
Introduction

How do we live together in the midst of our differences? The time may well have come to let a new voice speak into this pivotal question, a new voice that is, in truth, an old voice. This question is once again inspiring fresh conversation, as it invariably does in societies faced with the realities of diversity and plurality in their midst. The intensity of the conversation ebbs and flows with changing religious, political, economic, cultural, and geographic tides. Today it can be heard in high volume, as virtual cornucopias of cultures, philosophies of life, communities of belief, and ways of being are trying to live together in single western political societies, and in an increasingly connected global world. How are we to live together in the midst of this tremendous and ever-increasing pluralism?¹ What shall be the basis of our common life, what guiding framework can we share, how do we acknowledge the differences in our midst, and what ethos will mark the interactions between those differences? These are among the most pressing questions involved in this most important conversation. And this conversation continues, with no signs of ending soon, because its current participants have yet to provide answers that fully or adequately resolve the tensions arising from today's pluralist situation.

One voice in the conversation, that which has been heard the loudest and has held the most sway in liberal democracies, offers an answer based in toleration: we live together by tolerating the differences we find around us. That is to say, we may disapprove of

1. In this context, "pluralism" is used descriptively to refer to the co-existence of distinct faiths, cultures, ethnicities, races, and ideologies within one society, rather than as a belief or ideology in and of itself.

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others' beliefs and choices, we may have deep-seated reasons for thinking those beliefs and choices are morally deficient, but we nevertheless make the decision not to repress their differences. While various strands of contemporary liberal political thought provide different arguments in defense of toleration and different descriptions of what tolerance is and what it entails, the legacy of liberal toleration lies in the Enlightenment and certain beliefs about the nature of knowledge and reason. That is to say, liberal invocations of tolerance have their roots in a very distinct epistemology, which includes a belief that through the use of reason all people can be unified around a body of common truths and morals, regardless of their other differences. The goal is a unity that can stand despite and independent of differences, so that "public" life engages only with that which is held in common, while "divisive" differences are left in the "private" sphere.

Early liberalism sought this unity based on what, following political philosopher John Rawls, we will call a comprehensive philosophical doctrine. This doctrine held as a basic tenet that if all people accepted their duty to exercise reason, then all could be united around a body of moral truths, to which reason had led them, that would serve as the basis of public life. More recent liberalism, having recognized that such Enlightenment-based dreams have not come true and having accepted that the use of reason does not guarantee agreement on philosophy or way of life, seeks to find a new means of unity. This involves adapting liberal concepts to a genuinely pluralist society, seeking to find ways to agree on those concepts that do not require adherence to the fuller Enlightenment project. The quest, as taken up by John Rawls, the leading voice in the recent conversation, is for "freestanding" conceptions with which all people, regardless of their comprehensive doctrines, belief systems, or ways of life, can agree, so long as they are "reasonable." In the face of difference, through appeals to reason and tolerance, political liberals seek unity.

Some new voices have entered the conversation about plurality and diversity in recent years, bringing with them considerable questions about the sufficiency of political liberalism's approach to difference. For within political liberalism, as articulated by Rawls, difference is seen as a fact or a problem to be dealt with rather than a part of life and identity to be acknowledged, embraced, and

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celebrated. In contrast to this view, more recent theorists argue that such differences are not incidental and that it is problematic to assume that they can and should be left in the private realm. The scholarship most commonly associated with such a position recommends what has come to be known variously as the politics of difference, the politics of recognition, and multiculturalism. Yet another group of political thinkers operating in the name of difference goes even further than what we commonly associate with multiculturalism; for these agonistic theorists or proponents of radical democracy, difference is to be celebrated because it lies at the very heart of the way the world is and the way our identities are constituted. They bring to the conversation a concern that liberal tolerance is not sufficient because it still, by definition, involves disapproval rather than embrace of difference and, to work, it requires that differences not be recognized in any public way. By assuming that it is possible to keep difference and conflict out of our common political life, political liberalism overlooks the conflictual, agonistic nature of reality. The presence of conflict and power in all aspects of life, relationships, institutions, and structures means that attempts to find unity or to develop political theories in the name of unity always suppress or do violence to difference. Unity cannot, according to these agonistic or post-Nietzschean political theorists, be the goal, nor tolerance the way to get there. Instead, these theorists search for a way to move beyond tolerance and unity to a deeper and richer embrace of difference. For the sake of diversity, they relinquish the hope of unity.

In short, when it comes to answering how we might live together in the midst of our pluralism, liberal tolerance emphasizes the quest for unity, while agonistic difference prioritizes diversity. Indeed, each can be accused of pursuing the one at the expense of the other, of pushing to unnecessary extremes the dichotomies of the universal and the particular, the one and the many. These two “schools” of political theory represent prominent attempts to use political and theoretical imagination to create pictures of what it could look like to live together in the midst of increasing recognition of difference. They also reflect recent changes in the cultural and intellectual climate of Western society. The theories and practices related to these “schools” of thought, however, have yet to provide sufficient or adequate pictures of what our collective life

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can look like under conditions of extreme diversity. This is, of course, due in some measure to the complicated nature of these issues; both theoretically and practically, questions related to difference and tolerance, to the organization of political society in times of high levels of plurality, will have no easy answers.

But it may also be due to our own impoverished political imagination. Perhaps answers, or hints towards answers, may be found by welcoming into the conversation a voice that is no longer considered helpful or plausible from the perspective of political theory, indeed from one of the very quarters that is most often blamed for the rise and perpetuation of intolerance, namely Christianity. The voice of Christian theology may help provide an alternative picture to those given by either political liberalism or post-Nietzschean political thought that offers a glimpse of a way out of our current morass, by helping us to think more creatively about the mutually fulfilling relationship between the universal and the particular, between unity and diversity, that does not leave us stranded in unhelpful bifurcations. It may contribute to the reinvigoration of contemporary public discourse, which is not infrequently diagnosed as impoverished, as “too spare to contain the moral energies of democratic life,”² by offering a richer picture of conversation between those who constitute today’s pluralist society than the truncated pictures offered by other political theorists. A Christian theological voice may, further, help religious identity be heard as an important difference that goes largely unrecognized within contemporary academic discussions of diversity.³

The Church, also, as it tries to navigate the tricky waters of tolerance, difference, liberalism, and pluralism, is in need of a theological investigation of recent political theory. Such an investigation could help the Church articulate how its Christian ontology, or beliefs about the nature of human being and reality, influences its understanding of diversity, unity, and the political realm. It might, indeed, help remind Christians that they have a crucial role to play in the development of communities in which unity and diversity can come together through participation in the reconciling work of

2. Michael J. Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1996), p. 323.

3. Cf. Jeff Spinner-Halev, *Surviving Diversity: Religion and Democratic Citizenship* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), pp. 6–7.

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the Triune God. And it might help Christians to see ways to love God and neighbor in the Church *and* in the “earthly city,” by providing them with the theological resources to be engaged in the social and political structures and institutions of this world without compromising or forgetting that they are first and foremost citizens of the Heavenly City and members of God’s family in the Church. These concerns for the Church provide much of the impetus for this work, so that while it is a sustained engagement with political theory, it is nevertheless primarily and unapologetically theological.

To say that this work is theological is not, I hope, to say that it has nothing to offer to those who do not share its Christian theological presuppositions. On the contrary, the project is undertaken because of the belief that theology and political theory have overlapping fields of interest and concern, and that genuine conversation between them needs to happen for the sake of both. Nevertheless, I do hope in this work to write theologically about issues far too long left to nontheologians and to explicate the implications of Christian theology for the situation of pluralism and “tolerance” in which we find ourselves today. This is indeed but to be faithful to the own inner themes of Christianity, which have to do with nothing if not with community, unity, diversity, difference, and harmony.⁴ My goal in writing, therefore, is neither to convert to Christianity those who do not yet believe its story, nor to provide an apologetic for the ontology, political society, or “social usefulness” of Christianity. My goal is rather to think theologically and critically about tolerance and difference as currently proffered, and by so doing to help expand our current political imagination as we seek answers to contemporary problems; this should be of interest to all who share Western political arrangements.

Before moving on to introduce in more detail the contents of this book, it may prove helpful to step back to consider the concept of toleration, both in its own right and in terms of its relationship with liberalism. Toleration and liberalism are crucial characters in the intellectual story I am weaving and the theological critiques I am offering. The complexity of definition and discussion surrounding both prohibits the possibility of either one being covered sufficiently,

4. Cf. Oliver O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 3.

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but even a brief introduction to these complexities will help some of the key issues become clearer. After this brief introduction, the move within political theory from tolerance to difference, and the concomitant move from epistemology to ontology, is described a little more fully, along with the ways this ontological turn opens the door for a theological turn. Finally, a description of the contents of this book, chapter by chapter, is provided.

A brief introduction to tolerance and liberalism

As long ago as 1689, John Locke told the English readers of his letter concerning toleration that “there is no nation under heaven in which so much has already been said upon that subject as ours.”⁵ Yet more than three hundred years later, contribution after contribution continues to be made to the subject. Some contributions take as their starting assumption that tolerance is the rightful reigning “value” of our day; some view tolerance as the necessary culmination of centuries of liberal political thinking, theorizing, and implementation; others decry the intolerance and repression of difference that they see as veiled concomitants of so-called liberal tolerance; and others yet raise significant philosophical questions about the very definition of toleration, as well as how attainable or desirable it is as an ideal.

Toleration may, indeed, be among the more complicated “virtues” of our time, in terms of its origins, its conceptuality, its merits, and its entailments. Its complexity is increased because it is of relevance to both informal, “unregulated” life and legal and institutional aspects of political life. As a “virtue,” it is certainly among the most controversial. Perhaps evaluations of toleration are best viewed along a spectrum. On one end are those who laud the accomplishment that tolerance represents, and who would agree with William Galston that, “in the real world, there is nothing ‘mere’ about toleration.”⁶ In the middle are those concerned with what toleration is and is not, the paradoxes it raises as a moral

5. John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. Mario Montuori (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963), p. 3.

6. William A. Galston, *Liberal Pluralism: The Implications of Value Pluralism for Political Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 120.

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concept, and the potential impossibility of its realization.⁷ And at the other end are those who, for a variety of reasons that would keep them from being happily grouped together, regard tolerance as repressive, discriminatory, pretentious, and/or dangerous.⁸ Regardless of the evaluation, one would be hard-pressed to deny the central role that toleration has played and continues to play in political theory and practice. This makes it all the more interesting that, as Andrew Murphy writes, “the meaning of the term continues to elude us.”⁹ David Heyd concurs on the elusive nature of this virtue:

Tolerance is a philosophically elusive concept. Indeed, in the liberal ethos of the last three centuries, it has been hailed as one of the fundamental ethical and political values, and it still occupies a powerful position in contemporary legal and political rhetoric. However, our firm belief in the value of tolerance is not matched by analogous theoretical certitude.¹⁰

Others, such as Bernard Williams, are concerned that toleration is not only elusive but also impossible: “Toleration, we may say, is required only for the intolerable. That is its basic problem.”¹¹

Most scholars of the subject agree that toleration, by definition, involves disapproval, so that the object of toleration is viewed as morally wrong or undesirable even as those who offer toleration make the decision not to interfere with or repress that which they

7. See, for example, *Res Publica* 7, no. 3 (2001), containing the proceedings from the Annual Conference of the UK Association for Legal and Social Philosophy on “The Culture of Toleration;” Susan Mendus, ed., *The Politics of Toleration: Tolerance and Intolerance in Modern Life* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999); Susan Mendus, *Toleration and the Limits of Liberalism* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities, 1989); Susan Mendus, ed., *Justifying Toleration: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); David Heyd, ed., *Toleration: An Elusive Virtue* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

8. See, for example, Robert Paul Wolff, Barrington Moore, Jr., and Herbert Marcuse, *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1969); J. Budziszewski, *True Tolerance: Liberalism and the Necessity of Judgement* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1992); William E. Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); William T. Cavanaugh, “‘A Fire Strong Enough to Consume the House:’ The Wars of Religion and the Rise of the State,” *Modern Theology* 11, no. 4 (October 1995), pp. 397–420; and A. J. Conyers, *The Long Truce: How Toleration Made the World Safe for Power and Profit* (Dallas, TX: Spence, 2001).

9. Andrew Murphy, “Tolerance, Toleration, and the Liberal Tradition,” *Polity* 29 (1997), p. 594.

10. Heyd, *Toleration*, p. 3.

11. Bernard Williams, “Tolerance: An Impossible Virtue?” in *Toleration: An Elusive Virtue*, ed. David Heyd (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 18.

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have deemed immoral or objectionable. Toleration is not, then, equivalent to indifference or skepticism. Tolerance can turn into indifference if one ceases to view a particular behavior or belief with disapproval, or into skepticism if one declines to pass any judgment on another's way of life or beliefs because one questions the existence of a right or a standard by which to pass such judgments. True tolerance, however, depends upon a situation of diversity marked by both difference and disapproval. And herein lies its paradox. As Susan Mendus asks, how can toleration be counted as a virtue when it is based on moral disapproval, with the implication that the thing tolerated is wrong and ought not to exist? Why is it good to tolerate?¹²

Different justifications have been offered, historically and more recently, for the good of toleration. The perceived need of tolerance arises, for obvious reasons, under conditions of pluralism and diversity within a given political society. The most commonly told story of the rise of tolerance links it directly and inextricably with the diversity of post-Reformation Europe that inspired the emergence of liberalism.¹³ In this story, liberalism arises out of the wars of religion of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with tolerance playing a leading role as the answer to the antagonism and bloodshed that marked the prolonged religious conflicts of the day. And so we have Brian Barry's estimation that toleration is a defining feature and, perhaps, even the core of liberalism, and Judith Shklar's sense that toleration can be considered the core of the historical development of political liberalism, and William Galston's opinion that the virtue of tolerance is a core attribute of liberal pluralist citizenship.¹⁴ Some recent scholarship attempts to expand current conceptions of tolerance, in which tolerance is almost exclusively linked to liberalism, by finding examples of tolerant political arrangements and principled defenses of toleration that pre-date the rise of liberalism or by drawing attention to the

12. Mendus, *Toleration and the Limits of Liberalism*, pp. 18–19.

13. See, for example, Andrew Heywood, *Political Theory: An Introduction*, 2d. ed. (Hampshire: Palgrave, 1999), p. 268; John Gray, *Two Faces of Liberalism* (New York: The New Press, 2000), p. 1; and John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, ed. Erin Kelly (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2001), p. 1.

14. Brian Barry, *Culture and Equality: An Egalitarian Critique of Multiculturalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), p. 131; Judith N. Shklar, "The Liberalism of Fear," in *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, ed. Nancy L. Rosenblum (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 23; Galston, *Liberal Pluralism*, p. 126.

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differences between the earliest so-called liberal arguments for religious toleration and the toleration of contemporary liberal theorists.¹⁵ Although other forms of tolerance have existed and continue to exist, it nevertheless seems safe to say that the tolerance that predominates in contemporary Western society has its roots in liberalism and continues to be promulgated by liberal theorists today.

Liberalism approaches toleration in the complexity of defining and explaining it, in terms of either its historical origins or its contemporary articulations. The breadth of opinion on what liberalism has been and continues to be, even between those who consider themselves contemporary liberal political theorists, plays no small part in this seeming complexity. Indeed, the competing branches of liberalism try to convince others of their position by persuading them to accept their own version of liberalism's definition. As to the origins of liberalism, J. S. McClelland writes of the modern state that it "emerged from the feudal order. Beyond that nothing is certain. There is no agreement about how it happened or when it happened beyond saying that it happened at different times in different places."¹⁶ This description applies equally well to liberalism. Although we may not be able to successfully identify liberalism with a particular date or site of emergence, we do have some hint of its origins. Here we again agree with McClelland that "what does not seem to be in doubt is that liberalism, as a set of ideas and as a first, tentative approach to the treatment of political and social problems, began in the Enlightenment."¹⁷ To get a sense of what that means, we will look closely at the work of John Locke, who is commonly associated, although not without

15. For the former, see Michael Walzer *On Toleration* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997); Cary J. Nederman, *Worlds of Difference: European Discourses of Toleration, C. 1100–C. 1550* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000); John Christian Laursen and Cary J. Nederman, eds., *Beyond the Persecuting Society: Religious Toleration Before the Enlightenment* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998); and Cary J. Nederman and John Christian Laursen, eds., *Difference and Dissent: Theories of Toleration in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996). For the latter, see Andrew R. Murphy, *Conscience and Community: Revisiting Toleration and Religious Dissent in Early Modern England and America* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001).

16. J. S. McClelland, *A History of Western Political Thought* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 278.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 428.

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exception, with the earliest articulations of both liberalism and toleration.¹⁸

John Locke plays a leading role in the story of toleration, due to the influential publication of *A Letter Concerning Toleration*. Written in 1685 and published in 1689 (in four different languages that very year), its enduring legacy stems not from it being the first work on toleration as such but instead from it being the first work to use toleration as the basis for a different, limited role for the nation-state. He was among the first to advocate tolerance on the political and ecclesiastical level on the basis of principled philosophical argument.¹⁹ His justification for religious toleration is rooted in his understanding of the nature of salvation and the limits of human knowledge, and stems more from his case for the irrationality of forced belief than from a belief in the inherent goodness and desirability of difference.²⁰ This helps explain why he does not extend toleration to atheists and Roman Catholics: his concern for social cohesion allowed toleration at the private level so long as it did not disrupt order at the public level. Roman Catholics would be more faithful to the Bishop of Rome than the civil magistrate in their own land, while those who do not believe in God would not have reason to uphold the “promises, covenants, and oaths, which are the bonds of human society.”²¹

If Locke does not make his argument for toleration from a conviction of the inherent desirability of religious diversity, what is it that prompts him to write of toleration as “the chief characteristic mark of the true church?”²² Of utmost importance is his understanding of the nature of salvation as such that it cannot be forced or coerced but must stem from individual choice. His emphasis on the ineffectiveness of coercion stems largely from what he believes to be the nature of reason, knowledge, and faith. Though Locke retains a Christian belief in the necessity of salvation, his understanding of how one epistemologically acquires the faith that is

18. For examples of exceptions, see Murphy, *Conscience and Community*, pp. xiv–xv and Laursen and Nederman, *Beyond the Persecuting Society*, pp. 2–4.

19. Ian S. Markham, *Plurality and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 13.

20. This latter position is most often associated in early modern political thought with John Stuart Mill.

21. Locke, *Letter Concerning Toleration*, p. 93.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 7.