

VICENTE ROCAFUERTE (1788–1854)
AN ESSAY CONCERNING RELIGIOUS TOLERATION (1831)

Introduction

In this way human reason slowly develops along with the progress of civilization, which constantly wages against superstition and despotism: the one corrupts man by substituting error for the truth while the other degrades him by overwhelming him with the weight of chains and misfortunes; and as the ideas of fanaticism and tyranny are correlative so to is liberalism and religious tolerance . . . I consider religious tolerance to be the most effective means to arrive at such an important result: I know very well that a great number of my compatriots, illustrious for their virtue and knowledge, and in whose breasts burns, as in mine, the purest patriotism, do not believe that public opinion is sufficiently formed, nor its lights sufficiently widespread to promote this point and introduce into it a sublime Christianity with the full splendour of divine tolerance . . . The principle of tolerance is a necessary consequence of our system of political liberty, a consequence that no one has the right to impede or contradict, for it is born of the same nature of the institutions themselves. . . If after ten years of independence, and political essays on liberty, we have not found ourselves in a position to experiment with religious toleration, how long are we going to ignore this resolution of such an important problem?

North America

North America, after shaking off the yoke of Europe, has been the first nation to put into practice these sublime truths . . . The spiritual emancipation, that is to say, the application of intelligence and liberty to the study of the Bible and of true Christianity, is the foundation of happiness which North Americans presently enjoy: [this emancipation] is that which diffuses, in all classes of the state, this spirit of charity, this love of order and work, this benevolence towards one's neighbour, which forms good customs, without which public peace and the security of the individual cannot exist. The separation of religion from the state of this happy nation is owed, in great part, to the fate of its institutions, which tend to diminish crime and promote virtue, and in this way there are fewer crimes and a relatively higher number of executions than other parts of the world. The liberty of worship establishes a rivalry of good conduct amongst the Christian sects that is very favourable to the development of public morals, which facilitates the operations of the government by habits of obedience that it spreads and diffuses throughout the masses of the nation.

If the march of America is compared with that of Europe, there is a relation of twenty to one in terms of velocity; we can run in twenty years one cycle of civilization for which the ancient nations needed four hundred years. How easy it is to organize ourselves in such a short time and leave as an inheritance to the future generation the order, industry, and seeds of public prosperity! If we do not obtain such results we would be delinquents in the eyes of posterity, which would justly accuse us of having nothing to do with the march of this century, and of not having taken advantage of the experience of

the revolutions present in Europe, and of that which offers us the toleration of worship as an infallible medium to arrive at national glory . . .

Conclusion

Why would we make prohibitions to worship God (the common father of all mortals) according to their own practices and customs: the Lutheran, the Calvinist, the Presbyterian, the Anglican, the Anabaptist, the Methodist, the Quaker, the Unitarian . . . In the same way that [Christian] ministers are to preach political tolerance to avoid a clash between diverse and competing parties, and to promote interior peace that we so greatly need, in the same way true lovers of this country should propagate ideas about religious tolerance in order to introduce the reform of good customs, the establishment of colonies of foreigners, the abolition of begging, the increase of the population, the desire for commerce, and the progress of industry.

Translation by Jason Dyck. Taken from Vicente Rocafuerte, *Ensayo sobre tolerancia religiosa*, 2nd ed (Mexico City: Imprenta de M. Rivera, 1831), 3–4, 15–16, 19, 85.