The Myth of Religious Tolerance

A respect for religious freedom stands head and shoulders above a supposed tolerance for religious belief — with the relativism, indifference, and subtle disdain for religion it so often comprises.

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The vehement, sometimes acrimonious debates that accompanied the drafting of the Vatican II declaration on religious freedom, Dignitatis Humanae, yielded an exceptionally precise and carefully worded document. Noteworthy in the 5,700-word declaration is the absence of even a single reference to religious “tolerance” or “toleration.”

The choice of religious “freedom” or “liberty” as the proper category for discussion and the exclusion of “toleration” flies in the face of the societal trend to deal with church-state issues in terms of religious tolerance.

As one notable example, along with the 40th anniversary of Dignitatis Humanae, 2005 also marked the tenth anniversary of the United Nations’ “Year for Tolerance.” Back in early 1995, Federico Mayor, director-general of UNESCO, made the following remarks in New York:

“Fighting intolerance takes both state action and individual responsibility. Governments must adhere to the international standards for human rights, must ban and punish hate crimes and discrimination against all vulnerable groups, must ensure equal access to justice and equal opportunity for all. Individuals must become tolerance teachers within their own families and communities. We must get to know our neighbors and the cultures and the religions that surround us in order to achieve an appreciation for diversity. Education for tolerance is the best investment we can make in our own future security.

If the umbrella of tolerance necessarily covers hate-crime legislation and “appreciation for diversity,” with everything that has come to signify, these remarks may well give pause. In modern discourse tolerance is never just tolerance; and even if it were, it would hardly present the best category for describing attitudes toward religion. Rather, we would do well to heed the wisdom of the council fathers regarding the true meaning of religious freedom.

Why Tolerance Isn’t Enough

Religion is a good to be embraced and defended — not an evil to be put up with. No one speaks of tolerating chocolate pudding or a spring walk in the park. By speaking of religious “tolerance,” we make religion an unfortunate fact to be borne — like noisy neighbors and crowded buses — not a blessing to be celebrated.

Our modern ideas of religious tolerance sprang from the European Enlightenment. A central tenet of this movement was the notion of progress, understood as the overcoming of the ignorance of superstition and religion to usher in the age of reason and science. In the words of Voltaire, “Philosophy, the sister of religion, has disarmed the hands that superstition had so long stained with blood; and the human mind, awakening from its intoxication, is amazed at the excesses into which fanaticism had led it.”

Since religion was the primary cause of conflict and war, the argument went, peace could only be achieved through a lessening of people’s passion for religion and commitment to specific doctrines. As Voltaire wrote in his Treatise on Toleration, “The less we have of dogma, the less dispute; the less we have of dispute, the less misery.” Toward this stated end, many mechanisms were put into play, among them the selection of proper words to modify people’s views on religion.

The language of tolerance was first proposed to describe the attitude that confessional states, such as Anglican England and Catholic France, should adopt toward Christians of other persuasions (though no mention was made of tolerance for non-Christian faiths). The assumption was that the state had recognized a certain confession as “true” and put up with other practices and beliefs as a concession to those in error. This led, however, to the employment of tolerance language toward religion. The philosophes would downplay or even ridicule religion in the firm belief that it would soon disappear altogether. Thus, separation of church and state becomes separation of public life and religious belief. Religion was excluded from public conversation and relegated strictly to the intimacy of home and chapel. Religious tolerance is a myth, but a myth imposed by an anti-religious intellectual elite.

This “tolerant” mentality is especially problematic when applied in non-confessional countries — such as the United States — where an attitude of tolerance is not that of the state religion toward unsanctioned creeds, but of a non-confessional secular state toward religion itself.

Language of religious toleration of Christianity in Saudi Arabia would be a marked improvement over present conditions, and consistent with a confessional Muslim state’s belief that Christianity is a false religion. In a non-confessional state, such language is more pernicious.
Dignitatis Humanae, on the contrary, taught that religion is a human good to be promoted, not an evil to be tolerated. While government should not presume to command religious acts, it should “take account of the religious life of the citizenry and show it favor.” Religious practice forms part of the common good of society and should be encouraged rather than marginalized.

### Tolerance Versus Toleration

Along with the conceptual error of tolerating the good of religion, the meaning of tolerance itself has evolved still further. The United Nations’ Declaration of Principles on Tolerance states outright that tolerance is a virtue and defines it as “respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world’s cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human.”

This definition mirrors that of the American Heritage College Dictionary, which states that tolerance is “a fair and permissive attitude toward those whose race, religion, nationality, etc., differ from one’s own; freedom from bigotry. A fair and permissive attitude toward opinions and practices that differ from one’s own.”

If tolerance is a virtue, it is a decidedly modern one. It appears in none of the classical treatments of the virtues: not in Plato, not in Seneca, not even in Aristotle’s extensive list of the virtues of the good citizen in his Nichomachean Ethics. Indulgence of evil, in the absence of an overriding reason for doing so, has never been considered virtuous. Even today, indiscriminate tolerance would not be allowed. A public official tolerant of child abuse or tax evasion would hardly be considered a virtuous official.

The closer one examines tolerance and tries to apply it across the board, the more obvious it becomes that it’s simply insufficient as a principle to govern society. Even if it were possible to achieve total tolerance, it would be exceedingly undesirable and counterproductive to do so. In his play Saint Joan, George Bernard Shaw wrote, “We may prate of tolerance as we will; but society must always draw a line somewhere between allowable conduct and insanity or crime.”

Moreover, as a virtue, tolerance seems to have distanced itself so far from its etymological roots as to have become another word altogether. Thus the virtue of “tolerance” no longer implies the act of “toleration,” but rather a general attitude of permissiveness and openness to diversity. A tolerant person will not tolerate all things, but only those things considered tolerable by the reigning cultural milieu. Tolerance therefore now has two radically incompatible meanings that create space for serious misunderstandings and abuse.

Tolerance and intolerance have no objective referent, but rather can be applied arbitrarily. Thus the accusation of intolerance has become a weapon against those whose standards for tolerance differ from one’s own, and our criteria for tolerance depend on our subjective convictions or prejudices. Thus Voltaire was able to defend the actions of the Roman Empire in persecuting Christians and blamed the Christians themselves for their martyrdom because they failed to keep their religion to themselves. He avers that the death of Christians was a consequence of their own intolerance toward Rome, and not the other way around. Such sophistry is part and parcel of many of today’s debates on tolerance, and flows from the ambivalence of the term.

The affair grows even muddier when the “acceptance of diversity,” present in modern definitions of tolerance, is thrown into the mix. The UN Declaration of Principles on Tolerance incorporates a prior statement from the UN Declaration on Race and Racial Prejudice, which states: “All individuals and groups have the right to be different.” Taken at face value, that is a ridiculous claim. Suicide bombing is “different,” as are genocide and sadomasochism. To say that one person has a right to be bad, simply because another happens to be good, is the ludicrous logic of diversity entitlement.

The sloppiness of these definitions is unworthy of the lawyers who drafted them and cannot but lead to the suspicion that such ambiguity is intentional. This vagueness allows tolerance to be applied selectively — to race, sexual orientation, or religious conviction — while other areas — such as smoking, recycling, or animal experimentation — stand safely outside the purview of mandatory diversity.

Of course, this double standard is hardly new. John Locke himself, in the midst of his impassioned appeal for religious toleration, notes that toleration does not extend to Catholics, Muslims, or atheists. “To worship one’s God in a Catholic rite in a Protestant country,” he writes, “amounts to constructive subversion.”

In the end, the question for everyone necessarily becomes not, “Shall I be tolerant or intolerant?” but rather, “What shall I tolerate and what shall I not tolerate?”

### Relativistic Underpinnings

Voltaire, Locke, Lessing, and other Enlightenment figures downplayed the importance of doctrinal belief in favor of morals. Unlike today, in 18th-century Europe a general agreement regarding fundamental moral principles could be counted on in contrast to the fierce debates
surrounding doctrinal questions. In doing so, however, they couldn’t avoid a creeping relativism and epistemological uncertainty regarding religious doctrine. For example, in *Nouveaux Mélanges Philosophiques, Historiques, Critiques*, Voltaire posits as the condition for the establishment of a true tolerance the disappearance of theological controversy, which he describes as a “plague” and “epidemic illness.”

On the other hand, in *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, Locke dismissively notes that “everyone is orthodox to himself.” His own ecclesiology that lacked belief in the existence of any one true church led Locke to the conviction that all Christian churches (except the Catholic Church) should be tolerated. “Nor is there any difference,” he confidently wrote, “between the national Church and other separated congregations.”

Locke further appeals to the “Business of True Religion.” A true Christian, Locke asserts, will dedicate himself principally to a life of virtue and piety, which are the chief concerns of religion. In the same letter, he rebukes to a lower tier “outward pomp of worship, reformed discipline, orthodox faith.” His own theological prejudices and political concerns led him to arbitrarily place morals above doctrine, since morals at the time garnered greater unanimity and generated fewer disputes. Their roles have been somewhat reversed today.

Locke’s disdain for “orthodoxy” and Voltaire’s diatribes against religious “fanaticism” find an echo in contemporary descriptions of tolerance. The 1995 *UN Declaration on Principles of Tolerance* states that tolerance “involves the rejection of dogmatism and absolutism.” Popular wisdom holds that true tolerance entails not only respect for others, but the acknowledgment that we don’t know for certain who is right. In his 1995 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope John Paul II wrote that today, some “consider such relativism as an essential condition of democracy, inasmuch as it alone is held to guarantee tolerance, mutual respect between people and acceptance of the decisions of the majority, whereas moral norms considered to be objective and binding are held to lead to authoritarianism and intolerance.”

**What Are We Tolerating?**

Another argument against the language of tolerance is the widespread confusion regarding the proper object of tolerance. Nowadays, the different types of “tolerance” — for persons, ideas, and behavior — are generally lumped together, but they are hardly the same things.

Much as tolerance fails as a category for dealing with goods, which are embraced rather than tolerated, so too is tolerance an inappropriate category with regard to persons. From a Christian perspective, all persons deserve unconditional respect and love for the simple fact that they are persons. We may tolerate their irritating behavior — such as knuckle-cracking or gum-snapping — but it is insulting to suggest that we tolerate the persons themselves.

Nor are ideas the proper object of toleration. Ideas come in all shapes and sizes: true and false, ridiculous and compelling, brilliant and commonplace, diabolical and divine. Each is evaluated in relation to the truth and accepted or rejected accordingly. Those ideas that convince by the strength of their inner consistency are embraced; those found to be untenable are rejected.

If goods, persons, and ideas fail as the proper object of toleration, the only possibility remaining is annoying human behavior or situations of evil. Here, too, the criterion for discerning what is to be tolerated must be determined by the superior good that justifies it. In the case of *Dignitatis Humanae*, the council fathers avoid the claim that error has rights by appealing to the truth that people “cannot discharge these obligations [the pursuit of truth] in a manner in keeping with their own nature unless they enjoy immunity from external coercion as well as psychological freedom.” Thus even when they fail to live up to their duty to seek the truth, or fail in their attempts to discover it, the right to religious liberty persists.

Just as the term “tolerance” does not appear in *Dignitatis Humanae*, it likewise is absent in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. In fact, of the scant five times that the verb “tolerate” appears in the Catechism, two refer to the moral legitimacy of accepting foreseen but undesirable evil consequences of human actions, if the evil is not intended either as an end or a means. The other three citations concern the moral tolerableness of civil divorce in certain limited cases, and the intolerableness of trial marriages and a life of duplicity. The precision of this language provides a refreshing contrast to much of the vague tolerance blather of our day.

**Slouching Toward Indifference**

Though tolerance doesn’t necessarily entail indifference, modern formulations of tolerance as acceptance of diversity would seem to imply at least a placid resignation and sometimes even an enthusiastic celebration of religious diversity. This has led to theologies of pluralism incompatible with the divine mandate to “go out to the whole world and make disciples of all the nations” (Mt 28:19-20), as well as Peter’s declaration that “there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

Voltaire took Thomas Aquinas to task for having dared to say that he wished all the world were Christian, accusing...
him of being intolerant. But for Aquinas, that was the same as saying he wished all men to be happy. Few would consider it intolerant to wish all people to be healthy or well-educated (though this implies “intolerance” toward ignorance and illness), and for Aquinas the Christian faith was a greater good than health and education.

Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who devoted her entire life to spreading the love of Christ, expressed her motivation with the utmost simplicity, as recorded in Desmond Doig’s *Mother Teresa: Her People and Her Work*: “I want very much for people to come to know God, to love Him, to serve Him, for that is true happiness. And what I have I want everyone in the world to have. But it is their choice. If they have seen the light they can follow it. I cannot give them the light: I can only give them the means.”

The fact of a plurality of religions doesn’t imply the ideology of religious pluralism. St. Paul undauntedly preached the gospel of Jesus Christ to King Agrippa, who declared: “A little more and you would make a Christian of me,” to which Paul replied, “I wish that not only you, but all those that hear me might become as I am” (Acts 26:28-29). Though other religions may contain elements of truth, we must hope that all come to the fullness of truth.

Voltaire, building on Locke’s arguments, arrived at relativism’s logical end: indifference. Live and let live. Not only should we tolerate others’ behavior and beliefs, it is wrong to try to change them. In this regard, St. Pius X wrote in his apostolic letter *Notre Charge Apostolique*: “Catholic doctrine teaches us that charity’s first duty is not in the tolerance of erroneous opinions, sincere as they may be, nor in a theoretical or practical indifference toward the error or vice into which our brothers or sisters have fallen, but in zeal for their intellectual and moral improvement, no less than in zeal for their material well-being.”

This zeal, however, must express itself in ways consonant with the dignity of persons. In his letter on the missions, *Redemptoris Missio*, John Paul II penned these memorable words: “On her part the Church addresses people with full respect for their freedom. Her mission does not restrict freedom but rather promotes it. The Church proposes; she imposes nothing. She respects individuals and cultures, and she honors the sanctuary of conscience. To those who for various reasons oppose missionary activity, the Church repeats: Open the doors to Christ!”

Similarly, in his 1994 book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, he wrote, “The new evangelization has nothing in common with what various publications have insinuated when speaking of restoration, or when advancing the accusation of proselytism, or when unilaterally or tendentiously calling for pluralism and tolerance…. The mission of evangelization is an essential part of the Church.”

*Dignitatis Humanae* re-emphasizes perennial convictions of Christianity, including the obligation to seek the truth and to bear witness to the truth we have received. In doing so, however, it underscores the deep respect that must be borne in every instance for the dignity and freedom of the person. “Truth,” we read, “is to be sought after in a manner proper to the dignity of the human person and his social nature. The inquiry is to be free, carried on with the aid of teaching or instruction, communication and dialogue, in the course of which men explain to one another the truth they have discovered, or think they have discovered, in order thus to assist one another in the quest for truth.”

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