

## On the Compatibility of Cultural Inclusivity with Christianity

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In 2023 the Catholic Church formally denounced the Doctrine of Discovery. This doctrine embedded itself in Western legal thought and granted permission for many of the worst excesses in the West's "Era of Discovery." It is generally considered to have been created by papal bulls from the 1450s.<sup>1</sup> These documents authorized Catholic (European) powers to conquer the lands of non-Christians. Five hundred years is a significant amount of time to influence the formation of Western thinking.

However, this was not the beginning of the school of thought within Christianity. The excesses of this doctrine were not unique as an expression of Christianity or even monotheistic thought. They are not only a natural conclusion of religious thought coupled with violence but of exclusionary, supremacist underpinnings of monotheism itself.

The idea of Christianity going forth across the world is found in the Bible. An event called "the Great Commission" is outlined in Matthew 28:16–20. In this description, the resurrected Jesus Christ takes his followers to a mountain in Galilee where he instructs them to make disciples of and baptize all the nations of the world. While the early missionary activity of the early Christians was in many ways covert and even counter-culture it would not remain that way.<sup>2</sup>

The ancient Romans' general policy as they extended their territories was to promote stability by absorbing local deities and cults rather than eradicating them. They built connections between diverse peoples through constructing temples framing local beliefs within a syncretic, Roman theology. Worship of local and Roman deities, including dedications made by Romans to local gods, is widely recorded in inscriptions throughout the Empire.<sup>3</sup>

From the 2nd century, Christian leaders condemned the diverse religions practiced throughout the Empire as "pagan." This conflict took many forms, with Christians refusing not only to participate in state religious activities but to provide the types of assurance of Roman political and social loyalty

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<sup>1</sup> Two examples were issued by Pope Nicholas V. The bull *Dum Diversas* in 1452, authorized King Afonso V of Portugal to "subjugate the Saracens and pagans and any other unbelievers and enemies of Christ", and "reduce their persons to perpetual servitude", to take their belongings, including land, "to convert them to you, and your use, and your successors the Kings of Portugal." Another was *Romanus Pontifex* in 1455, which extended Portugal's authority to conquer the lands of infidels and pagans for "the salvation of all" in order to "pardon ... their souls."

<sup>2</sup> When Christianity emerged in the first century, it was initially viewed as a sect of Judaism. By 60 AD people were beginning to consider it a separate religion – a distinction made in letters used to shift blame for the burning of Rome under Nero to Christians. With this shift, Christianity began to fall under a policy related to mystery religions. These groups were matters of personal belief, practiced in addition to one's family rites and public religion. However, because they involved secrecy and exclusive oaths, wider Roman society viewed them with suspicion as forms of conspiracy and subversive activity.

<sup>3</sup> While Judaism's monotheism was an unusual problem for this Roman policy, it was handled through specific compromises and special exemptions. It was specifically considered a *religio licita*, "legitimate religion," but its members paid additional taxes and had other requirements to prove their loyalty to Rome.

provided by the followers of Judaism. The result was increasingly severe persecution and executions of Christians by the Roman government during the first three centuries of the religion's existence.

Emperor Constantine<sup>4</sup> formally converted to Christianity in 312 and played an influential role in the proclamation of the Edict of Milan of 313 which, along with other similar documents,<sup>5</sup> provided tolerance for Christianity in the Roman Empire. Moreover, Constantine created the ideas of Christendom and Constantinianism. Christendom is a collective name for the countries or places where Christianity is dominant. This has often referred to states where Christianity is the official state religion or at least countries with a Christian majority. This idea has been powerfully influential in the development of Western thinking. Constantinianism is an ideology still used in Christian politics which centers on the *unity* of church and state, as opposed to their separation. It is modeled on an "ideal" Christendom. If the idea of Christendom itself was not a sufficient foundation on which to build the later Doctrine of Discovery, the idea of unified church/state power certainly carried it forward.

Over the following centuries, the influence and dominance of Christianity in the West continued to rise even as the Roman Empire itself splintered and declined. Emperor Theodosius I issued the Edict of Thessalonica in 380 which recognized Nicene Christianity<sup>6</sup> as the Roman Empire's state religion. However, when he died in 395 the Empire divided between the warring ministers of his two incapable sons. This split between Eastern and Western Empires is reflected to this day in the Eurasian and Mediterranean regions as a dividing line between the Orthodox church and its successors in the east by contrast with the Roman Catholic Church and its Protestant splinters in the west.

In the region of the western Empire, the Roman Catholic church continued to exercise political power and display the deep cultural influence of religion. By the 9th century a document known as "The Donation of Constantine"<sup>7</sup> was forged, which would be used by the papal rulership of the Roman Catholic church to exercise claims of political authority throughout Christendom.<sup>8</sup>

The idea of Christian superiority and right is seen during the Crusades and the *Reconquista*.<sup>9</sup> The best known of these expeditionary wars are the Crusades between 1095 and 1291. These campaigns

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<sup>4</sup> Constantine I or Constantine the Great.

<sup>5</sup> Two years earlier there was the Edict of Toleration by Galerius or Edict of Serdica, which officially ended the Diocletianic Persecution of Christianity in the Eastern Roman Empire.

<sup>6</sup> The Nicene Creed, also called the Creed of Constantinople, is the defining statement of belief of mainstream Christianity. The original Nicene Creed was first adopted at the First Council of Nicaea in 325 – under the sponsorship and with the attendance of the Roman Emperor Constantine.

<sup>7</sup> Latin: *Donatio Constantini*. This appeared to be a Roman imperial decree by Emperor Constantine which supposedly transferred authority over Rome and the western part of the Roman Empire to the Pope. It was used to support claims of political authority by the papacy, particularly through the 13th century.

<sup>8</sup> Primarily defined as western Europe.

<sup>9</sup> *Reconquista* is Spanish and Portuguese for 'reconquest', also called the Reconquest of al-Andalus. The term *Reconquista* was not used by contemporary writers and was developed as a term in centuries after the events it references. It is used to describe the struggle between Christians and Muslims in the Iberian peninsula during the Middle Ages, and its definition as an actual reconquest has been subject to the concerns and prejudices of various scholars. The beginning of the *Reconquista* is often dated to the Battle of Covadonga (c. 718 or 722) and its culmination to 1492 with the fall of the Nasrid kingdom of Granada to the Catholic Monarchs.

were led from “Christendom”<sup>10</sup> to the Holy Land. Their sanctification came from “saving”<sup>11</sup> it from non-Christian rule. There was a convoluted evolution from pacifist early Christianity through St. Augustine’s ideas about “just war,”<sup>12</sup> where violence for the purpose of self-defense and self-restoration was excusable. However, there was then a further shift and culmination to “holy war,” where such violence was not only forgivable but was itself a purifying and sacred act.<sup>13</sup>

The idea of religion as an instrument of political and state power is clearly a continuation of the ancient Roman practice. However, the difference in effect between the Roman polytheist state religion and the exclusive monotheism within state Christianity is striking. The ancient polytheist state religion was explicitly inclusive and syncretic. State polytheism constrains and subjugates the local beliefs by tying them into part of the dominant Roman culture. However, the beliefs themselves were largely left in place and ongoing veneration was explicitly encouraged. By contrast, the monotheist core of Christianity requires an absolute abrogation, denial, and destruction of those pre-existing beliefs. While it may not always be an intended consequence, an inevitable result is an erosion of the underlying culture tied to the stories and beliefs supplanted by Christianity.

The features of exclusivity are not unique to Christianity among monotheist religions. Because Islam arose in direct and violent competition with polytheist and animist faiths it has some of the most direct and explicit injunctions about “non-believers” and their status as second-class citizens, while other believers in “the Book” (Abrahamic religions) enjoying a relatively elevated status. Judaism holds that those not of Semitic descent or conversion are generally free to believe as they would like. However, there are strict commandments (mitzvahs) regarding the types of interactions followers of Judaism can have with non-believers which could produce a startling form of discrimination if Jewish belief held the type of wide-spread dominant cultural position Islam or Christianity does. This holds true even beyond the Abrahamic religions. The Ancient Egyptian experiment in monotheism<sup>14</sup> demonstrates the need to suppress other religious beliefs to reenforce the centrality of the “one true god.”

In the cases of the Abrahamic religions, there are clear situations where these faiths have existed as tolerant participants in a multicultural environment. However, in all of these examples, this has happened at the cost of their centrality to the culture and social/political space. The rise of secular/non-religious political and social society is seen as a requirement for multi-cultural interaction because of monotheistic dominance in Western thought. In modern Western countries, this is often mourned by the more pious and devoutly religious parts of society. However, similar conflicts can be

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<sup>10</sup> Again, defined as western Europe.

<sup>11</sup> The First Crusade was called for at the Council of Clermont (17 to 27 November 1095) which was organized by Pope Urban II. The pope gave a speech stating “a barbaric fury has deplorably afflicted and laid waste the churches of God in the regions of the Orient”. He calls participants to “free the churches of the East.”

<sup>12</sup> Aurelius Augustinus or Augustine of Hippo, 13 November 354 – 28 August 430. While St Augustine introduced the idea of just war to Christian thinking, much of the concept was borrowed from Roman law and the works of Roman writers like Cicero.

<sup>13</sup> From the time of the First Crusade through the 12th century Crusader terminology used for these military campaigns remained largely indistinguishable from that of Christian pilgrimage.

<sup>14</sup> Atenism was an attempted religious shift by the Pharaoh Amenhotep IV starting in 1348/1346 BC and escalating for the next 20 years before traditional Egyptian polytheist beliefs were restored. There was a clear political effect of this religious shift by displacing a powerful traditional priesthood to empower the Pharaoh.

found in records of Islamic Golden Age<sup>15</sup> caliphates' political conflicts and the age's ultimate end with the rise of reactionary religious forces.<sup>16</sup>

There is no innate requirement in polytheist beliefs to accommodate other religions and belief systems in the way that the Roman state religion did. These do have variations that are extreme and produce extremists. However, these systems have a capacity that monotheism cannot replicate. They can provide space to accommodate other belief systems and the cultures associated with them. The closest relative to monotheistic religion with this capability is henotheism.<sup>17</sup> Zoroastrianism and Hinduism are common examples of henotheistic belief systems. While these have singular central gods<sup>18</sup> they also accept the veneration of other gods, either as other agents of goodness<sup>19</sup> or as manifestations of that primary god.<sup>20</sup> Variations and descendants of Christian belief have attempted to adopt these features, diluting the cultural displacement of monotheistic religions. Examples that have gained visibility in the early 21st century are Afro-Caribbean religions<sup>21</sup> which use the Catholic systems of angels and saints to try and preserve a connection to gods, beliefs, stories, and traditions from Africa and the Americas even through the horrors imposed by the Doctrine of Discovery.

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<sup>15</sup> This golden age was a period of scientific, economic, and cultural flourishing under Islamic rule throughout the Arabian Peninsula, northern Africa, southwest Asia, and the Iberian Peninsula. This period is traditionally dated from the 8th to the 13th century, but is sometimes extended to the end of the 15th or 16th centuries. This period was characterized by the importance given to Quranic directives emphasizing the importance of acquiring knowledge and placing value on education. Throughout this era, the Islamic world was renowned for its collection, preservation, and advancement of ancient knowledge from Babylon, Sumer, and other ancient regional powers with advanced knowledge of mathematics, natural sciences, and philosophy. The development of the modern scientific method is widely attributed to the Muslim thinkers of this age.

<sup>16</sup> Among the stories of the end of the Golden Age are several actions of the Ottoman Sultan. In 1485 and 1515 the Sultans issued decrees which declared printed script in Turkish or Arabic heresy. The punishment for anyone owning a printing press was execution while those owning a book printed in one of these scripts were jailed. Another event is the 1580 destruction of Taqi al-Din's Constantinople observatory in Galata by the Sultan. This facility was comparable with the contemporary Uraniborg built for Tycho Brahe. Among the many successes of Uraniborg was to provide the data used by Johannes Kepler to develop the three laws of planetary motion.

<sup>17</sup> Henotheism is the belief in a single supreme god without denying the existence of other deities which may be considered "lesser."

<sup>18</sup> The central gods are Ahura Mazda in Zoroastrianism and Brahman in Hinduism.

<sup>19</sup> Zoroastrianism asserts that Ahura Mazda is the central creator and source of goodness. It also believes in lesser divinities known as Yazatas or "good agents." There is also a dualistic opponent; Angra Mainyu –personified as a destructive spirit and the adversary of all things good, who is destined to lose to Ahura Mazda at the end of time.

<sup>20</sup> At least one system among the many local belief systems in the Indus region asserts that Brahman is the central god of all things, but that there are many other gods, all of which are partial manifestations of Brahman, innumerable spirits, which are manifestations of the gods and Brahman, and onward until all things and beings including humans are ultimately manifestations of Brahman.

<sup>21</sup> Believers in Santeria and Voodoo have long presented as orthodox Catholics or Protestants.