

Edict on Religion by Johann Christoph von Wöllner, Prussian Minister of Justice and Head of Religious Affairs (July 9, 1788)

Abstract

This combative document registered the anti-rationalist reaction that was gathering force in the late eighteenth century. At the same time, however, it also extended the principle of religious equality and toleration beyond earlier limits to explicitly encompass “the Jewish nation” and pacifist Protestant sectarians. It expressed a backlash in Prussia against the religious and censorship policies of Frederick II’s regime, which had encouraged and shielded speculative, Enlightenment-friendly thought. It provoked protest from within and outside the government and failed to remake Christian Orthodoxy in its own image.

Source

We, Frederick William, by the Grace of God,

King of Prussia etc.

Proclaim and make known to all, that, long before our assumption of the throne, we already realized and noted how necessary it would be one day, following the example of our most serene ancestors, but especially of His Majesty our grandfather who rests with God, to see to it that the Christian religion of the Protestant Church be preserved in the Prussian lands in its old original purity and authenticity, and in part restored; also that unbelief and superstition, and therefore the corruption of the fundamental truths of the belief of the Christians, and the dissolution of morals resulting from this, be checked to whatever extent possible; and that our subjects be simultaneously given convincing proof that, with respect to their most important affairs – namely complete freedom of conscience, undisturbed peace, and security in the confession they have adopted and in the faith of their fathers, and as regards protection against disturbers of their religious services and ecclesiastical constitutions – they must turn to us, as their territorial lord; having already attended to the most urgent matters of the state and completed various necessary and useful new institutions, we now make no further delay in seriously thinking about this, our other important duty as regent, and in making our unchangeable will on this matter publicly known in the present edict. Thus

§ 1. we order, enjoin, and command that all three principal confessions of the Christian religion, namely, the Reformed, the Lutheran, and the Roman Catholic, be preserved, sustained, and protected in all our lands in the form they have had until now, in accordance with manifold edicts and decrees issued by our blessed ancestors. At the same time, however,

§ 2. the toleration of the other sects and religious parties that has always been characteristic of the Prussian states shall be maintained, and no one shall at any time suffer the least coercion of conscience, as long as he fulfills his duties peaceably as a good citizen of the state, keeps his particular opinions to himself, and carefully refrains from disseminating them or persuading others to [adopt] them, and [avoids] making others erroneous or wavering in their faith. For since every man must attend to his own salvation, he must be able to act with complete freedom in this regard, and it is our belief that every Christian prince must only see to it and ensure that the people are taught true Christianity, faithfully and without corruption, by teachers and preachers, and thereby give everyone the opportunity to learn and

adopt the same. However, whether or not a subject wishes to use and take advantage of the opportunity so richly offered to him for his own conviction, must be left with complete freedom to his own conscience.

The sects hitherto publicly tolerated in our states, apart from the Jewish nation, are the Herrenhutter [Moravians], Mennonites, and the Bohemian Brethren, who hold their religious gatherings under the protection of the territorial lord and shall continue to be untroubled in enjoying this freedom which does no harm to the state. Hereafter, however, our Ecclesiastical Department shall make sure that no other assemblies harmful to the Christian religion and the state are held under the name of a religious meeting, by means of which all kinds of people dangerous to peace and new teachers might intend to gain followers and proselytes, which would constitute a great abuse of our tolerance. [...]

§ 5. As disagreeable as proselytizing within all confessions is to us, in that it can have all kinds of irksome consequences among the mass of the people, it is equally agreeable to us that the clergy as well as person of secular status, be they Reformed, Lutheran, or Roman Catholic fellow believers, have so far coexisted amicably and fraternally with respect to their religion: we therefore admonish them to carefully maintain this good harmony amongst one another, and we will never be opposed if the various confessions offer each other a helping hand with respect to their churches and temples in the holding of public services, or in some other way; rather, this kind of amiability will always be particularly pleasing to us.

§ 6. We order that in the Reformed as well as in the Lutheran Churches, the old ecclesiastical ordinances and liturgies be maintained; only we will allow these two confessions to change the still-unformed German language used in them and adjust it more to current usage. Likewise, we desire that some old and inessential ceremonies and customs be abolished; this we leave to the disposition of our Ecclesiastical Department of both Protestant Confessions. However, this Ecclesiastical Department of ours must take great care that in the process no further changes are made to what is essential in the old doctrine of each Confession. This command seems all the more necessary to us because

§ 7. we already noted with regret several years before our assumption of the throne that some clergy of the Protestant Church permit themselves completely unbridled liberties with respect to the doctrine of their confession; that they deny various essential elements and truths of the Protestant Church and the Christian religion in general, and assume in their teachings a fashionable tone that is completely contrary to the spirit of true Christianity, and would end up causing the basic pillars of the faith of Christians to teeter. They are not ashamed to revive, once again, the miserable, long refuted errors of the Socians, Deists, Naturalists, and other sects, and to spread them among the people with much boldness and impudence through the exceedingly abused name: Enlightenment; to degrade the authority of the Bible as the revealed Word of God more and more, and to falsify, twist, or throw out this divine document of the welfare of humanity; to make faith in the mystery of the revealed religion as such, and especially in the mystery of the redemptive work and the satisfaction of the Redeemer of the World, suspicious or even superfluous to the people, and to therefore lead them astray about it, and in this way to make a mockery, as it were, of Christianity all over the world. We wish to see this mischief counteracted in our lands by all means, all the more so since we regard it as one of the first duties of a Christian prince to protect against all falsifications and maintain in his states the Christian religion, whose superiority and excellence have long been proven and are beyond all doubt, in all its high honor and its original purity, as it is taught in the Bible, and is laid down in the convictions of every confession of the Christian church in their respective symbolic books, so that the poor people not be exposed to the illusions of the new-fangled teachers, and millions of our subjects not be robbed of the peace of their life and of comfort on the deathbed, and thereby be rendered unhappy.

§ 8. As the territorial lord and sole law-giver in our states, we thus command and order that henceforth no clergy, preacher, or teacher of the Protestant religion, on pain of inescapable dismissal, and even

harsher punishment and sanction at our discretion, be guilty of the errors indicated in § 7 above, or of even more, in the sense that he undertakes to spread such errors in the exercise of his office or in some other way, publicly or secretly. [...] Every teacher of Christianity in our lands who professes one of these three confessions must and shall teach what the doctrine of his respective religious party, once laid down and fixed, brings with it, for this he is obligated to do by his office, his duty, and the condition under which he is employed in his post. If he teaches anything else, he is already punishable under civil laws and can no longer properly keep his post. Our serious will is therefore directed at maintaining this immutable order, though we happily grant the clergy in our lands freedom of conscience equal to that of our other subjects, and are far from constraining their inner convictions to even the slightest degree. Thus any teacher of the Christian religion who possesses a conviction in matters of faith that differs from the one prescribed by the doctrine of his confession, can surely retain this conviction at his own risk, for we do not wish to arrogate rule over his conscience; except that, even by his own conscience he would have to cease being a teacher of his church. [...]

§ 9. Our Ecclesiastical Department, of both the Reformed and the Lutheran confession, is thus hereby instructed to always keep an eye on the entire clergy in our lands, so that every teacher in churches and schools does his duty, and observes precisely what has been said in the preceding §8. [...]

§. 10. In accordance with what has been said, we therefore order the respective heads of the two Ecclesiastical Departments, as graciously as earnestly, to make it their chief concern that the parishes as well as the chairs of theology at our universities, no less than the school offices, be staffed by subjects whose inner conviction about what they are supposed to teach publicly raises no cause for doubt; all aspirants and candidates who express other principles must and should be turned away without delay, wherein we shall always grant these two ministers free power and authority.

§ 11. With all of this having sufficiently shown that we are very serious about preserving the Christian religion in our states, and promoting true piety among the people, to the extent that it is within our power; we therefore admonish all our loyal subjects to diligently pursue a regular and pious way of life, and we will know how to value the man of religion and virtue on every occasion, because no unconscionable and evil man can ever be a good subject, let alone a loyal servant of the state on either the large or small scale. [...]

§ 13. The ecclesiastical estate shall not be despised and disdained by anyone, let alone mocked: this is something we will always note with great displeasure, and we will not let it go unpunished, because only too often it has an unavoidable influence on the contempt for religion itself. [...]

Source: Acten, Urkunden und Nachrichten zur neuesten Kirchengeschichte, vol. 1 (part 6). Weimar: Christian Wilhelm Schneider (1788), pp. 461–79; reprinted in Walter Demel and Uwe Puschner, eds., Von der Französischen Revolution bis zum Wiener Kongreß 1789–1815. Deutsche Geschichte in Quellen und Darstellung, ed. Rainer A. Müller, Volume 6. Stuttgart: P. Reclam, 1995, pp. 189–94.

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