

## **Ecclesiology, Ecumenism, and Toleration**

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### **Abstract**

This contribution discusses Leibniz's conception of the Christian church, his life-long ecumenical efforts, and his stance toward religious toleration. Leibniz's regarded the main Christian denominations as particular churches constituting the only one truly catholic or universal church, whose authority went back to apostolic times, and whose theology was to be traced back to the entire ecclesiastical tradition. This is the ecclesiology which underpins his ecumenism. The main phases and features of his work toward reunification of Protestants and Roman Catholics, and unification of Protestant churches are briefly explored, before turning to the issue of religious toleration. It is argued that a remarkably inclusive conception of toleration can be gleaned from a broad sample of Leibniz's writings and correspondence. It is thanks to the philosophical and theological grounds of this conception that toleration can in principle be extended, for Leibniz, to all men and women of good will, including non-Christians, pagans, and atheists.

**Keywords:** Church Reunification, Church Unification, Councils, *Negotio Irenicum*, Irenicism, Persecution, Heretics, Salvation, Religious Truth

Leibniz's conception of the Christian church, his life-long ecumenical efforts, and his stance toward religious toleration were shaped by the extraordinarily complex confessional and political situation of the Holy Roman Empire. At the time of Leibniz's birth in 1646, the belligerent European powers which had confronted one another on the battlefield since 1618, were in the process of hammering out the conditions of peace eventually signed at Westphalia in 1648. A central provision of the peace was permanently to recognize the legitimacy within the Empire of the three main Christian confessions -- Roman Catholic, Evangelical or Lutheran, and Reformed or Calvinist -- with the hundreds of semi-autonomous imperial estates under the loose authority of the Emperor and imperial diet. Flanked as it was by two

aggressive and more religiously unified neighbours -- Louis XIV's France to the West, and the Ottoman Empire to the East – the Empire was inevitably weakened by its confessional fragmentation. At the same time, the necessity of co-operation within its borders for its very survival resulted in a political model in which the main Christian denominations could co-exist more or less peacefully. The officially sanctioned toleration of different denominations within the Empire as a whole, and within some of its cities and principalities, paved the way for a series of negotiations for church reunification sponsored at various points by various princes, not least by the Emperor himself.

Leibniz's own background was Lutheran. Leipzig, where he was born and raised in an extended family of staunch Lutherans, understood itself as a bastion of Lutheranism against the creeping dangers of Calvinism.<sup>1</sup> He moved away as a young man, but not without having first equipped himself with much broader religious views through the independent reading of irenic literature from all main Christian denominations.<sup>2</sup> After a formative period at the Catholic court of the tolerant Archbishop of Mainz, Johann Philipp von Schönborn, and four years in Paris, he settled in the Duchy of Hanover, a northern principality which, although Lutheran for over a century, was ruled at the time of his arrival by a Catholic convert, Duke Johann Friedrich. An analogous situation had prevailed in the neighbouring electoral principality of Brandenburg since 1613, when the solidly Lutheran estates had refused to follow the ruling dynasty in its conversion from Evangelical to Reformed. Such complex arrangements became increasingly commonplace after Westphalia. The heir to Brandenburg, for instance, married a Lutheran Hanoverian princess, Sophie Charlotte, herself the daughter of a Reformed princess, Sophie von der Pfalz, presumptive heir to the English crown and, as such, presumptive head of the Anglican church. Mirroring these increasingly intricate relations, the balance of power in the imperial diet maintained a precarious equilibrium between a mix of Lutheran, Reformed, and Catholic Electors under the rule of a Roman Catholic Emperor. Leibniz's life itself was interspersed with both deep friendship and tense relationships with Roman Catholics (not least a number of Jesuits), Lutheran, and Reformed

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of Leibniz's background and formative years, see Maria Rosa Antognazza, *Leibniz: An Intellectual Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), chaps 1-3.

<sup>2</sup> On the complexity of irenicism within the Empire see Howard Hotson, "Irenicism in the Confessional Age: the Holy Roman Empire, 1563-1648," in *Conciliation and Confession: Struggling for Unity in the Age of Reform, 1415-1648*, edited by Howard Louthan and Randall Zachman (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), pp. 228-285.

women and men. It was against this variegated backdrop that his ecclesiastical views developed.

## **Ecclesiology**

Leibniz remained a Lutheran all his life. Yet, as early as his departure from Leipzig for Mainz, his relatives were gripped by fears for the safety of his soul due to the perceived danger of an imminent conversion to Catholicism or (even worse, in their view) Calvinism.<sup>3</sup> To his half-brother, who fulminated against the theological ‘syncretism’ of irenic theologians such as Helmstedt’s Georg Calixt (1586-1656), Leibniz replied in 1669: “I hold and with God’s help will continue to hold fast to the Evangelical truth as long as I live, but I am deterred from condemning others both by my own personal inclination and by the stern command of Christ: ‘Judge not, that ye be not judged’ [Matthew 7:1].”<sup>4</sup>

For their part, his Catholic friends were repeatedly puzzled and disappointed by his refusal to convert, given the closeness of many of his views to Catholicism. They were not mistaken in detecting this proximity: Leibniz went as far as drafting an entire theological system of markedly Roman Catholic flavour.<sup>5</sup> The main objections he had to the Roman church regarded its practices rather than its theology.<sup>6</sup> When it came to the issue of reunification, Leibniz openly accepted the idea of papal authority.<sup>7</sup> Remarkably, in a marginal note to one of his private papers of 1680–84, he wrote:

However often I consider in my own mind which dogmas I would myself propose if I were granted the supreme power of deciding, all things considered I would be inclined

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<sup>3</sup> See Leibniz’s response of 5 October 1669 to his half-brother’s accusation that he was near to becoming a Calvinist (in Paul Schrecker, “G.-W. Leibniz. Lettres et fragments inédits,” in *Revue philosophique de la France et de l’Étranger* 118 (1934), pp. 5–134, here p. 67) and the letter of 22 January 1672 written to him by his sister, Anna Catharina, while he was employed at the Catholic court of Mainz (A I i N. 157).

<sup>4</sup> In Schrecker, “G.-W. Leibniz. Lettres et fragments inédits,” p. 82.

<sup>5</sup> *Examen Religionis Christianae*, 1686; A VI iv N. 420. A number of his theological sketches would also have pleased the Roman church (see for instance *De Schismate*, second half of 1683; A IV iii 236–237).

<sup>6</sup> In a letter of 3 November 1682 to Landgraf Ernst (A I iii 272), Leibniz writes: “Most of the objections which can be raised against Rome are rather against the practices of people than against dogmas. Were those practices to be publicly disavowed, these objections would cease.” See also A I iii 246–7; A I iii 272; A I vi 165–6; A I vi 148 and A VI iv 2286–7.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. for instance A VI i 499–500.

to preserve the dogmas of the Roman church, and I would correct merely certain practices which have been disapproved of by pious and prudent men of that [the Catholic] side for some time now, [but] which until now have generally been tolerated in the Roman church due to the failings of times and men. If I had been born in the Roman church I would certainly not have abandoned it, and yet I would believe all the things which I now believe. The authority of the pope which frightens off many people above all, in fact deters me least of all, since I believe that nothing can be understood as more useful to the Church than its correct use.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, even when a conversion might have been to his immediate personal advantage, he resisted it. In 1687, while visiting Landgraf Ernst von Hessen-Rheinfels, another Catholic convert and close friend, he declined to pursue a candidacy for the position of chancellor of the Catholic bishopric of Hildesheim in view of his Lutheran commitments.<sup>9</sup> Although greatly desiring a move to Paris, in 1692 he refused an invitation to join the service of Louis XIV, which would in all probability have required conversion to Catholicism.<sup>10</sup> In early 1695, he renounced the possibility of “the post of *primus custos* of the Vatican library” as well as “many other advantages,” due to their being conditional upon his willingness “to rejoin the Church”.<sup>11</sup>

The Catholic hopefuls who mooted these offers may well have underestimated the extent to which he disagreed with some aspects of the Roman church.<sup>12</sup> Notwithstanding the importance of any such disagreement, however, his faithfulness to the confession of his birth does not appear to have been based on the conviction of its superiority to other Christian

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<sup>8</sup> *De Scriptura, Ecclesia, Trinitate*; A VI iv 2286-7. See also the letter to Landgraf Ernst of 11 January 1684, where Leibniz declares, “if I were born in the Roman church I would not leave it” (A I iv 321).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. A I iv, N. 2 and N. 4.

<sup>10</sup> The invitation was conveyed by Jacob Auguste Barnabas Comte Des Viviers, to whom Leibniz replied in May 1692 (see A I viii N. 158).

<sup>11</sup> Letter of 5 February 1695 of Antonio Alberti (alias Amable de Turreil) to Rudolf Christian von Bodenhausen (A II iii 19). Cf. Leibniz to Spanheim, end of July 1695 (A I ix 598); Leibniz to Bodenhausen (FC, *Oeuvres* II 79; quoted by André Robinet, *G. W. Leibniz. Iter Italicum* (Florence: Olschki, 1988) p. 180); Leibniz to Le Thorel, 5 December 1698 (A I xvi 306).

<sup>12</sup> See for instance in A II i 750-1 Leibniz’s reservations about “three or four places of the Council of Trent” which, in his view, had to be interpreted “in a way rather distant from the common opinions of Scholastic theologians and, especially, of monks” in order to avoid contradiction. Cf. also A II i 758 and Leibniz to Landgraf Ernst, 11 January 1684 (A I iv 321).

denominations. On the contrary, it seems to have stemmed from his belief that no particular Christian denomination is superior to the others. Hence, in his view, it would have been wrong to abandon one church to join another, as if the latter had a significantly greater claim to the status of true representative of Christianity. Already in 1669, he rebuked his half-brother's charge that he was one step from abandoning Lutheranism by noting that "it is foolish to flee from one fortress to the other" when "there is no difference regarding the foundation of salvation."<sup>13</sup> Rather than switching allegiances, Leibniz recommended remaining in one's confession and working instead for ecclesiastical reconciliation. He regarded in fact the main Christian denominations as particular churches constituting the only one truly catholic or universal church, whose authority went back to apostolic times, and whose theology was to be traced back to the entire ecclesiastical tradition.

He wrote, for instance, in private notes of 1690-1: "the churches of Italy or of France have no advantage over those of Germany or of England, and have no reason to believe themselves more in the Church than the latter. ... The dogmas of Trent have no greater claim to be attributed to the Church than those of Augsburg or of Dordrecht. It is merely the dogmas of particular churches which will be reformed."<sup>14</sup> Against the denial by a prominent French Catholic convert, Paul Pellisson-Fontanier, that the truth might be distributed amongst the Christian churches, Leibniz replied in no uncertain terms: "this is possible."<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, ideally Leibniz envisaged a return of all Christian churches into the fold of a reformed Rome. This vision was driven by a conception of the relationship between temporal and spiritual powers informed by the medieval ideal of "two heads" of Christendom, the Holy Roman Emperor and the Pope, both invested with supranational

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<sup>13</sup> Leibniz to Johann Friedrich Leibniz, 5 October 1669 (in Schrecker, "G.-W. Leibniz. Lettres et fragments inédits," p. 67).

<sup>14</sup> A I vi 147-8. Leibniz is referring, respectively, to the Council of Trent (held in three parts, from 1545 to 1563, by the Roman Catholic church in response to the Reformation), the Confession of Augsburg (the 28 articles presented in 1530 to the Diet of Augsburg as the basic confession of the Lutheran churches), and the Synod of Dordrecht (the assembly of Reformed churches held in 1618-9, marking the victory of strict Calvinists over the Arminians or Remonstrants).

<sup>15</sup> See Leibniz's marginal note on his copy of the fourth part of Pellisson's *Reflexions sur les différends de la religion* (Paris, 1691) (A I vi 141).

authority: the emperor as the “secular arm of the Universal church”, the pope as the spiritual authority who reserved the right to “curb tyranny.”<sup>16</sup>

## **Ecumenism**

This is the ecclesiology which underpins Leibniz’s dogged efforts to advance church reunification.<sup>17</sup> In all probability, Leibniz’s first direct contacts with the ecclesiastical negotiations promoted by some German princes took place at the court of the archbishop of Mainz, whose representatives (notably, the Catholic theologian Peter van Walenburch) were engaged in ecumenical colloquia.<sup>18</sup> Once in Hanover, Leibniz found in Duke Johann Friedrich a Catholic convert who chose not to exercise his right to impose his religion on his Lutheran subjects, and fostered instead talks aimed at the reunification of Catholic and Lutheran churches. In 1676, the same year in which Leibniz took up his official duties, Johann Friedrich welcomed in Hanover the Franciscan Cristobal de Rojas y Spinola (c. 1626-95), entrusted by the emperor with the task of taking soundings amongst German princes of Protestants territories on the issue of church reunification. Central to the talks with Rojas (which resumed in 1679 and 1683) was Gerhard Wolter Molanus (1633-1722), the Lutheran abbot of Luccum in charge of Hanoverian ecclesiastical affairs. Over the years, Leibniz developed a close collaboration with Molanus, working with him at some important ecumenical schemes.

Although he did not have an official role in the talks held in Hanover in 1683 under Duke Ernst August, Leibniz regarded them as a turning point, lending his full support to the

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<sup>16</sup> See *Caesarini Fürstenerii De Jure Suprematus*, 1677 (A IV ii 15-17). Cf. also Leibniz to Duke Johann Friedrich, autumn 1679 (A II i 752, 756-7).

<sup>17</sup> A more detailed discussion of Leibniz’s participation in ecumenical efforts throughout his life is offered by Antognazza, *Leibniz: An Intellectual Biography*, from which I am drawing. On Leibniz’s work toward the reunification of the Catholic and Lutheran churches, the classic volume by Paul Eisenkopf is still valuable (*Leibniz und die Einigung der Christenheit. Überlegungen zur Reunion der evangelischen und katholischen Kirche*. München-Paderbon-Wien: Schöningh, 1975). For an extensive recent collection of studies on Leibniz’s ecumenism see *Leibniz und die Ökumene*, edited by Wenchao Li, Hans Poser, and Hartmut Rudolph (Stuttgart: Steiner 2013).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *Theodicy*, “Preface” (GP VI 43).

strategy devised by the chief negotiators, Rojas and Molanus.<sup>19</sup> This strategy envisaged a preliminary reunion of the Protestant and Roman Catholic churches before agreement on controversial issues had been reached. On the basis of this reunion, a properly representative ecumenical council would be called. This council, having been recognised at the outset by all parties as legitimate, would have the authority of settling the points under contention.<sup>20</sup> In practice, the proposal amounted to setting aside the decisions of the controversial Council of Trent, in favour of a truly ecumenical council in which Protestant views would be taken fully into account. As Molanus crisply summarized the key principle, the reunion would have taken place *salvis principiis utriusque partis*, that is, preserving the principles of both parties.<sup>21</sup> Regrettably but perhaps not surprisingly, this ambitious plan did not meet with success. Lutheran theologians involved in the negotiations greeted the proposal with a distinct lack of enthusiasm. Even more importantly, the strength of Rojas's mandate as papal representative was far from clear. Although Pope Innocent XI regarded Rojas's endeavours toward reconciliation sympathetically, the extent of the pope's support for this specific reunion strategy was at best uncertain.

Meanwhile, Leibniz penned a number of sketches exploring the possibility of church reunification,<sup>22</sup> and corresponded intermittently on church reunification with one of the chief theological authorities of France, the bishop of Meaux and preceptor to the Dauphin, Jacques Bénigne Bossuet (1627–1704). As a leading architect of Gallicanism (the French way to Catholicism), Bossuet theorized a limitation of papal authority through appeal to the authority of the universal church.<sup>23</sup> Leibniz saw the relative autonomy of the French church from Rome as an encouraging model for a flexible Catholic communion in which local churches operated with a degree of self-determination. His exchanges with Bossuet, however, never achieved

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<sup>19</sup> See for instance A I v N. 6, a long memo prepared by Leibniz in 1687 for Landgraf Ernst, in which he endorsed the reunion strategy which emerged in the talks of 1683.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. A I v 19, in which Leibniz identifies the convocation of this “free and ecumenical Council” as the “nodal point of the business”.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. the two key documents prepared, respectively, by Rojas (*Regulae circa christianorum omnium Ecclesiasticam Reunionem*, 1682–3) and by Molanus and his Hanoverian colleague, Hermann Barckhausen (*Methodus reducendae Unionis Ecclesiasticae inter Romanenses et Protestantas*, 1683).

<sup>22</sup> See for instance four texts written in the second half of 1683 (A IV iii N. 16–19): *De unitate Ecclesiae*; *Apologia fidei Catholicae ex recta ratione*; *De Schismate*; *Reunion der Kirchen*.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. the fourth article of the *Declaratio cleri Gallicani de ecclesiastica potestate* (19 March 1682), penned by Bossuet.

the level of sympathy he enjoyed with other Catholic correspondents. To start with, Bossuet was closely involved in the court of Louis XIV, whose revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 caused waves of Huguenots to seek refuge in Germany, the Dutch Republic, and England<sup>24</sup> -- hardly a promising path to church reunification. More specifically, Bossuet's uncompromising insistence on the binding authority of the Council of Trent proved an insurmountable obstacle. After the death of Bossuet on 12 April 1704, Leibniz confided to his trusted correspondent, Thomas Burnett of Kemney: "the Bishop of Meaux . . . assumed too decisive a tone, and wanted to push things too far, advancing doctrines which I could not at all let pass without betraying my conscience and the truth. For these reasons I answered him vigorously and firmly, and adopted a tone as lofty as his to show him that, however great a controversialist he might be, I knew his subtleties too well to be taken by surprise." (Klopp IX, 182).

The mid-1690s constituted in many ways a watershed in the course of Leibniz's ecumenical efforts due to the alignment of his own personal circumstances with the shifting balance of power in the Empire. By 1695 all his closest Catholic discussion partners and supporters – Baron Johann Christian von Boineburg, Archbishop Johann Philipp von Schönborn, Duke Johann Friedrich, Paul Pellisson-Fontanier, Ernst von Hessen-Rheinfels, and Bishop Rojas – had passed away. In 1697, the conversion to Catholicism of the Duke of Saxony, and the unfavourable conditions for Protestants contained in the Treaty of Ryswick, suggested a reorientation of priorities away from a reunification between Catholics and Lutherans, and toward an intra-protestant ecumenical project instead. Around the same time, the two northern Protestant electorates of Hanover and Berlin – the first once again ruled by a Lutheran, the second containing a Lutheran population still ruled by a Reformed dynasty that had welcomed a significant number of Reformed refugees from France – began in earnest talks of church union between their Lutheran and Reformed confessions under the common denomination of *ecclesia evangelica et reformata*. Leibniz was at the forefront of the *negotio irenicum* launched by Berlin and led by Daniel Ernst Jablonski (1660-1741), court preacher in Berlin and grandson of a leading irenical thinker of the previous generation, Jan Amos Comenius (1592-1670).

Jablonski's preparatory document, the *Kurtze Vorstellung der Einigkeit und des Unterscheidens, im Glauben beyder Evangelischen so genandten Lutherischen und*

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<sup>24</sup> With the Edict of Nantes (13 April 1598), Henry IV granted toleration to the French Calvinists, the Huguenots.

*Reformierten Kirchen* (1697), identified three main points of disagreement between the Lutheran and the Reformed churches, namely, the communication of attributes (*communicatio idiomatum*) between the natures of Christ, the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and the issues of election and predestination.<sup>25</sup> None of these, Jablonski opined, was an insuperable hurdle – a view shared by Leibniz.<sup>26</sup> In close collaboration with Molanus, he penned an extensive reply to Jablonski, the *Unvorgreiffliches Bedencken über eine Schrift genandt “Kurtze Vorstellung”* (1698-9),<sup>27</sup> in which a cluster of philosophical issues raised especially by the doctrine of predestination and by Eucharistic real presence were tackled in an attempt to mediate differences between Lutheran and Calvinist positions.

Despite these sustained efforts, and some half-backed attempts (criticised by Leibniz) to call a pan-protestant conference and enforce unification within Brandenburg-Prussia, agreement could not be found. Fresh hopes were subsequently pinned on the mediation of the Anglican church.<sup>28</sup> Leibniz regarded the theological and liturgical positions of the Church of England as a middle-ground between the Lutheran and Reformed confessions. For instance, on the occasion of the accession to the throne of England of the Hanoverian Elector, Georg Ludwig (officially a Lutheran), Leibniz reasoned that his entrance into the Church of England as its head without a change of religion demonstrated that differences between the Lutheran and Anglican denominations were either merely liturgical or concerned nonessential theological matters.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, since (on the one hand) the Church of England was evidently not opposed to Lutheranism and (on the other hand) considered itself as basically aligned with the international Reformed communities, it constituted the missing link which could unite the main Protestant denominations on the continent.<sup>30</sup> Needless to say, countless theologians and clergymen of all three parties saw matters differently.

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<sup>25</sup> Leibniz’s position on these points is discussed in the chapter on “Philosophical Theology and Christian Doctrines”.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Leibniz’s *Tentamen Expositionis irenicæ trium potissimarum inter protestante controversiarum* (October-December 1698; A IV vii N. 62) and *Judicium de annotatis Placidis ad Tentamen expositionis irenicæ* (written by 11 February 1699; A IV viii N. 56).

<sup>27</sup> A IV vii N. 79. See also the important series of texts relating to ecumenical efforts, and discussing key theological issues, published in A IV vii N. 45-78 and A IV viii N. 44-65.

<sup>28</sup> On Leibniz’s engagement with Gilbert Burnet’s *Exposition of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England*, see chapter on “Philosophical Theology and Christian Doctrines”.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Leibniz to Caroline, undated (Klopp XI 20-21).

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Leibniz to Caroline, undated (Klopp XI 85-90).

While focusing on intra-Protestant unification, Leibniz never abandoned hopes for broader ecclesiastical reunification. He continued to negotiate with Roman Catholics, answering, for instance, a direct summons to Vienna from the emperor, who in May 1700 requested Georg Ludwig to dispatch his “highly experienced, discreet, and qualified” counsellor for further talks on the reunification of the Catholic and Protestant churches.<sup>31</sup> Toward the end of his life, he cast his net even wider, envisaging a worldwide ecumenical council under the patronage of the Russian Czar, Peter the Great.<sup>32</sup> This council should have prepared the eventual reunification of all main Christian traditions: the Greek, the Latin, and the Germanic. Leibniz had in fact long regarded the continuous tradition of the Eastern (or Greek) Christian church, arching back to apostolic times, as a unique antidote with which to purge Christianity of dubious innovations introduced by the Latin church. In his view, the restoration of the true teaching of the catholic or universal church needed a truly ecumenical general council encompassing all Christian churches (Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant):

Nowadays one can divide Christians who acknowledge the ancient councils into three nations: the Greek nation (within which I would like to include some other eastern nations and the Muscovites); the Latin nation, within which I include the Italians, French, and Spaniards; and the German nation which includes the Germans, English, Danes, and Swedes. And I believe that all three are needed to form a General Council, which could make the views of the Church known to us.<sup>33</sup>

Realizing a plan of such breath-taking ambition was scarcely on the cards in the extremely fragile and intricate confessional situation of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth

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<sup>31</sup> See Klopp VIII xxx. This summons resulted in a sojourn in Vienna from the end of October to mid-December 1700, during which Leibniz met with Franz Anton von Buchhaim (the successor of Rojas on the episcopal seat of Wiener-Neustadt) and the apostolic nuncio in Vienna.

<sup>32</sup> See Ernst Benz, “Leibniz und Peter der Grosse,” 1947, pp. 1–88 (here pp. 30–38), instalment 2 in *Leibniz. Zu seinem 300. Geburtstag 1646–1946*, edited by Erich Hochstetter (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1946–52), instalments 1–8; Franz Xaver Kiefl, *Der Friedensplan des Leibniz* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1903), pp. lxxxvii–lxxxx; and Eisenkopf, *Leibniz und die Einigung der Christenheit*, p. 58.

<sup>33</sup> Leibniz to Landgraf Ernst, December 1692 (A I viii 210). On the possible role of mediation of the Greek Orthodox church cf. also *Réponse de Leibniz au mémoire de l'Abbé Pirot*, in FC, *Oeuvres*, I 380–410 (see pp. 398–9, 405); Leibniz to Landgraf Ernst, 14 March 1685 (A I iv 356); Leibniz to Bossuet, 14 May 1700 (A I xviii N. 368, esp. pp. 636, 638–9).

centuries. After decades of frustrating negotiations, even the most inveterate optimist could not have been unimpressed by its complexity. Leibniz was well aware of the need to proceed pragmatically and step by step, achieving what was possible, and leaving the rest as a regulative ideal. Already within the more limited project of intra-protestant unification, he lucidly identified three progressively difficult degrees: a political unity or “a good civic understanding”, ecclesiastical toleration, and finally theological agreement or “concord of views”. “The first and the second degree,” Leibniz concluded,

seem to me necessary and achievable, and sufficient. The first degree is necessary on political grounds for the conservation of both parties. The second degree is necessitated by the principle of Christian charity, and in consequence is more than feasible. The third degree does not seem attainable, but it is also not necessary. It would nevertheless be good if some able theologians were to work at it at least as regards certain points where, I believe, the disputes consist in fact more in formulations than in realities. (A I xiv 690-1)

## **Toleration**

As shown by the passage just quoted, religious toleration amongst Christians was, for Leibniz, the preliminary condition of any further project of fuller ecclesiastical unification based on theological agreement. It is true that on several occasions he wrote dismissively of toleration as a cure targeting “the most pressing symptoms” of the illness but not its cause.<sup>34</sup> But these statements should be read in the context of his work for the actual unification or reunification of the Christian churches. Having his sight on the higher prize, he resisted calls to settle for mere toleration.<sup>35</sup>

When it comes to toleration as willingness to accept and respect irreducible differences in religious belief even on points of importance, Leibniz’s support is clear. Although he never wrote a systematic treatise on the matter, a remarkably inclusive conception of toleration can be gleaned from a broad sample of his writings and

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<sup>34</sup> Leibniz for Landgraf Ernst, November 1687 (A I v 11). However, also in this memo, Leibniz affirms that the starting point should always be “mutual Tolerance” (A v 11).

<sup>35</sup> See, for instance, the negotiations between Hanover and Berlin for intra-Protestant unification.

correspondence.<sup>36</sup> Arguably, its most interesting aspects are the philosophical and theological grounds of Leibniz's stance. As Pellisson crisply frames the issue in his discussions with Leibniz, the matter at hand is not so much the question of

whether the Prince should tolerate a plurality of Religions inside his State; this depends on one hundred thousand circumstances. ... Here ... we are only concerned with tolerance or intolerance of the Church. It is not a question of knowing, for instance, whether we should let the Socinian live, but whether we should promise eternal life to him.<sup>37</sup>

In other words, the question of religious toleration, as tackled by Leibniz, is not merely, or even primarily, a political issue concerning the conditions under which a state can and should allow different religions in order to promote its own security. It is first and foremost a philosophical and a theological issue concerning the nature of belief and the nature of salvation, from which important political consequences also follow.

For Leibniz, as for Locke, belief is not voluntary. To believe or not to believe something does not depend on the will but on the intellect. Responding in 1690 to Pellisson's *Reflexions sur les différends de la religion* (Paris 1686), Leibniz notes: "Opinions are not voluntary, and are not dismissed at will; this is why (absolutely speaking) they are not subject to orders."<sup>38</sup> Although (as Leibniz acknowledges in the *Nouveaux Essais*) belief can be obliquely influenced by the will, this is an *indirect* influence by which we "turn our attention" to think further about reasons in favour of a certain side of the issue. It is on these *reasons*

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<sup>36</sup> Most of the texts mentioned below are identified and discussed in Maria Rosa Antognazza, "Leibniz and Religious Toleration: the Correspondence with Paul Pellisson-Fontanier," in *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 76/4 (2002), pp. 601-622 and Maria Rosa Antognazza, "Leibniz's doctrine of toleration: philosophical, theological and pragmatic reasons," in *Natural Law and Toleration in the Early Enlightenment*, edited by J. Parkin and T. Stanton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 139-164. On Leibniz and religious toleration see also Nicholas Jolley, "Leibniz, Locke, and the epistemology of toleration," *Leibniz and the English-speaking world*, edited by Pauline Phemister and Stuart Brown (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), pp. 133-43; Ursula Goldenbaum, "Leibniz über Toleranz und Wahrheit," in *Leibniz neu denken*, edited by Erich Barke, Rolf Wernstedt, and Herbert Breger (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2009), pp. 37-61; and Mariangela Priarolo, "Individual certainty and common truth: Leibniz's philosophical grounds for toleration," in *Society and Politics* 8/1 (2014), pp. 25-40.

<sup>37</sup> Pellisson to Marie de Brinon for Leibniz, 4 September 1690 (A I vi 92-3).

<sup>38</sup> A I vi 117. See also A I iv 320; A I ix 192; Grua 216.

which belief depends since “what we believe is never just what we want to believe but rather what we see as most likely.”<sup>39</sup>

Moreover, unlike Descartes, Leibniz does not think that the root of error -- that is, the source of a false belief -- is ultimately to be located in the will.<sup>40</sup> Appealing (rightly or wrongly) to Cartesian epistemology, some authors concluded that to embrace a religious or theological error is a voluntary fault and should not, therefore, be tolerated.<sup>41</sup> Leibniz, on the contrary, is firm in sharply distinguishing error from voluntary action. The latter is punishable, the former is not: “one does not have a belief at will,” he writes around 1711, “but acts as one will; it is not the lack of belief which deserves properly to be punished, but malice and obstinacy.”<sup>42</sup> “The penalty for the errant,” he states, “is to be taught.”<sup>43</sup> Indeed, since it is “a natural right [droit naturelle] to express what one believes to be the truth,” Leibniz questions the “right to proceed ... to the ultimate punishment.” (A II 1 535)

In this view, those who hold some objectively false religious belief are merely material (as opposed to formal) heretics. In accordance with many Roman Catholic theologians, Leibniz notes, only formal heretics -- that is, those who *knowingly* reject a true

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<sup>39</sup> *Nouveaux Essais*, book IV, chap. xx, § 16 (NE 517).

<sup>40</sup> In the *Fourth Meditation*, Descartes gives the following diagnosis of the source of error: “the scope of the will is wider than that of the intellect; but instead of restricting it within the same limits, I extend its use to matters which I do not understand. Since the will is indifferent in such cases, it easily turns aside from what is true and good, and this is the source of my error and sin.” René Descartes, *Oeuvres de Descartes*, 12 vols, edited by C. Adam and P. Tannery (Paris: Léopold Cerf, 1897–1910), vol. VII, p. 58 (trans. by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 3 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984-1991, vol. 2, pp. 40-1). Basically, the source of error is located in the fact that the will assents also to what is not seen clearly and distinctly.

<sup>41</sup> See Priarolo, “Individual certainty and common truth,” pp. 25-26.

<sup>42</sup> *Remarques sur un petit livre traduit de l'Anglois, intitulé Lettre sur l'enthousiasme* [Shaftesbury's *Letter concerning enthusiasm* (London 1708)]; GP III 415. See also Leibniz to Johann Friedrich Leibniz, 5 October 1669, in Schrecker, “G.-W. Leibniz. Lettres et fragments inédits,” pp. 68-69, where the young Leibniz maintains that “to err against conscience [Errare contra conscientiam] implies contradiction. In fact, from the beginning of the world, nobody has erred against conscience. Someone errs who believes as true that which is false [Errat qui putat verum esse quod falsum est]. Whoever believes, this person is not otherwise convinced; whoever is not otherwise convinced, does not know better; who does not know better, does not feel against conscience. ... We can act against conscience but we cannot believe [sentire non possumus] against conscience. So you see that, if only those who err against conscience are to be damned, nobody is to be damned for his error.”

<sup>43</sup> See Dutens V 483; A II i 535.

doctrine -- are excluded from salvation.<sup>44</sup> Already in 1679, he writes to Duke Johann Friedrich: “if by chance a man believed to see clearly a contraction in what it is ordered him to believe, it would be impossible for him to give it credence; he would be a heretic but only a material one, and that would not keep him from being saved”.<sup>45</sup>

Salvation does not depend in fact on believing or not believing certain doctrines (even if these were objectively true ones), but on a practical attitude: the love of God above all things. This love requires the aid of God’s grace, but Leibniz is confident that sufficient grace is granted to all.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, Leibniz writes to Landgraf Ernst in 1690, “to believe that people are damned or sunk in eternal miseries, even if they could not help it ... leads to thoughts hardly compatible with the goodness and justice of God” (A I vi 107-8). In the *Nouveaux Essais*, referring to his exchange with Pellisson of 1690, he recalls:

I once showed M. Pellisson that many eminent doctors of the Roman church, far from damning lax Protestants, have been willing to save even pagans and to maintain that the people in question may have been saved by an act of contrition, i.e. of penitence resting on a *love of benevolence* – leading to a love of God above all other things, since his perfections make him supremely worth of love. This leads one to the whole-hearted endeavour to conform to God’s will and to imitate his perfections, the better to be united with him, since it appears just that God should not withhold his grace from those who are in this state of mind. ... I adduced the view of a Portuguese teacher, Diego Payva de Andrada, who was very famous in his day and had been one of the theologians at the Council of Trent. He went so far as to say that those who took the opposite view of the matter were making God supremely cruel -- “For”, he said, “there can be no worse cruelty”.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> See in particular A I vi 117 and 119-120; A I vi 79-80; A I vi 164; *De Haeresi Formali et Materiali*, A IV vi 337.

<sup>45</sup> A II i 752. In 1703, Leibniz reiterates: “to believe or not to believe is not a voluntary thing. If I believe I see a manifest error, all the authority of the world could not change my view if this [authority] is not accompanied by some reasons capable of satisfying my difficulties or of overcoming them.” (Grua 216)

<sup>46</sup> On Leibniz’s conception of salvation and its relation to grace (and, in particular, on the notion of ‘sufficient’ grace) see chapter on “Philosophical Theology and Christian Doctrines”.

<sup>47</sup> *Nouveaux Essais*, book IV, chap. xviii, § 9 (NE 500-1). Cf. Diego Payva Andradius, *Orthodoxarum explicationum libri decem* (Köln, 1564).

Citing with approbation the Jesuit's view that "invincible ignorance excuses, and that therefore the sincere conscience of anyone is always the last judge down here, *in conscientiae foro*" (A I vi 94), Leibniz maintains that it is not the objective truth of what one believes, but the sincerity of conscience with which one holds this belief, and behaves in consequence, that matters for salvation: "One can be of bad faith and obstinate even if he asserts the truth, that is to say when this is maintained without foundation on the basis of a bad principle." (A I vi 141) Indeed Leibniz goes so far as to maintain that "if someone were to embrace truth in bad conscience, he could be said a formal, and not a material heretic; and would be worthy of punishment although he did not err". A bad conscience [*malum animum*] is in fact what "constitutes the formal nature of heresy."<sup>48</sup>

It follows that coercion in matters of religion, far from being justified in view of the eternal life of those coerced, endangers their very salvation. Thus "it is necessary to be very careful in matters of retractations to avoid forcing people to act against their conscience." (A I v 182) Writing in 1685 to Landgraf Ernst (himself a Catholic convert from Calvinism), Leibniz claims: "One should not create hypocrites, since a true Huguenot is incomparably more worthy than a false Catholic and will sooner be saved without any doubt." (A I iv 352) In another letter of the same year, he adds: "according to what I have been told, the King said that he makes bad converts to the truth but that their children will be good Catholics. However, I doubt this is worthy of approval since it amounts to wanting to cause the damnation of some in order to save some others." (A I iv 341) Thus, "those who are correctly persuaded that someone else is on path to perdition have the right and even the obligation to try to rescue them: but this must be done through permitted means ... coercion is the enemy of truth."<sup>49</sup> In short, false beliefs must be combated with persuasion and arguments, not with violence. "Let them write, let them defend their opinions," Leibniz urges. "Their errors should be overturned with equal arms, not by force and fear ... It is extremely harmful that freedom of thinking [*sentiendi libertatem*] be restrained from day to day within unnecessary limits." (LDB 94-7)

More generally, Leibniz regards toleration as the path suggested by the core teaching of Christianity itself. Toleration is "necessary on account of the principle of Christian charity" (A I xiv 691). Persecution and condemnation are against the spirit of Christianity since "it is clear that the spirit of Christianity should lead to mildness" (A I iv 341).

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<sup>48</sup> *De Haeresi Formali et Materiali*, c. 1695 (A IV vi 337).

<sup>49</sup> *Remarques sur un petit livre traduit de l'Anglois, intitulé Lettre sur l'enthousiasme*; GP III 410.

Finally, even from a pragmatic point of view, persecution tends to be ineffective and is potentially counterproductive.<sup>50</sup> Around 1711, Leibniz notes that “in general persecution is not at all desirable, and that it has wronged the faith of many people but gives relief to that of some others: more zeal is never noted than in these occasions of trial, and greater examples of a great conviction are never found.” (GP III 413-4) “Under the pretext of preventing heresies,” he writes to Sophie on 26 October 1691, heresies “have been engendered.”

Normally these things fade away on their own when they lose the attraction of novelty; but when one wants to suppress them with noisy denunciations, persecutions, and refutations, it is like wanting to extinguish a fire with a pair of bellows. ... For fear of being short of heretics, Messieurs the theologians sometimes do everything they can to find some[.] (A I vii 38)

Commenting on the burning in England of an heretical pamphlet, Leibniz notes that those promoting the pamphlet could reasonably retort that “it is easier to burn such things than to refute them: the truth, indeed, cannot be burned.” (A I 11 123) In his view, false beliefs which lead to good actions, or which are at least harmless from a practical point of view, should definitely be tolerated. “What I find worst of all,” he writes to Bartholomew Des Bosses on 21 July 1707, “is persecution on account of opinions that do not encourage criminal acts, a practice from which honorable men should not only refrain, but which we should also abhor and work against so that others, over whom we have some authority, are discouraged from it.”<sup>51</sup>

The limits of toleration are in fact set by unacceptable actions rather than unacceptable beliefs. As Leibniz remarks in 1683:

it is against natural right to punish someone because he is of some opinion, no matter which, as opposed to punishing someone for some actions; *for the penalty for one who is mistaken is to be taught*. And again, I do not believe that we have the right to punish

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<sup>50</sup> Cf. A I v 11.

<sup>51</sup> LDB 94-5. See also Leibniz to Thomas Burnett of Kemney, 8 (18) April 1698 (A I xv 489): “I am delighted that authors whose views are dangerous are refuted but I am not sure it is appropriate to establish against them a kind of inquisition when their false opinions have no influence on morals; and although I am very far from the views of the Socinians, I don’t believe it is right to treat them as criminals.”

someone with corporal pains for actions which he undertakes in accordance with his opinion, and which he believes his conscience obligates him to perform, apart from the case in which these actions are evil in themselves, manifestly contrary to natural right. As if someone wanted to trouble the State and use violence and poison for a religious principle. (A II i 535; A II<sup>2</sup> i 843)

However, even though one could readily agree that violent actions cannot be tolerated and must be punished, the problem still remains of how to deal with *doctrines* which can lead to punishable actions. Leibniz warns that “in matter of Tolerance, one should not be prone to condemn, although one should not be negligent either when a doctrine is dangerous.”<sup>52</sup> His preferred solution is the use of moderate censorship and, in some cases, the ban of those spreading dangerous views; but recourse to such instruments should be limited. “One has some right to take measures to prevent the propagation of a pernicious error,” he acknowledges in 1706, “but that is also all one has a right to do, and these measures must be the mildest possible.” (Dutens V 483) The ban, for instance, should not be universal, since a universal ban would amount to sentencing people to death.

In sum, religious toleration does not follow, in Leibniz’s thought, from a deflationary account of religious truth or from indifference toward the content of revealed religion.<sup>53</sup> According to Leibniz, there is an objective truth, also in religious matters. However, “not everything which is true is always necessary,” and some things which are not true can be tolerated (A I vi 118). Thus “there is no right to condemn all errors, or always to force people to disavow them.” (A I v 182) Neither does toleration rest for him on a separation between church and state, as for some of his contemporaries.<sup>54</sup> Rather, religious toleration is grounded on the nature of belief and on the nature of salvation. Last but not least, it is grounded on what Leibniz takes to be the central message of Christianity, namely, charity. It is thanks to these philosophical and theological foundations that toleration can be extended, in principle, to all men and women of good will, including non-Christians, pagans, and atheists.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> *Réflexions de Leibniz sur un Écrit Irénique de Fétyzon* (August 1700), in Schrecker, “G.-W. Leibniz. Lettres et fragments inédits,” p. 107.

<sup>53</sup> The issue of indifference is discussed in particular in Antognazza, “Leibniz and Religious Toleration.”

<sup>54</sup> For a brief comparison with Locke, see Antognazza, “Leibniz’s doctrine of toleration,” pp. 163-4.

<sup>55</sup> My thanks to Howard Hotson for helpful comments on a draft of this chapter.

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