

## Religion, Step Aside!

Prior to the fourteenth century, Catholicism and the Catholic Church exerted great influence over Europe: many people strictly abided by Catholic beliefs and the Church owned land, levied taxes, and had significant political power. However, the Church's inability to rescue the population from the Black Death coupled with political blunders such as the Great Schism, during which two bishops laid claim to the papacy, called into question the role of religion in society. These challenges to religious authority initiated its overall decline from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, a trend exemplified by differences in Martin Luther's and Thomas Paine's views on religion in 1525 and 1794, respectively. Despite his criticisms of the Catholic Church, Luther viewed political and social developments as caused by God's will; Paine, on the other hand, felt that religious institutions were constructed solely for exploitation and argued for religion's confinement to theological matters. These differences in opinion reflected a broader weakening of religion's role in European society beginning in the sixteenth century when it permeated European thought, as seen by Luther's views on the German Peasants' War and Christian Humanists' goal of improving society through religious reforms. By the end of the eighteenth century, however, the motivations and discoveries of Kepler, Galileo, and Descartes, the ideas presented by Kant and Voltaire during the Enlightenment, and the anti-religious sentiment of the French Revolution led to a decline in religious authority but ultimately failed to expunge religion from society.

In the early sixteenth century, the world was almost entirely viewed and governed from a religious perspective, evidenced by the sentiments of Luther and Erasmus as well as the governance of newly established Protestant societies. For example, Luther held that the German Peasants' Revolt of 1524-26 was caused and should be suppressed because the actions of the

lords and peasants contradicted God's will. The revolt, Luther believed, was brought upon the lords by God: "For you ought to know, dear lords, that God is doing this because this raging of yours cannot, will not, and ought not be endured for long" (*Admonition to Peace: A Reply to the Twelve Articles*, 107). Nevertheless, he chastised the peasants for rebelling through violence instead of "achieving [their] goals by patiently praying to God, as Christians ought to do" (*Admonition to Peace: A Reply to the Twelve Articles*, 111). The social, economic, and political inequalities between the lords and peasants was likely the largest contributor to the revolt, yet Luther believed that God had orchestrated it rather than the peasants themselves, motivated by their grievances. He further admonished the peasants for their violence not because of its political inefficiency, but because he believed it went against proper Christian practice. Ultimately, Luther argued that abolishing serfdom "absolutely contradicts the gospel... A worldly kingdom cannot exist without an inequality of persons" (*Admonition to Peace: A Reply to the Twelve Articles*, 112). Luther's religious justifications for the cause and suppression of the revolt exemplify the strong role religion played in influencing people's perception of politics and society in the early sixteenth century.

Even the peasants themselves prioritized religion in their demands over political reforms. The first demand of the Franconian peasantry declared, "First, it has been considered and regarded as necessary and right that for the proper formation of this Christian, fraternal alliance, the Word of God... should be preached and proclaimed purely and clearly to the people daily..." (*The Field Ordinances of the Franconian Peasantry*, 19). The first political reform appeared in only the sixth article, outlining a democratic process for electing the supreme commander (*The Field Ordinances of the Franconian Peasantry*, 20). The emphasis on religion in the peasants'

demands, despite their political, social, and economic oppression, further showed the extent of religious authority at the time.

Moreover, the governance of Protestant communities formed after the Reformation was heavily influenced by their religious beliefs. In these communities, groups who did not follow the Lutheran faith were persecuted: “Thus, although Lutherans struggled against what they regarded as Catholic religious tyranny, they imposed an equally rigorous tyranny on Jews – and on other Protestant groups that they believed took reform measures too far” (Waddy, 168). Additionally, the most successful strain of Protestantism, Calvinism (Waddy, 169), governed Geneva by “strict moral codes enforced by both the church and political authorities” (Waddy, 169), such as “[punishing] residents who engaged in sinful behaviors such as missing a church service...” (Waddy, 169). Thus, despite separating from the Catholic Church because of its practices, Protestantism created societies which were still largely ruled according to religious beliefs, and this irony of Protestant religious intolerance showed the persistence of religion in government.

A Christian Humanist, Erasmus’ belief that religious reform would address the violence and corruption that embroiled Christendom was another example of religion impacting political thought. In *Paraclesis*, Erasmus argued political and economic issues could be solved through religious reform: “If princes in the execution of their duties would manifest what I have referred to as a vulgar doctrine... Christiendom would not be so disturbed on all sides by almost continuous war, everything would not be boiling over with such a mad desire to heap up riches by fair means or foul...” (*The Paraclesis*, 295). Erasmus referred to his reforms as “vulgar doctrine” which incorporated his direct interpretation of the Bible as well as the ideas of thinkers from pagan antiquity. On one hand, Erasmus’ belief that Europe’s problems can be solved

through religious reform again highlighted the important role religion played in people's thinking. On the other hand, Erasmus' encouragement of people's direct interpretation of the Bible began to sow the seeds of distrust towards religious authority. The motivations and discoveries of natural philosophers such as Kepler, Galileo, and Descartes at the end of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth centuries exemplified the subsequent initial decline of religious authority in Europe.

While religion initially had a strong influence in natural philosophy – reflected by many scientists' motivations to understand God's creation of the universe – scientific discoveries began to challenge religious authority and eventually, natural philosophers developed personal rather than religious motivations for their studies. Kepler's motivations for his studies exemplified the strong grasp religion had on natural philosophy at the end of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth centuries. He believed God knew the "truth" about the natural world and that it was attainable through scientific discoveries: "[Kepler] saw truth as residing in a primeval revelation, handed down in its purest form by God at the outset of human history... Kepler saw truth as the product of human effort, untidy and inconsistent, but gradually able to reach perfection over time" (*Kepler in Context*, 202). Thus, Kepler studied the natural world because he believed doing so would allow him to obtain the truth that God gave humans long ago. He further defended the Copernican view of the solar system through religious justification, arguing it "was not only true in itself but also the key to a still deeper revelation: the very logic of geometrical proportion that had guided the Creator's hand. Kepler proved, so he and many readers thought, that God had used basic principles of geometry in laying out the planetary spheres..." (*Kepler in Context*, 183). The role religion played in Kepler's studies showed the

extent of its influence during his lifetime. However, in the ensuing decades, this influence began to dwindle, as evidenced by the Galileo affair.

Galileo was more strongly motivated than Kepler to make discoveries for financial and political stability rather than because of religious beliefs, and the Galileo affair highlighted the Church's struggle to retain its authority amidst growing challenges to its authority. Like Kepler, Galileo believed that God was the "Maker of the stars himself" (*Starry Messenger*, 24) and further, that God instructed him to study science and mathematics: "It pleased Almighty God that I should instruct Your Highness in mathematics..." (*Starry Messenger*, 25). These quotes from Galileo's *Starry Messenger* suggested Galileo felt commanded by God to study His creation of the universe. Still, Galileo also acknowledged his financial and political dependence on the grand duke of Tuscany. Coupled with his previous financial struggles, Galileo thus had to please his patron "since the fame and accomplishments of an artist or scientist were meant to reflect on the magnificence of his patron..." (*The Galileo Affair: Introduction*, 11). In addition to Galileo's mixed motivations, Pope Urban VIII's role in the Galileo Affair showed that the Church was struggling to retain authority in the face of scientific challenges to its doctrine. The Pope was inconsistent with his treatment of Galileo: "...Pope Urban VIII, who had earlier been an admirer and supporter of Galileo, was in an especially vulnerable position; thus not only could he not continue to protect Galileo, but he had to use Galileo as a scapegoat to reassert, exhibit, and test his authority and power" (*The Galileo Affair: Introduction*, 12). The Pope's inconsistencies in his support and suppression of science showed that the Church was unsure of how to reconcile emerging scientific discoveries with its doctrines. Further, an institution's suppression of its challengers reflects its weakness, and in this instance, the Church's suppression of Galileo in 1632 suggested a decline in its authority. Galileo's persecution continued to have an impact on

future scientists through fear of persecution and thus furthered the decline of religious authority, as seen by Descartes' lack of religious motivation for his studies.

Descartes' motivation in studying the natural world lay in an intrinsic desire to maximally advance his knowledge rather than to understand God's intentions. While Descartes believed, similar to Kepler and Galileo, in a being who methodically created the world, he studied the natural world to fulfill his desire to learn as much as possible about the world through reason and personal experience. He viewed an ideal life as one spent "cultivating [his] reason and advancing as far as [he] could, in the knowledge of the truth..." (*Discourse on Method*, 15), and could not imagine living a life that did not lead him to "[acquire] all the knowledge of which [he] was capable" (*Discourse on Method*, 16). In these quotes, Descartes explicitly stated he was motivated to study the natural world to satiate his desire for "the knowledge of the truth." Thus, his motivation for scientific study was not religiously motivated and exemplified a significant decline in religious authority in Europe. It is important to note that the Galileo affair was fresh on Descartes' mind as he wrote his works, and it dissuaded him from publishing some of them (*Discourse on Method*, 23). Thus, it was not the case that religion was absent from natural philosophy in the mid-sixteenth century. However, instead of serving as a motivating force, it impacted thinkers through fear of persecution by the Church. Following the scientific revolution came the Enlightenment, during which ideals of political freedom began to take priority over religious beliefs.

Towards the end of the seventeenth and into the eighteenth centuries, thinkers of the Enlightenment such as Voltaire and Kant began to criticize religious authority not based on theological grounds as Christian Humanists did, but rather argued that such reforms would lead to beneficial political and social outcomes. While Luther criticized the Church and its monopoly

on power because it contradicted his religious beliefs, Voltaire criticized the Catholic regime of France because its intolerance led to absolutism: “Were there only one religion in England, despotism would be a threat; were they two, they would be at each other’s throats; out there are thirty, and they live happily and at peace with one another” (*Letters on the English*, 20). After its criticism of the Catholic Church, Protestantism resulted in the establishment of religiously intolerant societies. Voltaire, on the other hand, argued for religious tolerance, for he valued the resulting peace over people’s religious practices that may have been different than his.

Additionally, Voltaire’s argument for peace was different from Erasmus’. Erasmus believed that proper religious practice would lead to peace with those outside of Christendom because they would be more likely to convert than under Catholic rule. Voltaire, on the other hand, believed that peace could be obtained through religious tolerance because people would not be persecuted for their religious beliefs. In these ways, Voltaire’s indifference to people’s religious practices and advocacy for religious tolerance in the pursuit of peace differed from Christian Humanists’ criticisms of the Catholic Church.

Another Enlightenment thinker who explicitly criticized the ways religion influenced society in the eighteenth century was Kant. He argued that the Church, by suppressing the use of one’s own thinking through fear of persecution, inhibited society’s progress towards enlightenment. He likely would have seen Descartes’ hesitancy to publish works for fear of suppression as a prime example of how the Church prevented people from using their intellect. Out of all the forces – economic, social, political, and religious – Kant “focused on religious matters in setting out [his] main point concerning enlightenment... because that form of immaturity is both the most pernicious and disgraceful of all” (*What is Enlightenment?*, 3), suggesting a growing animosity towards religious authority during the Enlightenment. While

Kant's heavy criticism of religious authority was purely intellectual, the Glorious Revolution was an example of how ideals of political freedom manifested themselves through tangible outcomes.

Ironically, religion was in some sense at the center of the Glorious Revolution because “the threat of a return to Catholicism and absolutism in England... led to the appearance of opposition movements in both countries” (*Jacob*, 4). However, the goals of the revolution were not to improve Christian piety or reform Christian practices, as they may have been in the sixteenth century, but were instead to guarantee political rights. In this, the Revolution was successful: “The settlement of 1689 ended absolutism in England [and] ensured trial by jury, habeas corpus, and toleration for all Trinitarian Protestants; and guaranteed the independence of Parliament” (*Jacob*, 9). It is true that religious tolerance was a main objective of the Revolution, but its political reforms were the main outcomes. Compared to the Franconian peasants' emphasis on religion in their demands, the first declaration of the English Bill of Rights of 1689 established Parliament's power: “That the pretended power of suspending the laws or the execution of laws by regal authority without consent of Parliament is illegal” (“English Bill of Rights 1689”), exemplifying the shift in the priorities of the people. In other words political guarantees took center stage during the Glorious Revolution whereas religion did so during the German Peasants' Revolt and the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century.

The periods during which anti-religious sentiment was most prominent occurred in the French Revolution, as seen in the Civil Constitution of the Clergy and the period of de-Christianization. Adopted by the Assembly in 1790, the Civil Constitution of the Clergy stripped large swaths of power from religious figures and was motivated by democratic political objectives. For example, Title 1 Article 20 explicitly lessened the extent of religious influence: “All titles and offices, other than those mentioned in the present constitution... are abolished and



suppressed, ... and similar ones may never be established..." (*Civil Constitution of the Clergy*, 240-241). It was not the case, however, that the Constitution aimed to rid society of religion, for it allowed a limited number of religious figures to retain power. Still, it approached the maintenance of religion not through religious institutions, but through political methods. Title II Article 2 specified that "All elections [of religious figures] shall be by ballot and by absolute majority of votes" (*Civil Constitution of the Clergy*, 241), showing a democratic approach to appointing religious leaders rather than one based on religion, as was the case in previous centuries. Additionally, the Constitution aimed to place the power of election into the hands of the departmental assembly instead of into religious institutions. More extreme than the Constitution was the de-Christianization movement in revolutionary France, which hoped to completely remove religion from society. For example, the Gregorian calendar was replaced with the French Republican calendar in 1793 in an attempt to remove religion from timekeeping: "The logical pursuit of the denial system was taken to be more important than Sunday; the world began anew, not with the birth of Jesus, but with the proclamation of a republic in France" (*Reason and the Être Suprême*, 99). Despite the movement's attempts, however, Christianity was not able to be completely expunged from society.

Napoleon's actions as emperor displayed the persistence of religious authority in Europe despite its decline over the previous centuries. Likely as a political move, "In 1801, [Napoleon] signed a Concordat with the pope that established Catholicism as 'the religion of the great majority of French citizens'" (Waddy, 237-238). Additionally, in Jacques-Louis David's painting of the coronation of Napoleon, the Pope is still present. It was the case that compared to previous coronations, religious figures played a diminished role in Napoleon's. However, their presence, coupled with Napoleon's embrace of the Catholic religion, regardless of motivation, showed that

religion continued to play a role in the political affairs of Europe in the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Religion's diminished yet noticeable presence at the end of the eighteenth century was reflected in the words of Thomas Paine. He stated he believed in God and had religious duties that consisted in "doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavoring to make our fellow creatures happy." However, he believed religion should be confined to the individual, stating "[m]y mind is my own church" and that "[a]ll national institutions of churches... appear to [him] no other than human inventions set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit." This sentiment was in direct contrast with Luther, who felt people should act according to specific religious doctrine and religion should define society. Contrary to Luther's view of the German Peasants' War through a religious lens, Paine's analysis of the conflict could have been practical, arguing that while the revolt occurred for political and social reasons, violence would lead to lower quality of life for all and thus should not have been used. The differences in the two thinkers' sentiments exemplified the decline in religious authority from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries.

The challenges to religious authority by Humanism, scientific discoveries, new ideas produced during the Enlightenment, and the French Revolution led to its decline and near erasure from society. In the early sixteenth century, thinkers such as Luther viewed the world almost entirely through a religious lens. By the end of the eighteenth century, thinkers such as Paine criticized the presence of religion in circles outside of the individual. Still, religion had an impact on politics in the beginning of the nineteenth century and continues to do so to this day, despite attempts to remove it. Similar to de-Christianization, Stalin attempted to erase religion from the USSR, which previously had strong roots in Eastern Orthodox Christianity, and had to use

persecution to achieve this goal. However, these unappealing precedents for the removal of religion do not suggest that religion should have free reign in politics. Referring to the role of religion in government, Bernard Lewis noted, “Looking at the contemporary Middle East, both Muslim and Jewish, one must ask whether... whether Muslims and Jews may perhaps have caught a Christian disease and might therefore consider a Christian remedy” (*What Went Wrong*, 116). The Christian disease Lewis referred to was the presence of religion in government, and the remedy, its diminution. Defining the optimal boundaries for religious authority, in politics and society, is vital to the success of humanity. It is a centuries-long challenge humans have struggled with, one which we continue to do so even to this day.

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