

Religious Liberty, Proselytism, Evangelism

Some Baptist Considerations

by

Dr. Erich Geldbach

I. Church/State relations: an historical survey

(1) During the 16th. century when Protestant churches began to emerge, they were closely allied with the state. The ruling prince determined the religion of his region: *cuius regio, eius religio*. The right to migrate was later the only concession to adherents of other religious convictions.

(2) *Luther* considered the administration of the church by the state a necessary evil for a transitional period until the church was mature enough to be self-governing. In some cases, as in Germany, this period lasted until the end of World War I; in other cases, as in the Scandinavian countries, the link between church and state remains strong. The principle of toleration, however, made it possible for other Christian denominations to exist, albeit marginally.

(3) The French Revolution was anti-clerical in nature because of the close association of the court and the church. Hence, in that tradition the „separation“ of church and state has always carried the notion of being directed against the Roman Catholic Church.

(4) As the Orthodox Churches had also aligned themselves closely with the state - it was called „symphonia“ although in many cases the relationship was not as harmonious as the term implies -, the Russian Revolution was directed against the church as well. „Separation“ meant to secure the withering-away of the church; the faster, the better.

(5) In the colonies of Rhode Island (under the Baptist *Roger Williams*) and Pennsylvania (under the Quaker *William Penn*) a new approach was taken. In both cases the constitution provided for liberty of conscience. This provision must be considered a turning point in church history. It meant that people of *different* religious convictions could live together in *one* political realm. They could question each other's faith, write polemical literature against

each other, or put one truth claim over against another without disturbing the internal peace of the political community. The experience of the Thirty Years' War provided for *Roger Williams* the grim background for his revolutionary defense of religious pluralism.

(6) Religious pluralism necessarily led to the limitation of government. No one religion or Christian denomination was to be supported, censored or outlawed by the government. Religion was taken out of the sphere of governmental regulations. It was not government's role to inspect, certify or organize a religion or to give recognition to any one religion to the neglect or exclusion of others. Government could provide only a frame of reference for people of *all* religious persuasions. Consequently, government had to guarantee its own non-intervention in religious affairs, and it had to guarantee the free exercise of religion both individually and collectively. Sometimes such limitations have been referred to as „separation of church and state“. While this type of „separation“ supported religious freedom, the French and Russian Revolutions introduced „separation“ as a means of religious suppression.

(7) Religious uniformity, which was maintained only by a coercive system of government, was replaced by religious pluralism. This implied a change in the role of government. State support of a religion was replaced by *voluntary* support of those who were true adherents of a faith community. National identity and religious identity were no longer synonymous, and a particular religious affiliation neither qualified nor disqualified a person for public office; moreover, it was irrelevant to a person's status as a citizen.

(8) Until well into the 20th. century most countries in Europe and elsewhere have not recognized religious pluralism and, as a consequence, have placed restrictions on religious liberty. Is it perhaps not an accident that in countries with tightly controlled religious uniformity and hence without religious pluralism and dialog extreme political parties were able to seize control of governments? One could cite Orthodox Russia, Roman-Catholic Italy, Roman-Catholic Spain as well as Roman-Catholic and Lutheran Germany as examples. In those countries communism, fascism and national-socialism functioned as state ideologies in a similar fashion as state churches had previously been instrumentalized by the powers that be.

(9) The purpose of religious liberty is not to weaken religious denominations or to remove religion from public life, but to allow religions to flourish in public and private life; to respect religious diversity in public; to ensure equal rights for all faith communities; to give all religious groups, if they so wish, access to the informed public debate; to make sure that no adherent of any religious group is discriminated against on the basis of religious affiliation. Thus, religious communities may help to safeguard against political extremism, contribute positively to civilized society and, in cases of emergency, serve as bases for resistance.

II. Implications for the exercise of religious liberty

A number of lessons may be learned from the foregoing:

- (1) Religious liberty is a fundamental human right; it is not a grant or favor of government, but a right that precedes government (*James Madison*).
- (2) Religious liberty must be protected by government.
- (3) Religious liberty involves the free exercise of religion; it is the right, either individually or in community with others, at home or abroad, to manifest one's religion or belief in worship, in observance, in sharing the faith with others, in teaching as well as in practice and diakonia.
- (4) Religious liberty excludes the right of government to determine what a religion shall be or what form it shall take and restricts the role of government to be protector and guarantor of its free exercise.
- (5) Religious liberty includes the right of people to change their religious affiliation or to have none at all without any civil advantage or disadvantage.
- (7) Religious liberty excludes any discrimination on the basis of religious affiliation.

(8) Religious liberty puts all religions on an equal basis before the law and in public and excludes government endorsement for, or restriction of, any religious group.

(9) Religious liberty involves the free and voluntary support of adherents of churches and religions.

(10) Religious liberty refutes the notion that any church or religion has, by tradition or by law, a claim to a geographical area as „its own“.

(11) Religious liberty aims at creating vital religious communities that contribute to the good of the public rather than creating religious strife or warfare.

(12) Religious liberty must be upheld by *all* churches, religious groups and religions as a positive social good and the precious cornerstone of other liberties and democratic rights. [If churches or other religious organizations do not respect it or, even worse, recruit the state to repress it, religious liberty stands no chance to be respected by the state.]

(13) Religious liberty excludes all forms of coercion by government, religions, churches and other organizations or agencies.

(14) Religious liberty means both freedom of the government from religious control and freedom of religion from government control.

(15) Religious liberty means that it is as much a right for one person or group as it is a right for another person or group and that its denial toward one is a denial toward all. Consequently, its protection is the responsibility of all.

III. Proselytism and evangelisation

(1) *Proselytism* is a charge against a person or a religious group that intrudes into another religious group to „steal“ its adherents. The charge is most often made by churches or religions that enjoy special privileges and consider entire geographical areas their own.

(2) Some European countries may serve as examples: Poland is considered a „Roman Catholic country“, hence a Pole converted to Protestantism cannot, by definition, be a „good“ Pole. The Greek Orthodox Church calls the country „holy Greece“ because it considers all Greek citizens to be members of the Orthodox Church. Similar notions have in recent years been expressed by Orthodox Churches in former communist-controlled countries where the practice of religion was discouraged and many people, for whatever reason, had little or no association with the Christian Church. As a consequence the correlation of church membership with the population at large is much less marked, with the result that many people can rightly be described as „lapsed“ or „unchurched“.

(3) The same can be said of certain non-Christian countries: Thailand is a Buddhist country and to be a „good“ Thai citizen, one has to be a Buddhist. This also applies to Myanmar. Even in India, which claims to be a secular state, there is a Hindu domination of government. In all such and related cases, other religious minority groups suffer from restrictions imposed by the majority religion.

(4) Even in so-called „Christian“ countries where the old notion of the union of church and state is still intact (Germany, the Scandinavian countries, Italy, Spain) insofar as the vast majority of citizens belong to privileged (established) churches, many people are only nominally church members. In all cases the churches in question practice the baptism of infants who are then looked upon as „members“ of the church unless they, later in life, declare their „disassociation“. In this way church membership is not „acquired“ by the person who is being baptized, but is „wanted“ by its parents, godparents, grandparents or is simply by custom or tradition. Paedobaptist churches secure, through infant baptism, a large membership, but risk that a high percentage (as much as 90% or even higher) do not participate in church life, not even marginally.

(4) The question, then, arises: Can the charge of „proselytizing“ be leveled against a religious group that tries to reach the „lapsed“, the „unchurched“ or those who behave as if they were or are non-Christians? Is this group, by so doing, really intruding into the life of a „national“ or „territorial“ church or a „national“ non-Christian religion and engaged in proselytism? The answer must surely be a resounding No.

(5) Even if active people in „national“ or „majority“ churches or religions are being reached by other religious groups, the charge of proselytism cannot be directed against those groups as religious liberty means that a person is free to change his or her religious affiliation (cf. II.5).

(6) Proselytism, then, must be defined in a very narrow way as an attempt to win converts from another religious community by applying ignoble means as, e.g.:

- Ridiculing the beliefs and practices of another church;
- comparing two Christian churches by emphasizing the ideals of one's own with the problems of the other community;
- promising a person in need money or other material goods for a conversion;
- taking advantage of a person's health situation to secure a conversion;
- threatening a person in legal terms;
- coercing a person into unwanted religious behavior.

In sum: any form of economic, physical, psychological, social or legal coercion constitutes a form of proselytism that must be totally rejected. This type of proselytism is neither in line with religious liberty nor with sound religion.

(7) *Evangelism*, as distinguished from proselytism, is an attempt to preach the gospel to the unchurched. It is done in the hope that people may be converted. Conversion „entails a turning from the self-centeredness of sin to faith in Christ as Lord and Savior. Conversion is a passing from one way of life to another new one, marked with the newness of Christ. It is a continuing process so that the whole life of a Christian should be a passage from death to life, from error to truth, from sin to grace. Our life in Christ demands continual growth in God's grace. Conversion is personal but not private. Individuals respond in faith to God's call but faith comes from hearing the proclamation of the word of God and is to be expressed in the

life together in Christ that is the Church“ (Baptist-Roman Catholic International Conversation, 1988, No 15).

(8) As all persons or religious organizations have the right to evangelize, it may happen that a person is persuaded to leave his or her previous affiliation in order to join another religious group. Those Christian churches who readily voice the charge of proselytism in these cases should realize that there are different ways of authentic Christian discipleship or living a Christian life.

(9) Christian life is a life of Christian witness in word and deed. It must be done in a spirit of humility and service rather than triumphalism and domination. Evangelism as a special form of Christian witness to the unchurched can follow no other pattern. If evangelists of any particular denomination try to proselytize among active members of other Christian churches for the purpose of increasing the number of their own denomination, they fail to fulfill their calling and should be told so in no uncertain terms.

(10) Christians of all denominations should be encouraged to pursue a common witness in today's world and to avoid all fruitless competition. Evangelism, thus, would become a means of renewal and service for the church and the unchurched alike. It would also lead to an awareness that there exist different pastoral interpretations of who is „unchurched“ and different understandings of church membership.

(11) Preparing a common evangelistic effort in a certain town or area would require of all churches common prayer, common Bible sharing, inter-church study and action groups, theological dialogs, joint pastoral activities and common service.

„This is my commandment: love one another, as I have loved you ... You did not choose me, I chose you, and I commissioned you to go out and to bear fruit, fruit that will last; so that the Father will give you anything you ask him in my name. My command to you is to love one another“ (John 15:12.16-17).