

TRANSCRIPT

An Undeceptions podcast.

John Dickson:

Imagine if Michelangelo had been commissioned by the Pope to paint the Last Supper and then decided to express his own religious freedom. Actually, you don't have to imagine it because Monty Python has done the work for us.

Monty Python:

It's not the point that there are 28 disciples. Too many, well, of course it's too many. Yeah, I know that. But I wanted to give the impression of a real Last Supper not just any old Last Supper, not like a last meal or a final snack, but I wanted to give the impression of a real mother of a blowout. There were only 12 disciples at the Last Supper. Well, maybe some of the other ones came along after. Well, only 12 altogether. Well maybe some of their friends came by. Look, there were just 12 disciples and our Lord at the Last Supper, the Bible clearly says, so. No friends? No friends. Waiters? No. Cabaret? No. Our Last Supper I commission from you and our Last Supper I want with 12 disciples and one Christ. One? Yes, one. Now will you please tell me what in God's name possessed you to paint this with three rights in it? It works mate. Works? Yeah. It looks great. The fat one balances the two skinny ones. There was only one Redeemer. I know that, we all know that. What about a bit of artistic license. Well, one Messiah is what I want. I'll tell you what you want mate, you want a bloody photographer, that's what you want.

John Dickson:

And that's the problem with religious types, no wiggle room. In fact, it's often said that it was the intolerance of Christians from the Apostle Paul to the Renaissance Popes that led to the enlightenments cry for freedom of religion and even freedom from religion. Religion fosters bigotry and violence toward difference. Enlightened secular thought fosters peace and pluralism. The church demands conformity, the secular state encourages diversity and few enlightenment thinkers put it more forcefully than Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States and an avowed critic of religious intolerance. Be it enacted by the general assembly, he wrote in the Virginia statute for Religious Freedom passed on the 16th of January, 1786, that no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship nor shall he otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief, but that all men shall be free to profess and by argument to maintain their opinion on matters of religion. It's a wonderful statement.

John Dickson:

And it was the basis five years later of the US Constitution's First Amendment, which I hold in my little hands right here. It famously guaranteed freedom of the press, freedom of speech, freedom to protest, and freedom of religion. These things are now the common assumption of all Western democracies. A modern secular Aussie or Brit is just as well versed in the importance of freedom in matters of religion or irreligion as any citizen of the land of the brave and land of the free. Less well known is where these

ideas first came from. Today, I'm going to introduce you to some very ancient Christian theologians whose ideas became much more famous than their names. And thanks to a recent discovery we now know that even the very secular Jefferson knew full well the religious origins of religious freedom.

John Dickson:

I'm John Dickson And this is Undeceptions. Undeceptions is brought to you by Zondervan Academics new book The Problem of Jesus by Mark Clark. Every episode at Undeceptions we explore some aspect of life, faith, history, culture, or ethics that's either much misunderstood or mostly forgotten. With the help of people who know what they're talking about, we'll be trying to undecieve ourselves and let the truth out.

Robert Louis Wilken:

In antiquity and in the cities of the Roman empire, religion was an affair of the community as a whole which meant that any religious rites or ceremonies or practices were understood to be the responsibility of all the citizens. The whole idea that developed in early modern times that you would have religious communities who were independent of the religion of the city was quite foreign.

John Dickson:

That's professor Robert Louis Wilken, he's professor emeritus of the history of Christianity at the University of Virginia, a very good place to study the origins of religious freedom. His many books include The First Thousand Years, which I loved, The Spirit of Early Christian Thought and The Christians as the Romans Saw Them. Most recently, he wrote Liberty in the Things of God: The Christian Origins of Religious Freedom. The evidence is clear, he says, whatever the multiple failings of Christians to tolerate difference through history, it'd be wrong to think that Liberty in religious matters was a secular discovery. The real story is much more complicated. He spoke to me from his home in Virginia.

Robert Louis Wilken:

In the cities of the Roman world, especially in Asia Minor, many Jews had settled in the years, hundreds of years before the rise of Christianity. And because their way of life was so distinctive, they worked out an arrangement with the city officials that they could keep their own way and practice what they believed and would not be disturbed, at least most of the time. But Christians were not given that privilege.

John Dickson:

I want to ask then, why did the Romans persecute the Christians? And in particular, I'm thinking of the great persecution at the Dawn of the fourth century.

Robert Louis Wilken:

So when a religious festival would come around and Christians would not participate, it was clear to their neighbours. And so they were offended and some of the stories that we had, which are really accounts of the martyrs, the governor of the province or the chief official in the city said, "Why don't you keep our ways? We are religious people. Why do you have to follow your own way?" And they found that of

course offensive. So it was a simple matter of not following, not respecting, not honouring the religious rights which were part of everybody's experience. And they stood out and we have fairly extensive what are called the Acts of the Martyrs and these are in many cases firsthand accounts. Why can't you follow our ways? If you want to live among us, why don't you follow what we do?

Robert Louis Wilken:

Now the Christians of course claimed that they were a people who were worshipping a God who was the God for all. So they were seeking converts and so they were in that sense, divisive. They were not happy simply to be among their own tribe as were the Jews. And so the very presence of Christianity was divisive within the towns and cities because they did not live separately. They lived right in the midst. They went to the same grocers, they went to the same meat market, to the same barber. And you must remember that in the Mediterranean world, life was lived outside.

John Dickson:

Christianity was an affront to Roman sensibilities. Throughout the empire, religion was an important civic activity and often functioned as a thing of the state. And so Christians refusal to take part in pagan rituals, not to mention their claim that there was another Lord of Lords, came across as disloyal to the emperor and a threat to social cohesion. Famous philosophers at the time like Porphyry 234 to 405, started to denounce Christians as cultural traitors. How can these people be thought worthy of our patience? He wrote, they have turned away from those things divine. To what sort of penalties might they not justly be subjected? The argument was clear, the gods had protected Rome since the dawn of time. Anyone who abandoned the gods forfeited the right to imperial protection. And so on the 23rd of February AD 303, Emperor Diocletian issued the first of four decrees against the Christians. Ordering the destruction or seizure of church properties, the burning of Christians scriptures, the sacking of all Christians in government and academia, and eventually the execution of anyone who wouldn't sacrifice to the traditional Greek and Roman gods. Many Christians died in this eight year period as emperors and co-emperors maintained the policy.

John Dickson:

And then something truly earth shaking happened. Emperor Constantine declared himself a Christian. That story deserves a whole episode, if I can convince director Mark and producer Kaley to do so. Feel free to write in your support of my idea. Anyway, Constantine declared his allegiance to Jesus Christ and suddenly put an end to all persecution of the Christians. And of course he did what any self-respecting emperor might do. He coerced everyone to follow his religion just as previous emperors had done for the pagan gods. Actually, he did nothing of the sort. Instead he issued an edict. Well, really it was just a published letter, but it's called the Edict of Milan. And it's an extraordinary document in the history of ideas. It guarantees liberates in matters of religion.

Speaker 1:

Freedom and full Liberty has been granted in accordance with the peace of our times to exercise free choice in worshiping as each one has seen fit. This has been done by us so that nothing may seem to be taken away from anyone's honor or from any religion whatsoever.

Robert Louis Wilken:

It was a letter, but it had come to me called [inaudible 00:12:18] and it didn't spring out of the blue. Several Christian writers, Tertullian who lived around the beginning of the third century in North Africa in Carthage and then during the early fourth century like [inaudible 00:12:37] another writer both had written treatises one case to another to a Roman governor and another case, a more general treatise in which they had argued that religion was a matter of internal inter conviction. And therefore it couldn't be coerced.

John Dickson:

Religion can't be coerced. It can't be forced on anyone. Listen out for that phrase throughout the episode, because it's going to be really important. Tertullian the great third century Christian theologian and public advocate for the faith wrote these words in a letter to the Roman governor Scapula.

Speaker 1:

It is a fundamental human right, a privilege of nature that every man should worship according to his own convictions. One man's religion neither harms nor helps another man. It is assuredly no part of religion to compel religion to which free will and not force should lead us.

John Dickson:

Tertullian's language of a right to free worship sounds very modern but it is ancient and Christian. And then there's Lactantius, a Christian professor of rhetoric who lost his job in the great persecution. He's particularly important because we know he had direct contact with Constantine. In fact, Constantine immediately employed Lactantius to be a private family tutor. Anyway, here's what Lactantius wrote.

Speaker 1:

There is no need for violence and brutality. Worship cannot be forced. It is something to be achieved by talk rather than blows so that there is free will in it. There is nothing that is so much a matter of willingness as religion.

Robert Louis Wilken:

Now Lactantius who lived at the time of Constantine actually was the tutor to Constantine's son. So there's a kind of a direct link there. And so what happened was Constantine realized that the prosecutions had not worked and that something had to be done to change the political [inaudible 00:14:54] environment. And so he persuades his fellow emperor Lactantius to write this letter which is then sent out to various parts of the Roman world in which he says that religion should be not coerced. And he's not talking just about Christians, he says, everyone should be free to practice the religion that they wish. And this then becomes the kind of principle that is going to be remembered though not

actually observed. That's the sad part. And so by the end of the fourth century and the reign of Emperor Theodosius, he proclaims that the religion of all people in the empire should be the religion of Christianity. And by that, he means, of course, the Nicene Creed, and he even mentions the Bishop of Rome as a kind of a marker of that.

John Dickson:

It might be important to catch that timeline. For two generations after Constantine, there was an official Christian policy of toleration in matters of religion. That's roughly the time span from the Second World War to today, but it didn't last.

Robert Louis Wilken:

What happened then in the course of two generations was the Christianity basically falls into the pattern which had existed before the rise of Christianity but now it was not the Roman gods, but it was the Christian God. And that then extended right on through the middle ages. And the one exception would be the Jews, but even with the Jews, Christians did not observe what they said they should observe, that they should be right to practice their own religion.

John Dickson:

Thinking of the inner resources of the Christian faith, where does this intolerance stream come from? Is it born of Christian doctrines or is it as perhaps you hinted a second ago, more a reversion to what was the ancient way of thinking of religion as a societal as a civic good?

Robert Louis Wilken:

Well, I think it certainly is the latter, that it was religion was something that was to be observed by all people in the city, but of course, those people who did not practice the religion of the larger society and believes other things were to use a theological term were not Orthodox they were here Heretics. They believed things that were contrary to the scriptures and contrary to Christian doctrine. So there was a reason why they should be excluded or mistreated. And that comes up again and again, and again and again, even though there are voices that defend the ancient principle, but it's both a societal matter and a theological matter. You can't have people who deny the divinity of Christ. They're not the kind of people you want to have living in your community.

John Dickson:

And that's exactly the response many forms of Christianity took in the coming centuries. Not all of them and probably not as many as you think actually, but there were enough Christian bullies through the centuries for me to know that Christians should never feel smug about this idea of religious freedom. There is disturbing evidence of Christians persecuting Jews, executing pagans, and torturing heretics. I've just written the biggest book of my life on the topic of the Bullies and Saints of Christian history, more about that some other time. My point is that even though this notion of religious liberty was never wholly lost in the church, even in the so-called dark ages, there's another episode we need to do on the dark ages, it's nonetheless true that the church frequently reverted to the old Imperial ways where

coercion in religion seemed perfectly sensible for the stability of the state and the cohesion of society. I'd like to race forward to the time of the reformation where it was proposed that there were two kingdoms, two realms, a religious and a secular, what is the significance of that idea? And did it work?

Robert Louis Wilken:

Well, it's working now, has been working for centuries. When you write a book like this, part of the satisfaction is just turning up unexpected writings, and text, opinions. And in my case, because I was basically had spent my life working in the early church and to a certain extent in medieval, the reformation in the modern period was really pretty fresh territory. And of all the things that I turned up there was one, this was in France around 1560, and I remember that the reformation came to France, 1540, 1550, largely through Calvinists, not Lutherans, Calvinists.

John Dickson:

Just a note in case you're not familiar with the friendly Calvinists, they were the followers of John Calvin, one of the leaders of the Reformation movement that challenged the orthodoxy of the Roman Catholic church. The reformers call for a return to the Bible and protest against Catholic teachings is what led to them being called Protestants.

Robert Louis Wilken:

Calvin was of course Frenchman, spoke French, wrote in French, and around 1560 a Frenchman wrote to a friend of his. And he said, "Could you believe when we were younger that there could be two religions practiced in one city and even in the capital of France, Paris." I think that says everything. The assumption up until the mid to late 16th century and then the 17th century was that every community practiced one religion. And so that's why religious differences conflict were so destructive for the wellbeing of society. Everyone thought that you couldn't really have a safe and peaceful society if people didn't hold the same religion. And that's really what the reformation led to. And I mean, when you think about it, I mean, most people don't think about it, it would be very nice, wouldn't it? If all your neighbours went to the same church that you did, I think that'd be very nice.

Robert Louis Wilken:

I'm sure a lot of people think that's Heretical to say that, but when you realize the division of in our country or your country and where everything is divided up, you sometimes yearn for those days, but any case they're long gone. And that's why religious freedom is so necessary because there are always going to be some who are in power, who are not pleased with the dissenters because religion is not a matter of doctrine. It's a matter of education, that's where a lot of the issues are fought out today. What are you going to teach kids in the schools? Well, the Netherlands was a good [inaudible 00:23:41] I have a chapter on the Netherlands. And what I learned there of course is that if the Catholics were in power in a certain city, they would then persecute the Calvinists and vice versa. And what happened eventually was that the country was divided and the Southern part which became Belgium became Catholic in the Northern part became reformed. The Netherlands are very, very interesting, very significant.

John Dickson:

And so the history of religious freedom looks pretty dismal at this point. Whole countries are being divided up on the basis of different versions of the same faith, not much tolerance there. So how is religious tolerance and freedom reborn in the modern world? Well, as with so many things, a story like this is mixed. There are modern secular champions and there are religious ones but they all stand on the shoulders of giants. More of that after the break.

John Dickson:

Today's Undeception is brought to you by Zondervans *The Problem of Jesus* a brand new book by Mark Clark. This is my kind of book. *The Problem of Jesus* is an exploration of the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth, of course. His parables miracles, his controversial call to follow him and the seemingly mad claim to be God. And of course what his death and resurrection actually mean, if they really did happen. And then Mark asks, what does it all have to do with our lives today? He brings in thinking from the likes of Malcolm Gladwell, Jordan Peterson, Star Wars, James Bond, *Pretty Woman*, and throws in a bit of Christianity's greats as well, C.S. Lewis, N.T. Wright, John Polkinghorne, all to present a fresh and compelling portrait of Jesus, the man, the message and the mission. The one who forever changed the course of history. We all need to make up our minds about the man from Nazareth and we need a clear portrait of him to do that. So check out Mark Clark's *The Problem of Jesus* available now on Amazon, there's a link in our show notes, or just head to zondervan.com to find out more.

John Dickson:

In Zambezia Province, Mozambique Anglican Aids Waterworks campaign is improving the standard of living for over 5,000 rural villages, including 62 year old Louisa. Louisa had five daughters, but she has lost three of them. One was attacked by a crocodile while at the river collecting water and two others died of cholera, which could have been prevented had they had access to clean water. The Waterworks campaign has funded boreholes around Louisa's region, making it easy to access clean water for the rest of her family. You can help make this happen in more places. Please head to waterworks.org.au, waterworks.org.au to learn more about how the Waterworks campaign works and you can donate there. And I urge you to do it today. You can find more in our short notes.

Speaker 2:

Prime minister, Scott Morrison's divisive religious freedom laws have hit a snag with one nation declaring they have serious concerns about the unintended consequences of any change.

Scott Morrison:

People do have a right to be bigoted though. In a free country people do have rights to say things that other people find offensive or insulting or bigoted.

Speaker 3:

We haven't got clearly defined boundaries anymore when it comes to religious discrimination like we do with sexual discrimination like we have with age discrimination like we have with disability and that is why we need a religious discrimination act in Australia.

John Dickson:

Religious freedom has been a hot topic in my home country in recent times, for many countries in fact. This most recent public struggle began with the international movement to legalize same-sex marriage. I know that seems like old news now, but the implications for our topic are still with us. The marriage debate became a freedom of religion debate. As some groups tried to stake out their own claim to a protected viewpoint, the old traditional viewpoint, and others insisted that on a matter of justice like this, there should be no freedom to be a bigot. Could a Christian cake shop owner refuse to make a gay wedding cake? Could a Christian Church refuse to rent their premises to a transgender dance group? Could a Christian preacher even preach the old view without stepping over into hate speech? Believers and doubters are suddenly interested again in the nature and limits of religious liberty. That's where a little more recent history helps. Can we talk about an Englishman who became an important American named Roger Williams? Why is he significant to this story, particularly the American story of religious liberty, liberty of conscience?

Robert Louis Wilken:

Well, Roger Williams lived flourished in the early part of the 17th century. Just at the time when the anti-baptist, which then became the Baptist were beginning to gain strength. They began to form their own communities which meant that they engaged their own clergy. So they created social units that were independent of the larger unit of the city. So when he comes to north America and the Boston area, he's a very disruptive figure.

John Dickson:

Roger Williams arrived in Boston, Massachusetts as a Puritan but also pretty quickly found himself at odds with the powerful colony leaders who were also Puritans. Eventually Williams anti-establishment preaching got him ousted, and he established his own settlement which he called Providence. It's now the capital of the state of Rhode Island. It's a beautiful place, actually. Providence became in his time a bit of a Haven for other religious misfits.

Robert Louis Wilken:

He can't abide by the restrictions which really meant that there was one religion in Boston form or reform religion, but nevertheless one. So he's constantly pushing against that. And the man that he engaged with John Cotton, who is kind of the premier religious in some ways political figure in the community. And he then begins to write against him but what's interesting about Roger Williams is not only what he wrote. He wrote this one book, that's been very famous, deals with these issues, but he gets into a debate with Cotton about the passage from Tertullian that had been written early in the third century, but had then begun to be cited in the 16th and 17th century. This is Tertullian and a privilege inherent in human nature that every person should be able to worship according to his own convictions for one person's religion neither harms nor hurts another. Coercion has no place in religious devotion.

Robert Louis Wilken:

And Cotton took that passage from Tertullian to mean that there would be no public expression of religious differences, only private. And William said, "It can't mean that." And of course he was right. It can't mean that. So he develops his arguments and because he was a very flamboyant personality, he founded a community in Rhode Island. So Roger Williams and his ideas were centered by the English parliament because there you had an established religion but he's probably the most, not the most original. He's the most influential of the early writers, but there was another writer-

John Dickson:

Hey, just to navigate us on the time scale here., Roger Williams is active from the 1650s decades before John Locke, the father of liberalism, and more than a century before the great Thomas Jefferson. There's another clergyman even earlier than Roger Williams, who advocated very similar views about Liberty in matters of conscience.

Robert Louis Wilken:

But there was another writer just at the same time named Thomas Helwys who nobody knows anything about. He wrote a book called the Mystery of Iniquity and Helwys following the basic principles that religion is a matter of individual choice and conscience took the step and said he hated the Catholics. He said "They should be allowed freedom too." But then he went on to say, "Even the Jews and Muslims." Extraordinary, this is early 17th century. So you got to give a lot of credit to these Baptists, these anti-baptist. I don't think that they are the ones whose ideas were the basis but they knew how to make them work and they did.

John Dickson:

Helwys and Williams are hardly talked about today. They certainly rarely get the credit for the modern emergence of freedom in matters of religion. The biggest name of course was from a century or more after these theologians. And it's his more secular rendition of religious liberty codified in the First Amendment of the American constitution that most of us recall. Thomas Jefferson was a founding father of the United States and its third president from 1801 to 1809. He's also a character in a certain musical showing in Sydney at the moment.

Josie:

Hello.

John Dickson:

Hey darling.

Josie:

Hi.

John Dickson:

What was the Hamilton song you said that we should play in the pod because I somehow lost it from my script.

Josie:

What Did I Miss?

John Dickson:

What Did I Miss? Okay. Thanks darling. See you later.

Josie:

[inaudible 00:35:02].

John Dickson:

Yeah, that's all, bye. Josie and I saw that musical and I might have cried. I might have or got something in my eye, but Josie cried. Josie definitely cried. Anyway, Jefferson possessed a giant intellect and authored many sort of political philosophical documents, including the original draft of the Declaration of Independence and the American Bill of Rights. But it was his work on the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom that he thought was among his greatest achievements for which he "Most wished to be remembered." So we're paying him honor today. In this work, he laid out his grounds for religious freedom based on the freedom of the human mind. More about that in a moment. Jefferson was not particularly religious and he certainly wasn't a Christian. He famously created his own Bible, Google the Jefferson Bible, which excluded all the miracles and just kept the moral teachings of Jesus.

John Dickson:

That didn't stop him though, from thinking and engaging deeply with the issue of religious freedom in the state of Virginia. He described it as the most severe contest in which he'd ever been involved. And today there are many other good secular minds that are passionate about this issue. Time to make another call. Hi Tim, thanks so much for taking this call.

Tim Wilson:

That was a bit later, I got distracted.

John Dickson:

Not at all. I have. That's Tim Wilson, an Australian politician and member of the liberal party. For overseas listeners, that's the more conservative party. He served as Australia's human rights commissioner from 2014 to 2016. And while he's not a religious man himself, he's been a pretty vocal advocate for religious freedom in this country. Is it only religious people who advocate for freedom of religion?

Tim Wilson:

No, people advocate for freedom of religion because they believe both in people's rights to believe in different things and of course being atheist itself, its own form of exercising your freedom of religion. And also because if you want to live in a society that's tolerant and diverse, you have to respect people's different backgrounds and ways they see the world. So it's really about defending the rights of everybody.

John Dickson:

One newspaper article in an outlet that I won't name had an article about this topic. It was titled freedom to be a bigot. That's how a lot of people think of this debate about freedom of religion. What would you say in response to that? That it is just religious people wanting to be bigoted.

Tim Wilson:

I don't agree with that. It's about people of diverse communities having the freedom to come together and act collectively, not just individually. So this is not uncommon. I mean, there are lots of organizations that get together, do good works and social and charitable works, but they might be people united by a cause outside religion. And that's why anchoring these ideas back to universal principles that affect everybody is the best way to ensure their integrity and their respect across the community. When it comes to attitudes of some faith towards other minorities or sections of the community, I mean people are within their rights to have difficult and unpleasant views. You never need to defend freedom of speech from the excessive use of please and thank you. It's always when people cross the lines of social acceptability and they have different attitudes towards things like morality and in a free society, that's a necessary precondition because people's attitudes, whether they're inclusive or exclusive of others need to be anchored in religion, they can be anchored in lots of different principles. And ultimately if you want society to progress, it has to be able to hold the window up to itself, to challenge itself, to confront difficult realities and sometimes to recognize the limits of tolerance as well.

John Dickson:

Tim Wilson, thank you so much for taking the call.

Tim Wilson:

Pleasure, you take care.

John Dickson:

And you, from your perspective, is it really a secularist enlightenment development that insisted on Liberty? In other words, does one need this secular tradition in order to sustain a notion of religious liberty or does religion have its own resources?

Robert Louis Wilken:

About the time that the book was published, a very distinguished political commentator wrote an oped in the Washington post in which he said precisely what you just said that it was because of the religious wars that religious toleration was necessary. And so it came in because of these people who were more

reasonable than the Christians, but I think that's false. I think that the idea is that you find in the enlightenment thinkers and the one of course who's most important is John Locke. And it's in his essay on toleration in religion or his letter on toleration and religion. And Locke said-

John Dickson:

I mentioned John Locke a moment ago. He was an English philosopher and one of the leading voices of the enlightenment. He lived in the aftermath of the European wars of religion that ravaged the continent for decades. They weren't really wars of religion but maybe that's another episode. Anyway, Locke wrote what's become a classic three part reasoning for religious tolerance. First, it has to be accepted that human beings can't generally evaluate the truth claims of competing religions. Second, even if they could enforcing a single true religion would fail because belief can't be compelled by force. And third attempts to coerce religious uniformity rather than permitting diversity would lead to more social disorder.

Robert Louis Wilken:

And Locke says two things. They almost come straight out of Roger Williams or other writers. One, religion is a matter of private conviction and therefore you can't coerce it. And that there are two realms that have different ends. The realm of politics of society at large and the realm of religion. And it's not possible to explain how Locke said that without going back to the earlier Christian sources. There simply is no basis to claim anything else.

John Dickson:

Let's press pause. I've got a five minute Jesus for you. It's obvious to anyone who reads the gospels that Jesus only ever sought to persuade people, he never coerced. And he certainly never advocated violence on behalf of the truth. More than that, he demanded a policy of loving enemies, accepting persecution cheerfully, and even praying for those who violently disagree. Consider these few statements. Luke 6, but to you who are listening I say love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you or Matthew 11, blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me, rejoice and be glad. More than that, Jesus seems to have publicly implied a kind of separation between the realm of the state and the realm of Christian practice. He was once asked whether it's right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar.

John Dickson:

This was a hot topic for Jews in the period. Should we pay our invaders attacks? And Jesus says, "Well, bring me a coin." They bring him a denarius and then he holds it up or someone holds it up in front of him. And he says, "Whose image is on this coin?" And they say, "Caesar." Meaning Caesar Tiberius, the son of Augustus. And then Jesus makes this famous statement, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesars and to God what is God's." Now, I don't want to overplay this and suggest that Jesus had a full blown doctrine of religious liberty and the separation of church and the state. It was much later Christians who developed those ideas, Tertullians, Lactantius, [inaudible 00:44:28] Roger Williams and so on. But certainly the seeds of this thought are planted right here in this passage. It's in Mark 12 if you want to look it up.

John Dickson:

Jesus felt it was right to pay honor to the state as a separate field of moral obligation from one's devotion to God. In his first century context the one current view was that everything belonged to the state that is to Caesar. And so cooperation with state taxes and other state honours was absolutely mandatory. The other common view was that of the revolutionaries. The revolutionaries in Jesus day believed that God's kingdom ruled over all earthly kingdoms and so we should stop paying taxes to Caesar and establish a theocracy for God's glory. Jesus definitely avoids both political extremes. He makes clear on the one hand that it's right and good to acknowledge the reign of Caesar, the state, even when that state is not just secular, but pagan in the case of the Roman state. At the same time, a Christian bears an obligation to God above all. Jesus says, "Give to God what is God's."

John Dickson:

These two obligations can and should coexist according to Jesus but where they clash, obviously, the Christian will of course obey God first and cheerfully accept the punishment and ridicule that goes with being out of step with the state authorities. So Jesus didn't envisage complete acquiescence to the secular state, but nor did he envisage a kind of theocracy where our devotion to God permits us to force others by state power to join in our devotion. So it is almost unthinkable that Christians in the centuries that followed him could imagine that Jesus' Lordship meant that you could force people to convert at the point of a sword. And that is what happened in say the eighth century when Charles the great Charlemagne, the ruler of Europe attempted to force the Saxons, the original Germans to convert to Christianity. He waged what one scholar famously called a Christian Jihad. Charlemagne's policy was effectively baptism or the sword but that isn't to say they weren't devout Christians at the very time urging Charlemagne to do the right thing and adopt the much older, the original Christian policy of gentle persuasion rather than coercion.

John Dickson:

One of Charlemagne's key advisors was a man called Alcuin of York. And he insisted, "A person can be drawn to the faith, but they cannot be forced into the faith. They need to be fed on gentler teaching as babes on milk." And astonishingly the year after Alcuin wrote this letter, the year 797, Charlemagne actually changed his brutal policy toward pagans in his realm. There were of course other church rulers who departed from the way of Christ and adopted Christian Jihad. But as with so much of Christian history, there were always reformers who called the church back to its original policies, give back to Caesar what is Caesars and to God what is God's, love your enemy, do good to those who hate you, bless those who mistreat you. Boy oh boy, do we need all that today. You can press play now.

John Dickson:

So I want to talk briefly about Thomas Jefferson, who was a famous secular champion for religious Liberty and went into debates about it in the Virginia State House and so on. What about his influences? Were his influences wholly secular or was he in any way influenced by these Baptists that you're talking about or the Christian tradition?

Robert Louis Wilken:

Well, my reading of Jefferson is that he is sharing in, drawing on the same tradition that influenced Locke and [inaudible 00:49:19] who was actually a contemporary of Jefferson and the way he puts things make it very clear that he's thinking along the same lines. So when it comes to religious freedoms, we have to keep in mind that there's a difference between toleration and religious freedom and the way it came to be understood by the Christian writers was that it was a right. It was a privilege. Toleration is a means of accommodation of people you don't like but who are right in the midst of you. So there's not an in principle argument for that. You can make space for them and then generation passes. And of course then you find them very offensive, troubling so but Jefferson has an in principle argument that it really is a right.

John Dickson:

I want you please to tell my listeners the delightful story told in the appendix of your book of what you found when you personally inspected Jefferson's private collection a few years ago.

Robert Louis Wilken:

Right, well, this of course was the kind of thing that you spend your life not hoping for, but when it happens, I knew that Jefferson wrote a book called Notes on the State of Virginia. And that was written before he was president. He was probably in the 1770s, 1780s. And he has a chapter on religion in that book, small little book. And he talks about how in colonial Virginia, that Anglicanism was the established religion. And so there was no space for other religious groups in this case would have meant primarily the Baptist.

Robert Louis Wilken:

And in that chapter, in which he talks about religious freedom, he makes the statement that one person's religion cannot harm another. If you pick my pocket, that will hurt me. If you hit me or some other way, but if I practice one religion and you practice another religion, that's not going to harm me in any way. And that's what Jefferson writes. Well, it turns out that's precisely what Tertullian said. Tertullian said, "One person's religion neither harms nor hurts another." Well, it's very unlikely when Jefferson wrote the Notes on the State of Virginia, that he knew about this Tertullian passage. I'm sure if he had, he would've included it, but his language is very similar. In fact, I wrote a number of the top Jefferson scholars and asked them, where did Jefferson learn about that passage? And none of them knew and none of them were really very interested either.

Robert Louis Wilken:

I discovered. So anyway, Jefferson apparently after writing the book had learned about this passage from Tertullian, how maybe from some Baptist preacher and several decades after he published the book, he saw that there was some books of Tertullian that were being sold by a former professor in Richmond. And one of them had several writings of Tertullian. So he wrote, and he bought the books. And one of them had the treatise Scapulam, which is where the [inaudible 00:53:30] was the local governor. And he gets the book and that's apparently how he was in. I actually went to the University of Virginia Rare Book

library and saw the place where he copied out in his own hand the passage, but I was still puzzled as how he knew about it. I went to the Library of Congress and sure enough, I knew they had some of Jefferson's volumes of Tertullian and spoke to the librarian and called up the book.

Robert Louis Wilken:

So he brings it up, it was a small leather bound book, 17th century in Latin, two treatises of Tertullian on to Scapulam. And I turned the pages and I'll be darn if when I turned to the passage in chapter two, Jefferson had underlined it and put a big X in the margin. I mean, it's the kind of thing you spend your life looking for. So I had something very, very delicious, but I wanted to be very scrupulous. I could not establish that he knew that passage before he wrote what he said on religious freedom, but it indicates that there was a set of ideas there then when he saw them, he said, I can use this. So he writes it at the bottom of the page where he says, "You can't force a person to believe something." And out in Latin says Ad Scapulam and so that was a for me, a thrilling moment. So my point is Jefferson I think is working with ideas that go back deep into our Western Christian history.

John Dickson:

Not only did Jefferson underline and place an X in his private copy of Tertullian, in his own copy of his notes on the debate about religion, he scribbled out in his own hand in this published work, the Latin because Jefferson new Latin, the Latin of Tertullian. And I'm going to ask you if you wouldn't mind to read out in Latin those scribbled words which Jefferson got from Tertullian.

Robert Louis Wilken:

I'd love to. [foreign language 00:56:02] It is only just in a privilege inherit in human nature, that every person should be able to worship according to his own convictions for one person's religion, neither harms nor hurts another. Coercion has no place in religious devotion for it is by free choice not coercion that we should be led to religion. Offering a sacrifice must spring from a willing mind. It cannot be forced.

John Dickson:

I love it. After almost 250 years, we now know that the father of the American tradition of religious liberty and the separation of church and state knew full well that his ideas while sounding secular were first articulated by Christian theologians, many centuries earlier. What a delightful symbol of the secular inheritance from a deep and ancient Christian tradition.

Robert Louis Wilken:

I think so.

John Dickson:

Thanks for joining us for another Undeception. If you like what you hear and you want to get more of it, please consider supporting the Undeception's project, researching, writing, and speaking to let the truth about Christianity out. We're not yet making ends meet for this podcast let alone for all the other Undeception activities. So if you want to help out our little team bust a few more myths and promote the



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John Dickson:

Next episode. Well, speaking of letting people believe what they want to believe, allowing diversity and encouraging understanding, we're looking at the crusades. See you.

John Dickson:

Undeceptions is hosted by me John Dickson produced by Kaley Payne and directed by Mark Hadley, editing by Nathaniel Shumack. Special thanks to our series sponsors Zondervan for making this Undeception possible. Undeceptions is part of the Eternity Podcast Network and audio collection showcasing the seriously good news of faith today. I see the smile on your face, Mark.

Mark:

I got freedom.

Speaker 4:

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