

Tolerance and Hospitality: The Key to Religious Plurality

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The basis for maintaining a peaceful and respectful multicultural society has evaded many nations throughout history. Its absence has led to great atrocities including, but not limited to, genocide and terrorism. Many people point to tolerance as the key for an appropriately accommodating plural society. After providing a definition for what tolerance is, this paper analyzes tolerance as a virtue and exclusivism's role in its execution. It then demonstrates that tolerance is a virtue that falls short of providing a sustainable peacefully plural society because its determinant lies only in action and goes on to expand on a more positive virtue that is required for a stable diverse society—hospitality. This virtue requires mutual recognition, respect and response rather than the simple indifference that tolerance suggests.

Many view tolerance as a virtue and therefore by Aristotle's definition, a mean between extremes (Irwin, 2009). It then follows that there are times to exercise intolerance (acting against injustice for example) and times to exercise tolerance. However, in the case of religion, exclusive beliefs complicate the execution of tolerance because their doctrine may dictate that individuals of a foreign religion may be excluded from some important spiritual benefits. The solution to this problem is that *strong* reactions constitute religious intolerance. "Strong reaction is when [the action] is based on seeing a man's religion as relevant to something which it is not really relevant" (Newman, 1978). Evangelism may be seen as acting against another religion but it is in an area where religion is relevant and is, therefore, still religiously tolerant. Areas where religion is never relevant include but are not limited to the preservation of the other's life and the pursuit of a more flourishing life because these are areas that people of any faith (or lack thereof) pursue – their faith is irrelevant. Any action against these areas based on religion are strong reactions and therefore intolerant. Tolerance is seen as a mean between extremes, but religious tolerance does not allow acting against people of other religions in matters that are not religious in nature. Exclusive beliefs need not conflict with this definition

because a person may believe others are going to Hell because of their beliefs and only act against them in matters where religion is applicable.

There is little debate that virtuously tolerant people better a society. If an entire population were religiously tolerant, there would be less violence and injustice due to differences in beliefs, particularly theological beliefs. Religious tolerance is sufficient for a peaceful and respectful society but maintenance for the long term becomes difficult when relying solely on tolerance. While tolerance may prevent violence and injustice, it leaves undisturbed the underlying dynamic that makes violence possible—prejudice. While discrimination would end, the prejudices may still exist and this would leave a society very close to the violence that its prejudices call for but that its tolerance prevents. This is a notable deficiency of religious tolerance.

Tolerance is simply the “acceptance or endurance of something which one has a negative attitude towards” (Newman, 1978). The word is derived from the verb “to tolerate” which implies a certain amount of distaste for the thing tolerated. When this definition of tolerance is applied to religion, it follows that tolerance is not the acceptance of another’s belief but an acceptance or endurance of their *holding* a belief. This distinction is important in order to maintain the integrity of one’s own beliefs. Because religious tolerance is simply inaction where religion is not important, it “does not foreclose the possibility of looking condescendingly, with loathing and disdain upon the other whom one tolerates” (Conway, 2009). John Doe may be a religiously tolerant man because he is not acting against people of other faiths, but he could very well look at every other religion with the idea that they are far inferior to his own. This idea of presumed superiority is the underlying dynamic that makes the possibility of discrimination and violence ever present. In order to achieve a peacefully plural society, one must “view that many different activities and forms of life which are incompatible are valuable,” – a much more demanding call (Raz, 2001). The virtue of tolerance does not require one to see any value in any other style of life, but that one does not act in accord with those prejudices. As such, it is not the key to a plural society; rather, we must find another more appropriate virtue to accommodate this need. The virtue that demands one to not simply tolerate another’s way of life but *respect* that way of life is hospitality.

The need for hospitality seems to be recognized by Buddhists who call “for a different *ethos*... an abode of dwelling that describes a fundamental way of being in the world with others” (Conway, 2009). In today’s culture, this may not entail bringing strangers into our house but rather offering them a charitable hearing or even simply trying to understand their lifestyle. Hospitality is a virtue that many philosophers including Aristotle do not mention, but it is one that is recognized in many faiths as an important and holy attribute.

Hospitality calls on you to look at each individual as a fellow human being. It requires three important factors: recognition, respect, and response. Rather than first focusing on human differences and eccentricities, you are called on to give a charitable judgment and allow a mutual respect to form. Jacques Derrida goes as far as saying, “... hospitality is ethics itself and not simply an ethic amongst others” (2000). Trudy Conway goes on to say that hospitality “is central to human flourishing and truly harmonious social relations” (2009). Where tolerance does not require an understanding of a foreign belief, hospitality demands it.

The first part of hospitality is recognition. You are called on to investigate a different lifestyle with charitable hearing by refraining from immediate dismissal of anything that contradicts your own beliefs. Actively distancing or distorting a view is detrimental to any type of respect that may form later. This act of investigation with suspended judgment in itself assumes that there is something *worth* investigating. One way to enhance this mindset is to stop thinking of our societies as consisting of a majority and minorities but, rather, of a plurality of cultural groups (Raz, 2001). This strategy is in fact employed in the African country of Tanzania. They refuse to conduct a census because the statistics they have now state that they have equal populations of each cultural group: Christians, Muslims, and native tribal religions. As Bishop Skrenes noted, this idea of equal numbers has succeeded in keeping the peace thus far and has allowed religion to be an open topic for discussion among the general population (2011). This discussion allows for an undistorted interpretation of the other lifestyle and can allow a mutual respect to form.

Respect is the most important part of hospitality, and it is the quality that differentiates it most from mere tolerance. We need to drop the utilitarian arithmetic that we are so used to and realize that many ways of life may be valuable and are not

susceptible to comparison. The formation of mutual respect in this way is the most integral quality for a peaceful coexistence. During this discussion, one must have an “imaginative empathy in order to begin to conceive of the other’s experience in its ... complexity” (Conway, 2009). By forming an understanding, it is possible to realize why the other way of life is good without trying to compare it to the more familiar lifestyle chosen by oneself. Both lifestyles are good in their own right and this is why they are chosen in the first place. We need to understand that these different views have an inherent value of their own. By realizing that the other way of life may be valuable, you have formed a certain amount of respect for that way of life.

Respect is probably the most challenging part of the virtue of hospitality, especially in regard to religion, precisely because our beliefs may carry serious consequences for those who do not agree. Someone with an exclusive belief that has repercussions for those who dissent may feel morally obligated to convert those who have chosen another lifestyle. This moral obligation does not have to be ruled out when practicing hospitality. Jesus Christ did not use the sword to convert his followers nor did he pursue anyone who did not want to hear what he had to say. Rather, he went and had a respectful conversation in the home of those that had chosen a nearly opposite lifestyle from his own, and he succeeded in creating a following. Muhammad left the city where he was not wanted, Mecca, and went to a city that would listen to his word, Medina. It was in this city that was open to Muhammad’s message that he succeeded in creating a following rather than staying in Mecca and trying to force his word on those who would not. These great religious figures were practicing hospitality. The opening up and understanding of another lifestyle allows one to understand the inherent value that it contains. The respect that is required for the practice of hospitality is in fact the most optimal path to inviting others to your faith. While this is an effective form of evangelism, we must be wary of those who enter the discussion with a closed mind and the sole motivation of conversion. This is not true hospitality.

Response is the final demand of hospitality. It is an internal response rather than an external show of acceptance or rejection of the other faith. It asks us to allow other views to challenge our own. Allowing this to happen requires a certain amount of courage because it could lead to a massive shift in an individual’s frame of reference. A change in religious membership can change a person’s entire identity. Conversion need not always happen,

but, you should walk away from the discussion with an important understanding of another individual's way of life, a mutual respect towards each other's lifestyle and perhaps most importantly a greater understanding of *your own* way of life. This increased self-understanding and mutual respect towards another member of society allows for the most stable path to coexistence within a plural society.

As mass international transportation gets faster and easier, every community is going to face the issue of religious pluralism. The immigration of new religions and lifestyles requires a means to prevent altercations and violence due to these differences. The virtue of tolerance has been called upon to be the solution for violence. The test for religious tolerance is in the presence or absence of actions that deem religion relevant where it is not. Avoiding strong reactions allows religions to keep their exclusive doctrines and ideals rather than attempting to be inclusive, which risks making themselves superfluous or less important. The problem with religious tolerance is that it allows a society to depend on inaction or mere indifference towards other religions. This indifference is not a stable platform for the peaceful coexistence of a plural society. We need to go beyond tolerance and start practicing hospitality.

Hospitality is a virtue that requires an understanding and recognition of value in another lifestyle or religion. Instead of distancing ourselves from other religions, we need to engage in dialogue with these different cultures. We need to "promote not the passive grudging, minimal view of tolerance as acquiescence to a regrettable pluralism, but the active virtue of hospitality which wisely and generously promotes the mutuality of respect distinctive of persons and civil societies at their very best" (Conway, 2009). By engaging in this discussion, we gain a certain amount of self-understanding, knowledge of another's life, and respect for them rather than the ignorant indifference that is permitted by tolerance. Hospitality is a challenging virtue, but it will lead to a more enlightened society. Where tolerance falls short, this newfound source of enlightenment will undoubtedly promote and maintain a peaceful multiculturalism.

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