

As Americans who enjoy a wide range of freedoms and liberties, it's difficult for us to understand the level of persecution people of faith have experienced over the centuries where religious expression for some was deliberately curtailed by those in power. Indeed, such persecution is alive and well today in many parts of the world.

For Christians, the first taste of religious freedom came seventeen centuries ago this year, when the Roman Emperor Constantine, along with his briefly reigning co-emperor Licinius, issued a decree that came to be known as The **Edict of Milan**. In short, the proclamation outlawed the persecution of Christians because of their religious beliefs, and ordered the return of church property that had been confiscated during the Great Persecution. In one fell swoop, the decree changed the course of history.

Today parts of the declaration read almost like a modern human rights document, although the notion of human rights would not emerge in the West for more than a millennium.

"(F)or the good of many ..." the document says, "we have given to ... Christians free and unrestricted opportunity of religious worship ..." and "we have also conceded to other religions the right of open and free observance of their worship for the sake of the peace of our times. ..."

It was a remarkable statement of toleration for its time.

By liberating Christians from persecution and death at the hands of the Roman state and providing the once-marginalized movement with a new legitimacy supported by law, Constantine did more to advance the place of the church in the world since St. Paul took Christianity to the Gentiles in the first century.

Constantine's legacy was further cemented with his involvement in encouraging a meeting of the first universal council of church bishops in the city of Nicea that led to the development of the Nicene Creed, the fundamental statement of faith regarding what most Christians today believe to be the nature of the person of Christ and his ministry of redemption and salvation.

Yet for some, Constantine's legacy became a problematic one, and his action came under criticism in later centuries. During the Protestant Reformation some argued that the "Constantinian Church" became captive to political interplay and even dependence upon the state. Indeed, not long after the **Edict of Milan**, the Christian church would become a beneficiary of state patronage, heretics were persecuted, and pagan temples closed.

But are these old arguments really relevant for Christians today? The notion of an official state church is all but dead. In the handful of nations that have a constitutionally recognized church, such as Denmark, police aren't arresting people of other faiths simply because they adhere to a different religious affiliation or none at all.

Indeed, the power of the state throughout the twentieth century was more often used to distance or remove the place of Christian beliefs and related faith practices, such as prayer, from various areas of public life. More dramatically, as in the case of Nazi Germany, attempts were made to diminish Christianity's voice and subjugate it institutionally. Militant atheists in Communist Russia attempted to blot out any form of religious expression, down to its physical presence, having closed or destroyed nearly 50,000 churches and imprisoned or executed more than 100,000 clergy.

So where does this leave Christianity and its relation to the state today?

In America there continues to be a vigilant — some might say hyper-vigilant — watch by some groups in search of activities that might be perceived as state support of churches. This has come up in relation to issues such as the use of private school vouchers, and it has reached the point of discussing whether the long-held tax-exempt status for churches constitutes a type of government subsidy of religion.

Constantine may have ceased Christian persecution in his day, and later rulers may have made the Christian church the only recognized faith of the realm, but one is hard pressed to draw no other conclusion than that we are moving in the opposite direction.

Those wishing to learn more about the impact of the **Edict of Milan** and Constantine the Great on the Christian Church are invited to attend a conference on the matter being held at St. Louis University on Sept. 21. For more information visit stirenaeusinstitute.org.

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