and Licinius. This edict revoked centuries of intolerance towards Christians, and Christianity was equated with all other religions and cults of the ancient Rome. The Constantine's letter to the administrators of the East, in the autumn of 324, is even better example of religious tolerance. The emperor expresses his sympathy for Christianity, condemning the pagan religion as misleading, but letting anyone who wants to keep their polytheistic religion and follow their beliefs do so, while prohibiting the use of any force against those who remain loyal to the old cults. The religious politics of the Equal to the Apostles Emperor Constantine was the policy of religious tolerance.

## The Nature of Religious Tolerance Then and Now

As one could perceive we can talk about religious tolerance in all epochs of human history. This is always an issue of concern but, nevertheless, there are big differences in its understanding from one epoch to another, while the event we analyze here stretches from today's era to the era of Constantine.

Etymologically tolerance comes from the Latin word *tolerare*, meaning to endure, to suffer. In general under the tolerance we mean the willingness of a person to submit themselves to someone else's way of life, someone else's faith or anyone else's world view (Weltanschauung), although it is a kind of interference for that person (passive tolerance) or actively supporting one's position even though it is different from my own attitude (active tolerance). Religious tolerance can be defined as an attitude towards one's neighbor affirmed in faith. It assumes my faith, but also the faith of my neighbor, which is different from mine, and should be tolerated either passively or actively. In matters of faith, it does not refer to the imposition of any judgment regarding the truthfulness of any religion or belief. It is a practical prerequisite of human unity and coexistence with the people of different beliefs and different faith. Religious tolerance does not raise the question of who is right, and such question, in terms of religious tolerance, remains unresolved and is, actually, never raised.<sup>4</sup>

We are faced here with another very important, we would say a key element of religious tolerance — and that one about the truth. This issue was brought by Christianity, within the scope of the religious map of the old Roman Empire. Polytheistic religions and cults that used to exist in the Roman Empire did not raise the issue of truth. There were higher and lower gods, whose authority and power depended on the people or community that believed in them, but there were no true and false gods. The question of truth is placed in the monotheistic, not polytheistic religions. And it is the question of truth that was and still is the most closely related to the religious tolerance. This problem can be expressed in the following way: does delusion have right to life and existence? If Christians firmly believe that Christ is not one of many truths, but the Truth with a capital letter, is it not desirable for everyone, even by the use of smaller or larger force, to be brought to the knowledge of truth. On the other hand, if Christians would advocate for religious tolerance, or for the ultimate outcome of religious tolerance resulting in an absolute freedom of religion, would that mean their recognition of the relativity of their own religion and their own truth. Finally, the whole issue can be summed up in the dilemma: Truth or individual freedom?

The answer to this question would perhaps be given easily if we could only stay within the Gospel, but taking into consideration social accents and

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<sup>4</sup> More on this in Medved, Šiljeg, 2011.

understanding of the role of religions in different historical epochs will make this issue dramatically complicated.

We have already mentioned that religion in ancient societies was a matter of community, not individual. Today's concept of the individual rights to freedom of religion and the right not to believe, was not, as an individual right, known to the ancient nor medieval societies. In this sense, the emperor Constantine's religious tolerance could not change anything. In the past people resorted to it during the crisis, but as soon as the crisis was over the emphasis was again on collective rather than on an individual. In medieval society religion also had a political character, in the sense that one of its purposes was a homogenization of society, for which all medieval rulers of the East and the West were very interested. The ingenious statesman mind of the emperor Constantine realized that Christianity, as a religion, had a potential, and the Church, as an institution, is organized and disciplined enough to make a new homogenization of the Empire based upon the Christian principles. This attitude of a statesman in no way excludes Constantine's personal religion. However, as the society was being increasingly Christianized after the emperor Theodosius had declared Christianity as the state religion and especially during the high and late Middle Ages, Christians might have observed that a matter of faith could not be a matter of an individual but the community too, and it needs to be uniformed and monolithic. Once the principles of unity of the community are being violated, then the very same community through its rulers, has not only the right but also the obligation to punish heretics or those of other faiths who violate its monolithic structure. So by a mentality of the majority and politicking of the faith, Christians themselves, in particular historical moment, questioned the existence and validity of religious tolerance. This does not mean that the medieval state always used this option but there was always the possibility of resorting to the argument of disrupting the unity of a community that would justify the use of force. For this reason, in such homogeneous societies throughout the history, we can find the practice of religious tolerance, but hardly a freedom of religion, because of the emphasis on the collective society, not the individual. These societies believed that when it comes to a conflict between the rights of the community and the rights of the individual, preference should be given to the community.

Modern societies, regarding this as well as many other issues, have a diametrically different position in comparison to the traditional ones. They are characterized as pluralistic, which, in matters of faith, involves individual freedom prevailing over the collective (which is the essence of all modern human rights) while towards each and every "objective" truth they remain skeptical. Modern pluralistic society, at least in theory, rejects any ideology or ideological homogenization of a society, irrespective of whether these ideas are political or religious in nature, because of the tragic experience of the 20 century in which



the two great ideologies of fascism and communism carried out a complete homogenization of the society in which and for which millions of people died.<sup>5</sup>

Concluding, yet bearing in mind what has been presented here so far, we should try to answer the questions raised earlier in the introduction about the similarities and differences in the understanding of religious tolerance then and now, respectively in the time of the emperor Constantine and in our own, including the question of a possibility of accepting religious tolerance by Christians.

From the time of Constantine, culturally the society begins to resemble the society in which we live today. His edict of religious tolerance was the first step towards a healthy secularism of the state, along with the step towards distinguishing political from religious community, whose foundation was laid by Christ Himself. The first step is related to the religious role of the king which the very nature of Christianity changes and makes it pointless. He is no longer the high priest, but a layman under the spiritual authority of the clergy. In this way the political nature of religion lost one of the key pillars of antiquity, but, in accordance with the spirit of the time, maintained its political aspects in the field of homogenization of society. The second pillar will disappear in a historical period of modernity. Summarizing, we can say that with the Emperor Constantine and his understanding of religious tolerance we step on a path that will lead us to this historical understanding of religious tolerance and religious freedom, but in that, as the periods are different, there are also differences in understanding of religious tolerance then and now.

We still have one question, maybe the most important one for Christians, and that is — can they reconcile the request for the truth with a request for religious tolerance but honestly, on the basis of their faith, but not on the requests of the time that, at this moment, it does not allow intolerance towards other people of different faiths and religions, and with whom they live together? The answer could be formulated as follows: the Truth or what one holds as true is not tolerant nor intolerant. The truth harms no one. Just our attitude towards our neighbor may be tolerant or intolerant. As it has been highlighted, tolerance leaves aside the question of the truth of one's belief or attitude. It is strictly our attitude towards others who think or believe differently.<sup>6</sup> Christ gave a new precious gift of knowledge of the Truth to all who believe in Him and Christians are obliged to offer this gift to others but never in a violent way. Truth and violence are neither conceptual nor practical pair that would fit the Christian understanding of the testimony and the increase of Christianity. Truth and love are that very conceptual pair of the highest guarantee of religious tolerance.

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<sup>5</sup> Scola, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> More on this in Medved, Šiljeg, 2011.

The attitude towards the problem of the relationship between truth and personal freedom, along with giving priority to personal freedom in relation to objective truth, yet in accordance with the contemporary social accents, for Christians, too, should not be problematic because it is deeply evangelical. Access to the truth is impossible outside the personal freedom and personal consent. Trust in the freedom of an individual, although it carries out a variety of risks, non-politicking of religions in a modern society are a theoretical and legal framework that traditional religious tolerance raised to a higher level, to the level of religious freedom. At the beginning of this road there is the Edict of Milan of the year 313 on religious tolerance appointed by the Equal to the Apostles the Emperor Constantine.

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## Политички аспекти религије, верске слободе и верске толеранције у време цара Константина и данас

У раду се разматра, пореди и анализира верска толеранција равноапостолног цара Константина изражена у Миланском едикту и савремено разумевање верске толеранције. Износи се скица разлога настанка савремене верске толеранције као и њен однос и зависност од политичности религије како у античким и средњовековним друштвима, тако и данас. Аутор, такође, разматра специфичан савремени однос према истини који ствара претпоставке за прерастање верске толеранције у верску слободу појединца која је карактеристична у савременом друштву али не и у доба цара Константина. У закључку, аутор сматра да се на почетку пута који води до данашњих друштвених достигнућа у области верских слобода налази Милански едикт из 313. године.

**Key words:** политички аспекти религије, религијска толеранција, цар Константин Велики, религијска слобода, истина.

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Датум пријема чланка: 5. 5. 2013.

Датум прихватања чланка за објављивање: 31. 5. 2013.