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Religion, Democracy, and the "Twin Tolerations"

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Are all, or only some, of the world's religious systems politically compatible with democracy? This is, of course, one of the most important and heatedly debated questions of our times. My goal is to contribute to this debate from the perspective of comparative politics. More specifically, as a specialist in political institutions and democratization, I intend to discuss three questions, the answers to which should improve our understanding of this critical issue.

First, what are the minimal institutional and political requirements that a polity must satisfy before it can be considered a democracy? Building on this analysis, what can we then infer about the need for the "twin tolerations"--that is, the minimal boundaries of freedom of action that must somehow be crafted for political institutions vis-à-vis religious authorities, and for religious individuals and groups vis-à-vis political institutions?

Second, how have a set of longstanding democracies--the 15 countries in the European Union (EU)--actually met these requirements, and what influential misinterpretations of the Western European experience with religion and democracy must we avoid?

Third, what are the implications of the answers to our first two questions for polities heavily influenced by such cultural and religious traditions as Confucianism,¹ Islam, and Eastern Orthodox Christianity--traditions that some analysts, starting from a civilizational as opposed to an institutional perspective, see as presenting major obstacles to democracy?

Before addressing these three questions, let me briefly give some **[End Page 37]** quotations from Samuel P. Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, an exceedingly influential statement of a civilizational perspective that represents a major competing perspective to my own institutional approach.

Huntington gives primacy of place to Christianity as the distinctive positive influence in the making of Western civilization: "Western Christianity . . . is historically the single most important characteristic of Western civilization."² For Huntington, Western culture's key contribution has been the separation of church and state, something that he sees as foreign to the world's other major religious systems. "In Islam," Huntington says, "God is Caesar; in [Confucianism,] Caesar is God; in Orthodoxy, God is Caesar's junior partner." After arguing that "kin cultures" increasingly support each other in "civilizational fault-line" conflicts and developing a scenario of a religiously driven World War III, Huntington warns: "The underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam." Regarding Confucianism, he asserts that contemporary China's "Confucian heritage, with its emphasis on authority, order, hierarchy, and supremacy of the collectivity over the individual, creates obstacles to democratization." In discussing post-communist Europe, he says that "the central dividing line . . . is now the line separating the people of Western Christianity, on the one hand, from Muslim and Orthodox peoples on the other." He asks rhetorically, "Where does Europe end?" and answers, "Where Western Christianity ends and Islam and Orthodoxy begin."³

For Huntington, civilizations, not states, are now the key units, and he argues that due to the growing importance of "kin cultures" and "civilizational fault-line conflicts," the world's religious civilizations are increasingly unitary and change-resistant. Clearly, a central thrust of Huntington's message is not only that democracy emerged *first* within Western civilization but that the other great religious civilizations of the world lack the unique bundle of cultural characteristics necessary to support Western-style democracy.

If we approach the issue from an institutionalist perspective, will we arrive at a different view of the probable cultural boundaries of democracy?

Democracy and Core Institutions

All important theorists of democratization accept that a necessary condition for completing a successful transition to democracy is free and contested elections of the sort discussed by Robert A. Dahl in his classic book *Polyarchy*. Among the requirements for democracy, Dahl includes the opportunity to formulate and signify preferences and to have these preferences weighed adequately in the conduct of government. For these conditions to be satisfied, Dahl argues that eight institutional [End Page 38] guarantees are required: 1) freedom...

RELIGION, DEMOCRACY, AND THE "TWIN TOLERATIONS"

Alfred Stepan

*Alfred Stepan, Wallace Sayre Professor of Government at Columbia University, is coauthor with Juan J. Linz of **Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe** (1996). A much longer and more extensively footnoted version of this essay will appear in his forthcoming book, **Arguing Comparative Politics** (Oxford, 2001).*

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