

Exchange of Letters between Empress Maria Theresa and her Son, Joseph II, on the Subject of Religious Toleration (1777)

Abstract

These letters, originally written in French, reveal the gulf between Maria Theresa, who was unwilling to abandon the Habsburgs' traditional equation of Catholic orthodoxy with Austrian state interest, and her son and co-regent Joseph, who, as an Enlightenment rationalist and admirer of Prussia's secular-minded Frederick II, invoked the justice and practical utility of religious toleration on the part of the state. The difference of opinion revealed in these letters was not the only one in their fifteen-year co-regency, but it was certainly among the sharpest. Still, the two cooperated to a remarkable extent in successfully governing the far-flung Austrian empire.

Source

Joseph to Maria Theresa

June 19, 1777

[...] In politics, difference of religions in a State is an evil only insofar as there exist fanaticism, disunity, and party spirit. It disappears automatically when one treats members of all sects with perfect equality and leaves the rest to Him Who alone rules hearts.

Joseph to Maria Theresa

late June, 1777

[...] If one does not accept this method, not only will one save no more souls; on the contrary, one will lose far more useful and necessary bodies. To take only half-measures does not agree with my principles: either one must allow complete freedom of worship, or you must be able to expel from your lands everyone who does not believe the same as you and does not accept the same forms of worshipping, the same God and serving the same neighbor. But if, in order that their souls shall not be damned forever after death, one expels excellent workmen and good subjects during their lifetime, and thereby deprives oneself of all the profit that one could derive from them, what power is one arrogating to oneself thereby? Can one extend it so far as to pass judgment on Divine mercy, which will save men against their will, order their consciences? So long as the service of the State is cared for, the law of nature and society observed, Your person not dishonored but respected and revered, what business have you temporal administrators to interfere in other things? The Holy Ghost is said to illuminate hearts; your laws will never be able to do anything more than weaken its effects. Those are my views; Your Majesty knows them, and I fear that my complete conviction will make it impossible for me to change them all my life long.

Maria Theresa to Joseph

July 5, 1777

This letter will reach you in Switzerland; those people do not appreciate the value of your presence. An asylum for all debauchees and criminals, it also shelters some of our women, whom you will not, I hope,

see. They were shameless enough to try to arrange this, and to my great grief I have to say that there would be nothing more to corrupt in respect of religion if you intend to insist on that general toleration of which you maintain that it is a principle from which you will never depart. I hope it all the same, and I will not cease from praying myself, and causing those who are worthier than myself to pray, that God may protect you from this misfortune, the greatest which would ever have descended on the Monarchy. In the belief of having workers, keeping them, even attracting them, you will ruin your State and be guilty of the destruction of so many souls. What would it profit you to possess the true religion, when you appreciate it and love it so little, when you care so little to preserve and propagate it? I do not observe such indifference among the Protestants; I wish, on the contrary, that one might imitate them, since no [Protestant] State allows such indifference in itself. You will see this in that ugly Switzerland; there they watch and experiment daily with what is allowed in the German Empire, in England, Saxony, Baden, Holland, etc., with the exception of Prussia, but is the country the happier for it? Does it possess those workers, those people who are so necessary to make the State flourish? There are no lands less happy, none more backward in this respect than those provinces. One needs good faith and immutable rules; where will you find them or keep them?

Joseph to Maria Theresa

July 20, 1777

In answer to your long and gracious letter, you must permit me to tell you that the picture and conclusions which Your Majesty draws from what I ventured to write to you about the Protestants who were unmasked in Moravia so astounded and moved me that I cannot at this moment at all recollect whether anything of the sort escaped from my pen in error, whereas I am very far from thinking so. Fortunately, the word “toleration,” which you were good enough to repeat to me, dispelled my doubts and transformed my whole fear into a tender and lively gratitude for the truly moving, heroic, manly, and powerful goodness with which you revealed to me the conclusions you draw from it. But it is only the word “toleration” which has caused the misunderstanding. You have taken it in quite a different meaning. God preserve me from thinking it a matter of indifference whether the citizens turn Protestant or remain Catholic, still less, whether they cleave to, or at least observe, the cult which they have inherited from their fathers! I would give all I possess if all the Protestants of your States would go over to Catholicism.

The word “toleration,” as I understand it, means only that I would employ any persons, without distinction of religion, in purely temporal matters, allow them to own property, practice trades, be citizens, if they were qualified and if this would be of advantage to the State and its industry. Those who, unfortunately, adhere to a false faith, are far further from being converted if they remain in their own country than if they migrate into another, in which they can hear and see the convincing truths of the Catholic faith. Similarly, the undisturbed practice of their religion makes them far better subjects and causes them to avoid irreligion, which is a far greater danger to our Catholics than if one lets them see others practice their religion unimpeded. If the Protestants do not generally adopt this method in their States, this is because their governments lack the clarity and perceptiveness of ours, and because it is harder for Republicans to undertake such changes. Finally, if I had the leisure that a letter does not allow, I should be able to prove that, as I see the question, I could stand on my view before the awful judgment seat which will pronounce on my eternal destiny. Certainly no one would then turn Lutheran or Calvinist; there would be fewer unbelievers in all religions, the State would profit greatly thereby, and I cannot believe that all this together would make me appear guilty in the eyes of God. To me, at least, this would seem hardly compatible either with His all power, or with the office which He has conferred on me, in making me the servant of fifteen million human beings.

Maria Theresa to Joseph

late July, 1777

Without a dominant religion? Toleration, indifference are precisely the true means of undermining everything, taking away every foundation; we others will then be the greatest losers. It is not the Edict of Nantes that has ruined those provinces; there was never any such edict in Bordeaux, and the place is none the richer for it. What has ruined that land, with all its natural advantages, has been the ill-advised farmings out (*i.e.* of Crown resources), the bad administration, the weak or revengeful Ministers, the lack of religion among the officials, who are concerned only with their own interests or passions; this has ruined everything. What restraints are left for that sort of person? None, neither, the gallows nor the wheel, except religion, or cruelty against them. He is no friend of humanity, as the popular phrase is, who allows everyone his own thoughts. I am speaking only in the political sense, not as a Christian; nothing is so necessary and salutary as religion. Will you allow everyone to fashion his own religion as he pleases? No fixed cult, no subordination to the Church—what will then become of us? The result will not be quiet and contentment; its outcome will be the rule of the stronger and more unhappy times like those which we have already seen. A manifesto by you to this effect can produce the utmost distress and make you responsible for many thousands of souls. And what are my own sufferings, when I see you entangled in opinions so erroneous? What is at stake is not only the welfare of the State, but your salvation, that of a son who since his birth has been the one purpose of all my actions, the salvation of your soul. Turning your eyes and ears everywhere, mingling your spirit of contradiction with the simultaneous desire to create something, you are ruining yourself and dragging the Monarchy down with you into the abyss, destroying the fruits of all the laborious care of your forefathers, who at the cost of the greatest pains bequeathed these lands to us and even greatly improved their condition, because they introduced our holy religion into them, not, like our enemies, with violence and cruelty, but with care, pains, and expense. No spirit of persecution, but still less any spirit of indifference or tolerantism [*sic*]; in this I hope to maintain myself so long as I live, and I only wish to live so long as I can hope to descend to my ancestors with the consolation that my son will be as great, as religious as his forebears, that he will return from his erroneous views, from those wicked books whose authors parade their cleverness at the expense of all that is most holy and most worthy of respect in the world, who want to introduce an imaginary freedom which can never exist and which degenerates into license and into complete revolution.

Source: C.A. Macartney, ed., *The Habsburg and Hohenzollern Dynasties in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, in *Documentary History of Western Civilization*. New York, Evanston, and London: Harper & Row, 1970, pp. 149-53. Introduction, editorial notes, chronology, translations by the editor; and compilation copyright © 1970 by C.A. Macartney. Used by permission of HarperCollins Publishers.

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