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An Early American Primer on “Force” and Faith

As the editor of a daily e-zine which focuses on a defense of the religious and moral foundations of the American republic, I am daily confronted by the same hostile complaint, often in the most colorful of terms: “Stop shoving your religion down my throat!”



In this hypersensitive, self-centered age, anyone responsible enough and smart enough to voice concern over the amoral, even immoral path our country is taking, our schools are endorsing, and all too many of our children are embracing hears the same mean-spirited protest ... and the volume keeps turning up.

It should concern us: I mean the increasingly angry tone, the incessant lawsuits, the vigorous and open defense of the amoral and immoral, and the reckless lack of stewardship regarding the rising generation, that they might be grounded enough in the basics of moral law to know the difference between right and wrong, so that they might be a generation that feels it their duty and good pleasure to step up the plate as true men and true women and act accordingly, to the blessing of themselves, their families, their associates, their countrymen, and the cause of self-government.

But point of fact and alarm, a growing coalition of millions, even tens of millions don't see it that way.

Equally alarming is the complete lack of understanding among these noisy protestors, and even among many of the faithful who stand accused of them, that nearly all of their complaints have nothing to do with religion being “forced” on them at all — at least, not in the sense that the American Founding Generation, they who set up the inspired rules we are supposed to be playing by, understood force in religious matters — but in fact constitute a protest, even an assault upon the free exercise of religion by their neighbor.

So let's turn back the clock, for a moment, to the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries and see what we can learn about force in religion; what it is, and what it is not; so to better avoid giving weight to constitutional interpretations and public policies that favor the promotion of debauchery over virtue, self-enslavement over self-empowerment, and, in general, tyranny over slavery.

First From Webster

Turning to Webster's 1828 Dictionary we find “force” defined as follows:

As a noun: “Violence; power exerted against will or consent; compulsory power.”

And as a verb transitive: “To compel; to constrain to do or to forbear, by the exertion of a power not resistible. Men are forced to submit to conquerors. Masters force their slaves to labor.”

These two definitions, apropos of the legal context of forced religion, present a very strong “do as I say or else” proposition — that is: “worship my way, or else be killed, flogged, imprisoned, fined, robbed or politically disenfranchised.”

A Church Position

Nearly everyone once understood this. For instance, in 1835, one faith declared, concerning the legal limits of Church discipline:



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“We do not believe that any religious society has authority to try men on the right of property or life, to take from them this world’s goods, or to put them in jeopardy of either life or limb, or to inflict any physical punishment upon them. They can only excommunicate them from their society, and withdraw from them their fellowship.” (1)

Similarly, as far as religious influence in government, the following ought to be unlawful: “wherein one religious society is fostered and another proscribed in its spiritual privileges, and the individual rights of its members as citizens, denied.” (2)

And so we have again:

- Force in religion involves taking away or threatening life, limb, property or civil rights.
- Such force is never legitimate, not by church and not by state.
- As a preventive measure, a state church ought to be unlawful.

Locke on Toleration

The above 19th century definitions coincide with John Locke’s 1689 approach in “A Letter Concerning Toleration.” Here, Locke laid out seven common sense principles as to what is forced religion and what is not.

1. The “sword, or other instruments of force” can never be used to convert, to proscribe “outward forms” of religious worship, or to administer church discipline.

The reason is simple:

“[T]rue and saving religion consists in the inward persuasion of the mind, without which nothing can be acceptable to God. And such is the nature of the understanding, that it cannot be compelled to the belief of anything by outward force. Confiscation of estate, imprisonment, torments, nothing of that nature can have any such efficacy as to make men change the inward judgment that they have framed of things.”

“[T]o impose such things ... upon ... people, contrary to their own judgment, is in effect to command them to offend God. ...”

Locke understood what moderns miss: Opposition to force in religious affairs was introduced into public life by those who sought to reverence God’s order of free agency, while national church schemes were set up by those antagonistic to the order of God, with this proof: never was there a national church which promoted moral behavior, the real crux of religion.

2. Nevertheless, Locke taught, short of force, the Church does have a right to discipline its members, as already alluded to.

“If ... offenders will not be reclaimed ... there remains nothing further to be done but that such stubborn and obstinate persons ... be cast out. This is the last and utmost force of ecclesiastical authority.”

3. So long as religious organizations comply with rules 1 and 2, the excommunicated have no legal grounds to appeal to civil authority, because there is no “civil right” to membership in a “spontaneous [or voluntary] society.” Membership in private societies is a privilege, and every such society has a “fundamental and immutable right” to make its own rules.

Or, to apply the above to civil rights claims by those today who have been fired or dismissed from church employment or, for example, the Boy Scouts on moral grounds, the true nature of the gripe



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unveils: an attempt to use civil force to impose disbelief, disorder and debauchery upon a religious or private society.

4. While government officials are forbidden to bring force to bear in matters of faith, they do have every right and responsibility to use every tool of religious persuasion at their disposal. Said Locke:

“It may indeed be alleged that the magistrate may make use of arguments, and, thereby; draw the heterodox into the way of truth, and procure their salvation. I grant it; ... this is common to him with other men. In teaching, instructing, and redressing the erroneous by reason, he may certainly do what becomes any good man to do. Magistracy does not oblige him to put off either humanity or Christianity. ... [This] charitable care ... cannot be denied any man.”

What’s wrong with that? Locke makes sense.

5. If we think about it, the dividing line between freedom and force in religion is pretty simple, not confusing: “[I]t is one thing to persuade, another to command; one thing to press with arguments, another with penalties.” Freedom of speech, press, and assembly are the truest friends of religious liberty — attempts to take these away are the real agents of force.

6. Religious persuasion belongs in public life for another vital reason: Without it, “the whole subject-matter of law-making is taken away.”

Religious morals, taught Locke, are “indifferent things,” consisting of basic rights and wrongs common to all faiths, and common among all unbelievers (through reason), as well, and it is upon these common rights and wrongs all law rests. (3)

7. Finally, religious morality ought to be defended, not just by persuasion, but by force on those matters which concern the safety of the state and the individual. “This is the original use [of government],” simply the protection of man’s God-given rights. Or, as Issac Backus wrote in his 1773 “An Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty,” “the only crimes which fall within the magistrate’s jurisdiction to punish, are only such as would work ill to our neighbor.”(4)

Locke and Backus are speaking of justice, or the negative application of moral principle in the law. To defend such laws as coming from God, or to say, in essence: ‘the Moral Governor of the Universe warns that beyond this point lays anarchy not liberty,’ does not impose religious belief, for it does not control religious conduct, nor impose positive behavior and choices. What it does do is set a fixed standard of this far and no farther, drawing a line in the titanium that those who cross over this line, violently disturbing the peace, striking a blow at every man’s liberty will be punished, now and forever, making our rights, therefore, truly inalienable.

Thus, Locke concludes:

“A good life, in which consist not the least part of religion and true piety, concerns also the civil government; and in it lies the safety both of men’s souls and of the commonwealth. Moral actions belong, therefore, to the jurisdiction both of the outward and inward court; both of the civil and domestic governor; I mean both of the magistrate and conscience.” (5)

Unlike this unschooled in the basics of liberty generation, that too often trembles when charged that their mere verbal and written defenses of religious principles constitute force — our progenitors knew what force was, and what it was not, and as moral beings stood up responsibly, faithfully, on God’s side, as they saw it, in whatsoever situation they were, in public and in private, in the legislature and in the classroom, for the reasons stated above, plus one more.



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Webster's Honest Insight

Wrote revolutionary soldier, legislator, judge, American Founder, and creator of the aforementioned Webster's Dictionary, Noah Webster:

"The religion which has introduced civil liberty, is the religion of Christ and his apostles, which enjoins humility, piety and benevolence; which acknowledges in every person a brother, or a sister, and a citizen with equal rights. This is genuine Christianity, and to this we owe our free institutions." (6)

Conclusion

Denouncing religious speech in public places or by public servants as force is a farce. What is speech but persuasion? What is the voicing of one's convictions but a right and the stamp of a person's individuality? What is the defense of public morality in a republic but common sense? Whence cometh the source of our free laws and our rights but from God?

It's time for saint and sinner, believer and scoffer to look back to history, back to faith, back to reason, and defend this right of persuasion as it was once defended, lest freedom for all perish from the earth.

Footnotes:

1. Doctrine and Covenants, 134: 10. Salt Lake City, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints
2. Ibid., 134: 9
3. Locke, John. "A Letter Concerning Religious Toleration, 1689.
4. Sandoz, Ellis, Ed.. "Political Sermons of the Founding Era, 1730-1805," Liberty Fund, Indianapolis 1998, p. 336. See also Romans 13: 1-10. Backus wrote in defense of the Baptist Church.
5. Locke, John. "A Letter Concerning Religious Toleration," 1689.
6. Webster, Noah, "History of the United States," New Haven: Durrie & Peck 1832, p. 300

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