

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND THE AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT: THE CASE OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

Robert Matikiti¹

Department of Political Theology, University of Zimbabwe, Harare,
Zimbabwe

Abstract

This article explores whether the Age of Enlightenment, in general, and the French Revolution of 1789, in particular, promoted or restricted religious freedom. The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 defines religious freedom as the “inalienable right of individuals and groups to choose or change beliefs as their consciences dictate and be free from intimidation, restrictions and biases based on those beliefs”. In other words, people must have an opportunity to exercise their religious beliefs in an atmosphere that is free of intimidation and interference. During eighteenth century, the Age of the Enlightenment ushered in a profound scientific and cultural transformation. This transformation altered the conditions under which religion was practised. In theology, pietism served to promote new scientific discoveries and theories. In addition, a secular culture developed; nothing was regarded as sacrosanct and secularists sought to prevent believers from worshipping God according to the dictates of their own consciences. A consequence of the French Revolution was that some of the spirit of the Enlightenment became reality-interference in religious affairs. This article will argue that by joining the Third Estate to form the National Constituent Assembly, the clergy negated one of the fundamental pillars of religious freedom: the separation of church and state. The Constituent Assembly forbade the taking of religious vows, regular religious life was restricted to houses, the state was involved to interfere with the selection of priests, and believers were harassed and imprisoned. In the words of

¹ Research Associate, Research Institute for Theology and Religion, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa.

Comby (1989:111), the French Revolution signified a “war with Christianity”. In 1791, Pope Pius VI condemned the principles of the French Revolution and interference in ecclesiastical affairs by the state. It should be noted that the key role of the state is to respect and protect religious choice, not to mandate religious conformity.

1 INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of the French Revolution was preceded by ideas of modern thought. According to Cairns (1981:373), these ideas had “their rise in the period between the end of the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) and the beginning of the French Revolution”. These ideas had immense impact on religion. The thinkers of the Enlightenment made a conscious effort to apply the rule of reason to the various aspects of individual and corporate life. The fundamental principles of the Enlightenment – autonomy, reason, and the concept of a pre-established harmony deeply influenced the thought and actions of the modern world and created a new atmosphere within Christianity had to operate. The eighteenth century produced prominent writers such as Voltaire, Diderot and d’Alembert. Brought up as Christians, these philosophers embarked on a mission to judge everything according to the “light” of reason.

Modern thought emphasised the importance of reason and scientific method in the discovery of truth and refused to be bound by the traditions of the past. This Enlightenment philosophy was essentially an anti-Christian war machine. Philosophers struggled to overthrow of the church and Christianity. For example, Voltaire (1694-1778) reserved his most bitter attacks for the Catholic Church and Christianity in general, both of which he regarded as being the essence of superstition and ignorance (Peacock 1982:13). Referring to Christianity, Voltaire categorically stated that “Let us obliterate the infamy” (Comby 1986:105). This kind of thinking forced the church to defend itself using traditional methods such as censorship and apologetic works. Most of those philosophers who thought that there was need for a religion for the people were inclined towards deism. Deism is a religion that accepts reason and excludes all revelation. Edward Herbert of Cherbury (1583-1633) was an early Deist who in 1624 enumerated the articles of belief alleged to constitute natural religion. They were that God exists; that he is to be worshipped; that

virtue is his true service; that man must repent of wrongdoing; and that there are rewards and punishments after death (Walker 1985:579). Deism helped to strengthen the idea of the omnipotence of the state. Philosophers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) insisted that the state was of natural origin. It was held that the state should be subject only to the sovereign people, and that it was supreme in all areas of life. Religious ideas that were rational should be freely held.

Braur (1971:704) states that religious freedom has been variously interpreted in church history as, for example, the church's right to unrestricted liberty, toleration for dissenters, equality for all faiths, and separation of church and state. In the biblical sense, religious freedom, or in today's parlance, respect of freedom of conscience with regard to the adherents of religion, does not mean the right to do whatever one pleases without any restraint whatever; rather, it means the liberty to make one's own decisions before God without restraint by government (Eidsmoe 1984:37). Religious freedom points to the area of human activity that is beyond the state's jurisdiction. The Bible views people as possessing certain basic human rights bestowed upon them by God who created them and gave them human dignity. The state should provide an enabling environment for religious freedom to thrive.

2 DECLARATION OF RIGHTS OF MAN AND CHURCH PROPERTY

The French concept of religious freedom did not grow out of an existing pluralism of religions but had its roots in a history of Roman Catholicism as the single official state religion. It was behind centuries of persecution of people who did not endorse it, or who strayed from the official church line. Religious groups such as the Cathars and the Jansenists were persecuted, and this type of persecution of cults and minority religious movements lasted until the French Revolution. There was no religious freedom. Instead there were strong anti-Protestant and anti-semitic feelings in France.

By joining the Third Estate to form the National Constituent Assembly, the clergy negated one of the fundamental pillars of religious freedom: the separation of church and state. From this point onwards, neither the church nor the state would have any control over each other. Most notably, the French Revolution resulted in

considerable bloodshed in its attacks on established religion. It is clear that this separation ensured that there was no correlation between membership in any religious group and political affiliation.

On 26 August 1789, the French revolutionaries in the National Constituent Assembly adopted the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. The 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen which gave equal legal standing to all citizens states:

No one may be questioned about his opinions, [and the] same [for] religious [opinions], provided that their manifestation does not trouble the public order established by the law. The law has the right to ward [i.e., forbid] only actions [which are] harmful to the society. Any thing which is not warded [i.e., forbidden] by the law cannot be impeded, and no one can be constrained to do what it [i.e., the law] does not order (*Wikipedia* June 2007).

Thus it follows that the French government could not arbitrarily regulate and prohibit religious activity; it was strictly constrained to regulate it only to the extent that there was a need to safeguard public order and prohibit actions harmful to society such as human sacrifice. This declaration was a result of the general sense that the Revolution was and would be of great importance to all peoples. It asserted the right of the people to rule and that all humans were by nature equal. It also held that there should be freedom of speech, writing and printing, representation and that “nobody [should be] imprisoned except by forms of law decided by the people” (Peacock 1982:28). Unfortunately, this declaration did not include the right to religious freedom and paved the way for an extensive upheaval in religious life in France.

The church owned vast and sometimes derelict properties in France before 1789. The revenues from the land benefited the upper clergy. There was need for reform. In total disregard for land rights, the National Assembly of France declared church lands public property in November 1789 and the great wealth of the church became the nation’s property. After the decrees of August 4, the breakdown of the old system of taxation left the government without funds to meet the expenses of the state. The Assembly decided to print a new paper currency with the security for this paper money being church land. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the majority

of the clergy supported the nationalisation of church land. They saw this as a necessary step in the reformation of the church. Not only did the church lose its land, but it also lost many artistic riches when churches and monasteries were destroyed or transformed to serve new purposes.

In February 1790 with a total disregard for freedom of worship, the Constituent Assembly forbade the taking of religious vows. Restrictive laws regarding freedoms of assembly and association challenged the Catholic Church. Public religious vows were forbidden. Those interested in retaining a regular religious life could do so privately in their homes. These measures caused consternation in the monasteries and convents. As stated earlier, religious freedom points to the area of human activity that is beyond the state's jurisdiction. The Assembly had no right to prescribe and control religious issues.

3 STATE REORGANISATION OF THE CHURCH

Religious freedom received a further blow on 12 July 1790 with the promulgation of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. The ultimate objective of this law was to realign the organisation of the church with the principles of the French Revolution. Consequently the geography of the church was reshaped.

According to Comby (1989:112), the Civil Constitution of the Clergy reduced the number of dioceses from 135 to 85, one per department, of which ten were archdioceses. The church was mandated to have one parish for every 6 000 inhabitants. In addition, bishops and priests were to be elected by the same people who elected civil servants. Electors included non-Catholics. The Civil Constitution of the Clergy reduced all ecclesiastics servants of the state. The salaries of the clergy were to be paid by the government. The Constitution reduced the power of the Pope. He had no power to alter elections or other matters decreed by the State. A bishop would require the archbishop to install him and would only inform the Pope and assure him that he was in communication with him. King Louis XVI, a devout Catholic, reluctantly signed this constitution into law on 24 August 1790. However, he did not want to oppose the Pope and what he considered to be the best interests of religion.

Despite the fact that thirty out of thirty-two bishops in the Assembly objected and protested that the reorganisation of the

church was being carried out without papal approval, the Assembly directed that all priests were to take up an oath of loyalty to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. Many priests and bishops refused to accept the control of the state over the church in any way. Peacock (1982:32), states that the oath was rejected by about two-thirds of all parish priests and by 130 of the 134 bishops. Those accepting the constitution became known as the juring priests, those rejecting it were known as non-jurors. Non-jurors were not allowed to exercise their ministry and were replaced. In a nutshell, state interference in religious matters resulted in schism between juring priests and non-jurors.

On 10 March 1791, the Pope condemned and rejected the Civil Constitution of the Clergy and Declaration of the Rights of Man as contrary to freedom of worship:

... this absolute liberty which not only assures people of the right not to be disturbed about their religious opinions but also gives them this license to think, write and even have printed with impunity all that the most unruly imagination can suggest about religion (Comby 1989:112). The way this is structured makes one first think that these were the Pope's words. Please restructure.

In addition, the Pope demanded that all juring priests and bishops retract their loyalty to the oath. The Pope disowned all newly elected clergy and barred them from exercising their function. He also questioned the election of some priests and bishops. In my opinion, the state was putting its "unholy fingers" into religious "holy oil" as it, interfered with purely religious matters.

4 FIGHTING CHRISTIANITY

Despite the two groups (the jurors and the non-jurors) existing side by side in the French Roman Catholic Church there was tolerance. Disputes which arose were usually amicably resolved. This harmony ended in the spring of 1792. Anti-clericalism took root. Anti-clericalism is a movement that opposes religious institutional power and influence, real or imagined, in all aspects of public and political life, and the involvement of religion in the everyday life of the citizen (Maritain 1951:6). The goal of anti-clericalism is to reduce religion to

a purely private belief-system with no public profile or influence. Anti-clericalism during the French Revolution was violent, leading to attacks and seizure of church property. Though inspired by the Virginia Declaration of Rights of 1776, the French revolutionaries failed to adhere to the sixteenth clause which states that:

... religion, or the duty which we owe to our CREATOR, and the manner of discharging it, can be directed only by reason and conviction, not by force or violence; and therefore all men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience ...
(Dowrick 1979:157)

The state used force and violence to achieve its objectives. From April 1792, the history of the church in France became closely related to events abroad and the activities of the *émigrés*. France declared war on Austria largely for harbouring *émigrés* and malcontents. They were seen as traitors. Many priests were arrested, tortured and persecuted.

The Reign of Terror of 1793 and 1794 shook the Roman Catholic Church to its very foundations. The Christian church was dissolved in spite of the guarantee of religious freedom given by the Declaration of the Rights of Man. Anti-church laws were passed by the Legislative Assembly and its successor, the National Convention, and by department councils throughout the country. In November of 1793, the very word *dimanche* ("Sunday") was abolished. The Gregorian calendar, an instrument decreed by Pope Gregory XIII, the Sabbath, the various saints' days and any references to the church were abolished. The Reign of Terror tried to wipe out all the vestiges of religion by changing the calendar. Every tenth of day rather than Sunday became a day of rest. This calendar was enforced on France on October 7, 1793. It was retained until 1804 when Napoleon came to power. Religious holidays were banned and replaced with holidays to celebrate the harvest and other non-religious events. Anti-clerical parades were held. Street and place names with any sort of religious connotation were changed. The church and state were completely separated during the Reign of Terror. Many religious functionaries were tortured and executed for counterrevolutionary activities. Persecution is the ultimate nemesis of religious freedom, the poison of freedom of worship. In 1793 the more atheistic of the leaders of the

Reign of Terror even tried to force a religion of reason onto the French and crowned a young actress the goddess of reason in the Notre Dame Cathedral. Later, Robespierre (1758-1794) and his colleagues decided to supplant both Catholicism and its rival, the atheistic Cult of Reason with the cult of the Supreme Being, with Robespierre, a Deist, as chief priest.

The de-Christianisation of France reached its zenith around the middle of 1794 with the fall of Robespierre. By early 1795, a return to some form of religion-based faith was beginning to take shape and a law, which was passed in February 1795, legalised public worship, albeit with strict limitations. The ringing of church bells, religious processions and displays of the Christian cross were still forbidden. As late as 1799, priests were still being imprisoned or deported to penal colonies and persecution reached its crescendo when the Pope Pius VI was captured and taken as a prisoner to France where he eventually died.

The Cult of the Supreme Being finally ended during the reign of the Convention (1794-1799) and churches were allowed to reopen. However, The Convention formally separated church and state and consequently “cults” had to pay for themselves. While some saw this as more de-Christianisation, it was widely recognised as a step towards religious freedom. This was done partly to appease the Vendée, a region of devout Catholics which had supported the Revolution, and which was heavily bloodied but still angry and insurgent. In doing so, the Convention now tried to stop the rebellion by offering amnesties to anyone handing in arms and giving into to demands, for the lifting of conscription laws and the return of land.

5 THE NAPOLEONIC ERA

The Napoleonic era generally brought some respite for the Roman Catholic Church. Napoleon came to power in 1799. His domestic policy is crucial to our overall understanding of Napoleonic France. In it, he was clearly influenced by the Revolution. He was also affected by the ideas of the philosophers. In terms of religion, Napoleon fell somewhere between deism and atheism. Catholicism as a religion of salvation had little meaning to him. Like Machiavelli, Rousseau and Marx, Napoleon believed that religion was little more than the cement which held society together. According to Napoleon, religion promoted national unity and prevented class war – it kept the people

meek and mild instead of strong and independent. He made every effort to close the divide between the state and the church, a divide created by the Revolution. The temples of reason (i.e. the churches) and the Cult of the Supreme Being of the early 1790s were too abstract for Napoleon. How could he expect the French common people to understand them? He began to reconcile church and state. This reconciliation would gain him even greater approval of his people.

He realised that the Roman Catholic Church was popular in France and proposed a liaison between the Roman Catholic Church and the state with the Concordat of 1801. Signing the Concordat allowed him to reconcile the religious differences which had torn France apart during the Revolution. At the same time, the Concordat insured religious freedom.

In line with the new spirit of religious freedom Napoleon recognised the Roman Catholic Church as “the religion of the great majority of French citizens”, but did not declare it the state religion (Comby 1989:118). Declaring any religion a state religion would be tantamount to the negation of freedom of worship. The Concordat acknowledged Catholicism as the religion of the majority of the French, but did not make it an “established” religion as the Church of England was in Britain. Protestants and Jews were also allowed to practice their religion and retain their civic rights. A general amnesty signed by Napoleon on 26 April 1802 allowed all but one thousand of the most notorious *émigrés* to return to France. These two actions helped to bring relative calm to those areas of France which had long been at war with the Revolution. Hence through the Concordat, freedom of worship was built into the legislation. The people of France could also declare themselves non-Catholic or non-Christian. Certain concessions to the church were made by the state. For example, bishops were to be appointed by the state and consecrated by the Pope. This Concordat governed the relations between the church and state until 1905.

Shrewd, calculating and intelligent, Napoleon knew exactly what he was doing. It was for these reasons that he negotiated an agreement with the Pope. In other words, in terms of religion, Napoleon basically guaranteed one of the rights mentioned in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen – religious freedom. However, the Church did not regain the land confiscated during the Revolution, nor the right to collect tithes and the French clergy,

though consecrated at Rome, remained under state control. Through the Concordat Napoleon had achieved his aims: Jews, Protestants and Catholics could freely practice their religion but the Church remained under state control. Finally, although the people seemed to get what they wanted, so did Napoleon.

6 CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article has argued that the anti-clericalism or atheism of the state that originated in the eighteenth century was strengthened by during the French Revolution by the principles of the Revolution which were largely incompatible with the spirit of religious freedom. The Revolution resulted in a great secularisation of French society. The powers of the ecclesiastical princes were largely curtailed. The Pope alone retained temporal powers. The Revolution left the church largely dependent on the state and denied it its prophetic mission and independence.

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