

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-03216-2 - Toleration in Enlightenment Europe
 Edited by Ole Peter Grell and Roy Porter
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

1. Toleration in Enlightenment Europe

Ole Peter Grell and Roy Porter

Prehistory

The invention of printing, the Protestant Reformation and the reactions of princes and popes brought furious struggles, theological and political, over conscience and coercion, faith and freedom. Throughout the Reformation and Counter-Reformation eras, Europe remained uncompromisingly a ‘persecuting society’, even if arguments for toleration, both on principle and as a *politique* necessity, were also advanced.¹

The publicists of the Enlightenment further developed such pleas for toleration, and in the process their basis and character was transformed, with the original religious rationales becoming incorporated within a wider philosophy of freedom conceived as a fundamental human attribute and precondition for civilized society. *Liberté* would head the Rights of Man of 1789, just as religious freedom – guaranteed by the absence of an established church – was one of the shibboleths of the Constitution of the United States, whose third president, Thomas Jefferson, boldly proclaimed the ‘illimitable freedom of the human mind’. Toleration was thus to acquire a secular cast as, in liberal ideologies, freedom of thought and speech became definitive of human rights, alongside other cherished freedoms like *habeas corpus*.²

In reality, however, the eighteenth century saw toleration nowhere unequivocally and comprehensively embraced in either theory or practice; and where it gained ground, it was partial, fragile, contested and even subject to reversal. No clear and distinct metaphysics underpinned toleration claims, nor was there a single, classic, foundational text, commanding universal assent. It will be the aim of this book, therefore, to address the ambiguities, limits and fluctuations no less than the extension of toleration in the Enlightenment.

One point, moreover, must first be stressed. Religion did not merely retain a powerful presence throughout eighteenth-century Europe, it was central to the Enlightenment project itself. Some historians have claimed that the *philosophes* crusaded for ‘atheism’ or ‘modern paganism’³ and atheists there were indeed. François-Marie Arouet de Voltaire (1694–1778), the most notorious critic of Christianity, made his ultimate rallying-cry *écrasez*

l'infâme – ‘crush the infamous’ – and he attacked not only Catholicism but also the shallow natural religion and Optimism of the rationalists. His own liberal views were set out in his *Traité de la tolérance* (1763). Most activists, however, wished to see religion not abolished but reformed, with ‘bigotry’ and ‘superstition’ yielding to a God of reason and Nature, compatible with science, morality and civic duties. Immanuel Kant claimed the Enlightenment meant *sapere aude*, having the courage to think for oneself in all things, including matters of religion.⁴ The fact that the French Revolution enthroned its Goddess of Reason in Nôtre Dame shows how religion continued to provide the vestments in which enlightened values were ceremonially clad. ‘The coherence, as well as the confidence of the Enlightenment’, Norman Hampson has maintained, ‘rested on religious foundations’.⁵

Nor must it be forgotten that while the cause of toleration was fundamental to freethinkers and Deists, it might weigh no less heavily with sincere Christians. The English polymath Joseph Priestley (1733–1804), for instance, combined materialist philosophy with a distinctive model of Protestant Dissent. His *Lectures on History* (1788) vindicated the superiority of modern times over the ancient in faith, science, government, manners and happiness, discerning therein the hand of God. In his providentialist scenario, the future progress of religion and rationality required total toleration and the separation of Church and State would be its guarantee.⁶

But if many of them were pious and even Christian, *Aufklärer* across Europe were disgusted by worldly and extravagant church establishments, by ‘priestcraft’, and by preposterous pontifications: ‘I knew a real theologian once’, wrote Voltaire:

He knew the Brahmins, the Chaldeans . . . the Syrians, the Egyptians, as well as he knew the Jews; he was familiar with the various readings of the Bible . . . The more he grew truly learned, the more he distrusted everything he knew. As long as he lived, he was forbearing; and at his death, he confessed he had squandered his life uselessly.⁷

Divisions within Christianity, and the bloody wars of truth they sparked, brought disillusionment. The endless squabbling among the children of God was contrasted with the harmony supposedly brought by the ‘new philosophy’, notably the Newtonian science which was revealing the fundamental laws of Nature. There were, Voltaire quipped, no sects in geometry.

Thinking Tolerance

The early modern centuries advanced many arguments for toleration. Every advocate denounced tyranny, the persecution of the faithful and the suppression of truth. The Inquisition, the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (initiated in 1559), judicial torture and the Augustinian maxim ‘*compellare intrare*’ all

drew vehement denunciations. The irenic Erasmus, along with fellow Christian humanists, had reminded the faithful that the Gospel message was peace; Christ had preached love, and war-mongering popes like Julius II were like Antichrist. Sceptical towards witch persecution, Michel Montaigne famously deemed that ‘it is putting a very high price on one’s conjectures to have a man roasted alive because of them’.

On a huge hill, cragg’d and steep, Truth stands
 And hee that will reach her, about must and about must goe,

declared John Donne, likewise intimating that no candid Christian should presume to possess a monopoly on that commodity.⁸

For all that, Catholics and Protestants alike continued to maintain that the True Church was duty-bound to extirpate evil and error, if necessary with fire and faggots. Thomas More declared the ‘carbuncle’ of heresy had to be surgically excised lest it infect the rest of the *corpus Christi*. Was it not preposterous to tolerate the disciples of the Devil or of Machiavelli? Witches, unbelievers, atheists and apostates were rebels against the Lord who must be converted, punished or annihilated. Only a few brave and persecuted groups, like the Anabaptists or Socinians, proclaimed toleration as an ideal – toleration, it has been remarked, was long a loser’s creed.

Building upon what had come before, Enlightenment champions were to recast the emergent claims to toleration. New individualistic models postulated an original autonomy for natural man anterior to Church and State. If, as John Locke and many others were to insist, man was born free under universal law in a state of Nature, how could the prince come by any legitimate authority to constrain the mind? Faith was not to be forced: ‘For what obeys reason is free, and Reason He made right’, sang John Milton, developing a tolerationism hingeing on a pious image of reason as a divine light, which complemented the anti-censorship arguments developed in *Areopagitica*.⁹

If freedom and toleration were thus essential to the pursuit of inquiry, both religious and secular, doubts were at the same time being voiced in the early Enlightenment about the authenticity of any transcendental tablets of Truth to which the Godly had privileged access. The seeds of such scepticism might be found in Renaissance Pyrrhonism – Montaigne’s ‘*que scais je?*’; in the temper of Christian fideists; in the Cartesian call to systematic doubt; and in the adiaphoristic teachings of Anglicans and Dutch Remonstrants, who pared down to the core the truths essential for subscription and accepted a penumbra of ‘things indifferent’ about which forbearing Christians could agree to disagree.

Enlightened minds ventured further. Philosophy, philology and textual scholarship were persuading critics like Pierre Bayle that human erudition

was irremediably imperfect, be it in respect of the migrations of the descendants of Noah, the occurrence of miracles or the theology of salvation. The corruption of sources, the depredations of time and the quarrels of authors meant that teachings would never cease to be in dispute. In the late seventeenth-century ‘crisis of European consciousness’, the ‘Ancients versus Moderns’ *querella* challenged old certainties. William Temple’s *Essay upon the Ancient and Modern Learning* (1690) maintained the superiority of Greek philosophy and science; William Wotton’s *Reflections upon Ancient and Modern Learning* (1694) countered that, in the sciences at least, the ‘Moderns’ had surpassed the ‘Ancients’. This battle of the books was especially corrosive because its arguments were manifestly extendable to the sacred writings themselves. What then of Scripture truth? Was it self-evident for all to see? Was it literal or figurative? Did it have to be elucidated by the erudite? And, if so, who were the authorized interpreters?¹⁰

This scepticism accompanied a new problematization of the well-known fact that the human scene was a world of difference. Travellers and armchair anthropologists alike found themselves confronted by a kaleidoscope of beliefs and customs amongst the peoples of mankind. Might such differences in manners and morals best be understood not – as traditionally – in terms of truth and error but as marks of mere heterogeneity? Indeed, might such human variability be natural or even desirable? The histories of nations showed that one prime site of divergence was religion. The globe presented a cabinet of diverse faiths – Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, Christianity, with all their sects and schisms, to say nothing of polytheistic cults. Confrontations with such radical heterogeneity fostered the deistic conviction that there must be many ways to God, discoverable through Nature, each acceptable to the Supreme Being, and hence deserving of tolerance.¹¹ In his *L’Esprit des lois*, that magisterial account of human diversity and the laws governing it, Montesquieu implied that the true philosopher would be indifferent to difference.

In short, philosophical doubt swept through the world of letters in the early Enlightenment. Diversity did not, it goes without saying, unequivocally clinch the case for toleration. For Hobbes, after all, no less than the Pope, the enforcement of uniformity was necessary to obviate anarchy. But the philosophy of tolerance could be supported by pragmatism. Voltaire thus suggested the utility of diversity:

Take a view of the *Royal Exchange* in *London*, a place more venerable than many courts of justice, where the representatives of all nations meet for the benefit of mankind. There the Jew, the Mahometan, and the Christian transact together as tho’ they all profess’d the same religion, and give the name of Infidel to none but bankrupts. There the Presbyterian confides in the Anabaptist, and the Churchman depends on the Quaker’s word. And all are satisfied.¹²

The ties of trade, in other words, rendered religious heterodoxy unthreatening in a nation in which ‘every man goes to heaven by which path he likes’. Voltaire’s was only one of many voices which made the economic case for toleration: pluralism promoted prosperity. Conversely, had not intolerance proved calamitous and counterproductive? Far from stamping it out, persecution had bred heresy; the Inquisition had created martyrs, its flames had lit freedom’s torch. Wars of religion had discredited the faith.

With the Peace of Westphalia ending the Thirty Years War in 1648, and the Restoration bringing down the curtain on twenty years of mayhem in Britain, the mood of Europe’s ruling orders swung decisively against those who had boldly shed blood in the name of infallibility, divine right, prophetic revelation or the Bible. As the dictates of popes and presbyters grew challenged by arguments historical, philosophical and moral, it could now even be claimed that religious dogmatism did not only create *civil* disorder but was even symptomatic of *mental* disorder: the *soi-disant* saints were literally out of their minds. Physicians pointed to affinities between sectaries and lunatics – speaking in tongues, seizures, visions and violence. In individuals such aberrations had long been blamed on demonic possession; now it was the turn of entire religious sects to be ‘demonized’ on medico–philosophical authority, with scientific rationality thus playing a regulatory no less than a liberating role.¹³ And all the while satirists were making laughing-stocks of Puritans and other zealots:

Such as do build their faith upon
 The holy text of pike and gun
 Decide all controversies by
 Infallible artillery . . .
 As if religion were intended
 For nothing else but to be mended.¹⁴

Critiques of Catholic superstition and Puritan enthusiasm (or self-divinization) thus had many sources and took many forms. The smouldering anti-clericalism fuelling them even occasionally became enshrined in official policy, witness the eventual expulsion of the Jesuits from all Catholic countries – hardly in itself a triumph of toleration!

The philosophical basis of toleration

In a political situation in which freedoms were endangered by the ambitions of the Sun King, Enlightenment philosophies of toleration were elucidated which construed man as a thinking being whose rationality demanded freedom of thought and expression. John Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) developed an empiricist model of the mind as a *tabula rasa* on which the raw data of experience were registered.¹⁵ Book IV spelt

out the epistemology of religion. Discussing the existence of God, Locke rejected the Cartesian assumption that man is born with an innate idea of the Deity. God is rather a complex idea built up in the mind by taking ideas already acquired – e.g. ‘existence and duration, knowledge and power, pleasure and happiness’ – and projecting them to infinity. Simple ideas are built up from the senses, and the mind organizes and ‘enlarges’ them until it arrives at the highest complex idea of all, that of God. Such notions were further developed in *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695), where Locke explained that faith for its part is, properly, trust in the powers of reason. Revelation contains verities which do not come from reason but which must be subjected to its bar, since it is a divine gift and therefore our final arbiter.

Locke’s thinking on toleration chimed with his epistemology. A substantial but unpublished essay on toleration, dating from 1667, contains the essential principles later to be expressed in the *Letters on Toleration* published during the reign of William III. In his 1667 essay, Locke held that the ‘trust, power and authority’ of the civil ruler was vested in him solely for the purpose of securing ‘the good, preservation and peace of men in that society’. That is, the sphere of the state extended solely to external matters and not to faith, which is internal, a matter of conscience.

To elucidate the limits of those civil powers, Locke divided opinions and actions into three kinds. First, there were speculative views and forms of divine worship which did not concern the polity at all. Second, there were those opinions and actions which were neither good nor bad in themselves, but which impinged upon others and thus were public concerns. Third, there were actions which were good or bad in themselves – namely, virtues and vices.

Beliefs and behaviours of the first kind had ‘an absolute and universal right to toleration’. This derived from the fact that they did not affect society, being either wholly private or concerning God alone. Opinions of the second sort – for instance conceptions about divorce – ‘have a title also to toleration, but only so far as they do not tend to the disturbance of the State or do not cause greater inconvenience than advantage to the community’. But, Locke added, while the magistrate could prohibit *publishing* such opinions if they might disturb the public good, no man ought to be forced to renounce his opinion, or assent to a contrary opinion, for such coercion would only breed hypocrisy.

As for the third class – actions good or bad in themselves – Locke maintained that civil rulers had ‘nothing to do with the good of men’s soul or their concernments in another life’. God would reward virtue and punish vice, and the magistrate’s job was simply to keep the peace. Applying such principles to the political situation of the 1660s, Locke held that Catholics could *not* be tolerated, because their opinions were ‘absolutely destructive of all

governments except the Pope's'. Neither should toleration include atheists, since any oaths of loyalty and allegiance which they took would carry no conviction.

Exiled in the Dutch Republic in the 1680s, Locke wrote a *Letter on Toleration* which was published in Latin in 1689. Echoing the 1667 arguments, this denied that Christianity could be promoted or defended by force. Christ was the Prince of Peace; He had used not coercion but persuasion; persecution could not save men's souls. Persecution was anti-Christian, since love of fellow men is the essence of Christianity.

Civil government must be distinguished from the Church. The business of civil government was to secure men's lives, liberty, health and possessions, whereas the salvation of souls was the concern of religion. Hence churches should be voluntary societies and the ecclesiastical authority ought to have no physical sanction other than excommunication.

Locke's tolerationism was contested by High Churchmen, while his latitudinarian attempt to defend Christian belief by reason drew criticism from traditionalists. Bishop Stillingfleet, for example, expressed his fear as to the erosion of belief which was bound to follow from the denial of innate ideas. 'An universal toleration is that Trojan Horse', he proclaimed, 'which brings in our enemies without being seen'.¹⁶ At the same time, Locke's opinions were being driven down more radical roads by embarrassing deistical and freethinking allies, notably John Toland (1670–1722). Reputedly the son of an Irish Catholic priest, Toland had run away to England as a young man, becoming a Protestant of a sort. A brilliant scholar, he was known in Oxford as 'a man of fine parts, great learning, and little religion'. In 1696, he published his *Christianity not Mysterious: Or a Treatise Shewing that there is Nothing in the Gospel Contrary to Reason, Nor above it: And that no Christian Doctrine can be Properly call'd a Mystery*. Religion, he claimed, requires no mysterious explanation, and the Christian gospel stands by the use of reason independent of divine revelation. He expressed his belief in a Supreme Being, verified, as Justin Champion shows in the chapter entitled 'Toleration and Citizenship in Enlightenment England' (see pp. 133–56, this volume), on broadly rationalist principles. The religion of which Toland had little was conventional Christianity; and while he roundly denounced clergy of all denominations, his true *bêtes noires* were the Puritans with their scriptural dogmatism.

Though just a year separated Toland's book from Locke's *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, the intellectual gulf was vast. Locke aimed to make Christianity acceptable to all reasonable men; Toland taught that the mysterious and miraculous elements of Christianity must be trashed. His book caused an uproar, being condemned by the Irish parliament, attacked by divines and burned by the public hangman.

Only the most anglocentric historian would maintain that toleration and rational religion blossomed on English soil alone. The French Calvinist, Pierre Bayle, exiled in the Netherlands, was hugely influential. His first major work was a critique of Catholic intolerance, published in 1682 as *Letter on the Comet*, and republished the next year as *Diverse Thoughts on the Comet*. In *New Letters from the Author of the General Critique* (1685), he expanded on ideas about the rights of conscience mentioned in that earlier work, showing – contrast Locke! – that a society of atheists could live by honour and civility, and even surpass idolatrous and superstitious nations in orderliness.

Bayle then reacted to the revocation of the Edict of Nantes with his outraged *Philosophical Commentary on the Words, 'Compel Them to Come In'*, published in 1686. To compel men to profess religion in which they did not believe was immoral; it was also irrational, because it discouraged the discovery of truth. No one, he maintained, had a right to claim such complete possession of truth as not to need to engage in rational argument with others.¹⁷

According to Jonathan Israel's 'Spinoza, Locke and the Enlightenment battle for Toleration' (see pp. 102–13, this volume), whilst discussion of toleration has tended to focus on Bayle, Locke and the English freethinkers, it was actually the Dutch Jew, Benedict Spinoza, who launched the most radical, and historically most momentous, justification. For such contemporaries, toleration remained essentially a matter of freedom of religion. Spinoza's slogan, *libertas philosophandi*, by contrast embodied a barely concealed revolutionary implication: the absolute freedom to philosophize, entailing the right to reject *all* revealed religion and to base human values, along with social and political principles, not on faith or priestly authority, but on rational philosophy.

The battle for *religious* toleration was crucial, since the flames of ecclesiastical persecution had been so fierce. But for Enlightenment thinkers more was to be at stake. Censorship in any shape or form denied man's dignity as a rational being. Social progress depended upon reason being free to apply itself wheresoever – to the natural sciences, to legislation, morality and politics. In a Europe still disgracefully backward, advance would be impossible without the ferment of knowledge and modernization of attitudes which the free exercise of reason alone would stimulate. How absurd that regimes were still burning books and clapping authors in irons! Why such dread of knowledge? The *philosophes* endlessly rehearsed Galileo's fate as an object lesson in the arrest of progress by religious bigotry. Where inquiry was free, as in England, science leapt ahead – witness Newton. Prometheus became the hero of those championing dauntless defiance of authority – other myths, from Dr Faust to Dr Frankenstein, were, of course, waiting in the wings as reminders of the nemesis looming for humans behaving like gods.¹⁸

Toleration and its tensions

The *philosophes* loved portraying themselves as paladins of freedom, combating censorship and intolerance, and as the tutors of enlightened rulers, notably Frederick the Great. Himself an unbeliever, Frederick perceived the value to Prussia of encouraging immigrants of all faiths, Jews included. ‘All must be tolerated’, he proclaimed in a celebrated letter of 1740, ‘here everyone must be allowed to choose his own road to salvation’.¹⁹ In reality the situation was far more complicated than these idealizations suggest.

There was, for one thing, no agreement even within the republic of letters as to precisely what toleration entailed and what its limits should be. Was it a means or an end? Must the intolerant be tolerated? Was curbing bigots itself an act of bigotry? Above all, realists like Locke divined that toleration had to be guaranteed by a civil power, which evidently would not tolerate deadly enemies like Papists. Voltaire notoriously would not allow atheism to be talked of in front of the servants.

As Quentin Skinner has recently intimated, building upon earlier discussions by Isaiah Berlin, the eighteenth century might be viewed as a watershed in philosophies of liberty. An earlier tradition of ‘liberty before liberalism’ – it has variously been called Machiavellian, neo-Harringtonian, civic humanist or republican, and is now styled by Skinner ‘neo-Roman’ – envisaged liberty in terms of citizen participation in a free and virtuous commonwealth. Nineteenth-century liberalism by contrast, as typified by John Stuart Mill, espoused what Berlin has dubbed ‘negative liberty’, that is a state of legal protection from external hindrances (‘freedom from’). Enlightenment thinkers rang the changes upon these respectively ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ ideas of liberty. In the context of the present discussion, the point is that both of these tenets, and all positions intermediate, tended to assimilate the case for religious toleration within a wider temporal politics of (positive or negative) liberty.²⁰

This is not to imply that the status of freedom itself was beyond controversy. That great fly in the ointment, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, insisted that the health of a republic might necessitate ‘forcing people to be free’ – why tolerate the selfishness and depravity which would cause a polity to corrupt and collapse? In that light it made perfect sense for the Genevan to condemn the setting up of a theatre in his native city, since such licentiousness would sap virtue. Quite apart from Rousseau, powerful primitivist currents hankered after the sincerity and simplicity associated with moral solidarity. Holding cohesion essential to political vitality, some *philosophes* advocated a civil religion to counter sordid, sinister, selfish factionalism. For Rousseau, those refusing to accept the civil religion would be banished. In such circumstances, tolerance might be represented as the atrophy of collective moral will.²¹

The dilemma of how personal and public freedoms could be balanced also loomed large, albeit within a different moral framework, in Immanuel Kant's analysis of the relations between rationality, freedom and the public sphere. It was, Kant insisted, man's duty to break free of his self-imposed chains and dare to think. But his *Was ist Aufklärung?* (1784) also maintained the individual's paramount duty of public obedience to his prince; subjects had a duty to restrain expression of individual judgments in the interests of upholding the ruler's will and thus forestalling chaos.²² As Kant's dilemma and other examples make clear, in the Enlightenment the bottom line in questions of toleration ultimately lay in decisions of state, even *raison d'état*. Thus the journalist and moralist Daniel Defoe allowed Robinson Crusoe to argue the case for toleration from the perspective of enlightened Absolutism in his best-selling novel of the same name, published in 1719. Here Crusoe stated:

My island was now peopled, and I thought myself rich in subjects; and it was a merry reflection, which I frequently made, how like a king I looked. First of all, the whole country was my own mere property, so that I had an undoubted right to dominion. Second my people were perfectly subjected; I was absolutely Lord and Law-giver; they all owed their Lives to me, and were ready to lay down their Lives, *if there had been occasion for it*, for me. It was remarkable too, we had but three Subjects, and they were of different Religions; my man *Friday* was a Protestant, his father was a *Pagan* and a *Cannibal*, and the *Spaniard* was a Papist; however, I allowed Liberty of Conscience throughout my Dominions.²³

For the poet and philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the argument for toleration, however, was a negative one, namely the proven historical failure of persecution. As he put it:

The only true argument, as it seems to be, apart from Christianity, for a discriminating toleration is, that *it is of no use* to attempt to stop heresy or schism by persecution, unless perhaps, it be conducted upon the plan of direct warfare and massacre. You *cannot* preserve men in the faith by such means, though you may stifle for a while any open appearance of dissent. The experiment has now been tried and it has failed; and that is by a great deal the best argument for the magistrate against a repetition of it.²⁴

So much for the theories, but how did eighteenth-century rulers handle the practical issue of toleration?

Toleration and the State

The histories of states reveal very different political stances toward toleration, and different degrees of its *de facto* or official practice.²⁵ At least in terms of the subjects' ability to think and worship as they wished, it was the Dutch