Theological and Secular Arguments for Religious Freedom in Early Christian Thought

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Scholar of political thought Timothy Shah analyzes arguments for religious freedom in three early Christian thinkers: Tertullian, Lactantius, and Gelasius. Shah emphasizes that these thinkers deployed varied arguments for religious freedom: some were recognizably Christian, others were based on secular appeals to common human reason. Tertullian coined the phrase “freedom of religion” (*libertas religionis*) and was the first to argue that religious freedom belongs to all people as a matter of natural right. Lactantius develops Tertullian’s arguments and underscores that all religion by its nature—Christian or otherwise—must be voluntary to be authentic. Though Tertullian and Lactantius draw on Christian ideas, many of their arguments for religious freedom are secular—not least because they were designed to persuade Christianity’s pagan persecutors. Gelasius also played a pioneering role in conceptualizing religious freedom by arguing that church and state must be free from the other’s undue interference. Though church-state separation is often assumed to be modern and secular, for Gelasius it is rooted in the biblical and Christological claim that Christ is the true and eternal “priest-king,” and, therefore, no single human institution can carry out the priestly and political functions that only Christ has the authority (and the virtue) to combine.