

On the Possibility of Tolerant Religion

On Tolerance

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, in the biological sciences the term *tolerance* means “the ability of an organism to survive or to flourish despite infection with a parasite or an otherwise pathogenic organism.” Non-biological definitions suggest a similar sense of discomfort. The “practice of enduring or sustaining pain or hardship” is an alternate definition in the *OED*, and it features a lively excerpt from Bacon: “Diogenes, one terrible frosty Morning, came into the Market-place; And stood Naked shaking to shew his Tolerance.” To me, the word *tolerance* signifies a general flexibility and a willingness to accommodate and accept others’ philosophical or religious beliefs. And so, when a conflict of opinion arises in a society, whether or not people can peacefully *agree to disagree* separates tolerant societies from intolerant ones. This is how I understand the word *tolerance*.

Many humanitarian missions integrate religion and tolerance, which serves as strong evidence that religion often creates (or at least coexists alongside) tolerant attitudes. Of course, there are many instances of religion fostering intolerance as well. Examples abound of both tolerant and intolerant religious people, and this tells us something about religion in general. That there are violent (intolerant) and peaceful (tolerant) people of most faiths (and certainly of the three faiths most often discussed in the Western media, namely, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam) suggests that it is not religious doctrines per se that influence whether its followers will be violent or peaceful. Rather, it depends on the individual members of each of the religions. And so, I cannot say generally whether religion fosters intolerance or tolerance, because it fosters both. Religion creates tolerance if the individuals that make up a given religion value tolerance. By value, I mean that the religion encourages the education of its followers, as empathy and rational dialogue, two components of a tolerant attitude, generally follow education and shared experience. This interrelated set of values, which can belong to both secular people and religious people, deserves analysis. Only by understanding the nature of each of these building blocks of tolerance can we evaluate the question of whether a given religion fosters tolerance or not. Intuitively, I suspect

that religion fosters tolerance in direct proportion to the degree that it fosters education, empathy, and rational dialogue.

On the Inseparability of Empathy and Education

Xigong asked, Is there one word that can be practiced for the whole of one's life? The Master said, that would be "empathy" perhaps: what you do not wish yourself do not do unto others.

--The Analects

When I consider what my best tool for fostering tolerance is, it seems to me that *empathy*, the act of projecting myself into other people's situations, is crucial. Tolerance requires that we be flexible towards differences. After all, people will always differ from one another. The philosopher Heraclitus said that "you cannot step twice into the same river." This quotation speaks to how each of us changes constantly. If we try to step into the proverbial same river twice, we find the river to be different, because we are different. Anybody who is unexpectedly reminded of a past perception realizes how drastically our perceptions can change over time. Once, revisiting my old elementary school as an adult, I momentarily glimpsed my childhood conceptions of the length of a day, what the size of water fountains should be, and so forth. It startled me! I thought: I am an entirely different person now! Of course, if the differences within a person are significant over time, think of how much more significant the differences between people must be over time. So, if I want to understand people, I should cultivate empathy—the faculty that accepts and, in doing so, even celebrates difference. There are infinite ways of cultivating empathy: I can talk to people, I can read books about other people, I can study different cultures in school. All these are forms of education. Therefore, education and empathy are inseparable because being able to imagine oneself in someone else's situation requires that we know what the other person's life is like. Just as I cannot accept what I do not understand, I cannot empathize with someone who I do not know of.¹ In fact, there are proverbs to a similar effect—we fear what we do not know. So, when I talk to somebody from a foreign country, the conversation, in addition to being interesting, will be educational if

¹ For this reason, shared experience is one of the most powerful forms of education, since it integrates empathy and education.

I identify with the other person at all. Additionally, the act of identifying with someone else posits a hypothetical equivalence (and thus equality) between me and whomever I am identifying with. In that education and empathy both encourage equality in this way, they are the life-blood of tolerance.

On Religions and Philosophies, or What We Must Tolerate of Each Other

Religions and philosophies are difficult to follow, but very important. There are two compelling reasons to analyze religion and philosophy generally. First, nearly everyone has a religion or philosophy, and the close-held beliefs that they entail can be difficult to tolerate in other people. Second, rational dialogue depends on reason being held in good stead—if faith dominates reason, there is no hope for the rational dialogue necessary for the acceptance and tolerance of Other People. In a sense, all religions and philosophies are two of the most popular ways of inquiring into the mystery of being, the one basic question: *why am I here?* Since there are infinite ways of approaching this, or any problem, we can analyze basic questions about being by any method we choose; religion and philosophy are not the only two choices. For example, we can see being as a function of probability. Or we can see it as the function of an all-pervading life force. In essence, the *philosophical* way of thinking attempts to approach the mystery of being from a purely rational standpoint, whereas the *religious* way of thinking approaches the same mystery from a faith-based standpoint. And so, rather than examine specific instances of contemporary religious attitudes and doctrines, and by induction arrive at general conclusions about religion and tolerance, it seems better suited to my present purposes to do the opposite, that is, to analyze faith and reason in general, since they are the building blocks of all religions and philosophies, and to then potentially deduce how the relation of faith and reason as *universals* dictate our *particular* convictions.²

On the Need for Rational Dialogue

If there be any among those common objects of hatred I do condemn and laugh at, it is that great enemy of reason, virtue, and religion, the multitude; that numerous piece of monstrosity, which, taken asunder,

² Invariably, we justify all actions, including acts of tolerance or intolerance, on grounds of faith or reason. Therefore, the intersection of faith and reason is a fruitful point of departure for looking at religious tolerance.

seem men, and the reasonable creatures of God, but, confused together, make but one great beast, and a monstrosity more prodigious than Hydra.

--Sir Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici*

Although both are limited, faith and reason are essential to life; a tolerant society will balance the two, keeping them in harmony. They are our main tools in understanding the mystery of being, and we need both of them because, individually, each tells us so little. Reason, after all, is the domain of evidence, logic, likelihood, and the other means by which we determine if something is likely to be true. Perhaps Descartes' travails best illustrate the difficulty of exercising reason without faith. Descartes, in an effort to rebuild the edifice of human knowledge through the act of doubting everything he could think of, famously tried to figure out if he knew anything solely because of reason. In the end, all he could be certain of was the appearance of mental states. There is little actual knowledge in ephemeral mental states—indeed, as far as Descartes was concerned, it was uncertain if there were even a world outside of his thoughts! On the other hand, faith, alone, furnishes us with a great deal of beliefs, but without solid evidence we cannot think that these beliefs are likely to be true. By definition, faith dispenses with evidence, etc., which is why formal proofs or refutations of God's existence have a comical and really quite campy effect. One example of this campy pseudo-logic could be the recent visit of Dr. Kent Hovind to the NMU campus. He sought to prove that the world is 6,000 years old by demonstrating that dinosaurs and humans were contemporary at one point. The specific proof of this proposition was part of his larger effort to show that the claims of Christianity, as he interprets them, can be proven rationally. Of course, he overlooked the fact that if the claims of Christianity (or any religion) were rational, then they would by necessity not require faith. That was the most ironic part of his charade: his final proof, aimed at converting people to his system of beliefs, if accepted, negated the need for faith altogether! So, this, then, is the complementary nature of the relationship between faith and reason—the one fills in the gaps that the other cannot fill. Thus, neither reason nor faith can replace or preside over the other. Instead, both must moderate and augment each other at different times. If one predominates, either we will lack the faith-based conviction to act as we see fit or we shall lack the rationality to moderate any belief that

we concoct. After all, the purest philosopher is certain to not have faith in anything, and the purest religious devotee is certain to be rationally wrong.

It seems clear that we must separate what we probably know from what we simply believe, or else we will become intolerant. The result of relying on faith without rationality to moderate one's beliefs is staggering (and also, possibly, hideously inevitable). If our beliefs seem irrational to others, we may keep them, but should not act on them; unless evidence, logic, probability, etc. support a given claim, we should see the claim as it truly is—a dogma. All kinds of retrograde beliefs follow dogmatic belief-forming processes. For example, we see otherwise modern people seeking to integrate the laws of nature, not by modifying their laws of God but by modifying science.³ Of course, such views are relatively harmless. Elsewhere, the preponderance of faith has been far worse—the brutalities of the Inquisition bear witness to the scope of intolerance, as does the case of some Sudanese men wanting to kill the British teacher for letting her schoolchildren name the class teddy bear *Muhammad*. If faith presides over reason, fanatical beliefs proliferate. Of course, it is not just religious faith that needs to be moderated by reason. I can believe whatever I like, even if it is the product of wishful thinking, or hypnosis, etc., but, no matter how devotedly I believe it, I must keep in mind that it is not *likely to be true* unless reason gives me some ground to justify the belief. For instance, I may lock myself in a room and tell myself repeatedly that I am Teddy Roosevelt. After a long while, I may come to believe the proposition in question. If I am deprived of light and human contact, I may come to believe it fanatically. However, the fervor of my belief does not influence the likelihood of my belief being true. And so, with both religious and secular beliefs, we must sift through all beliefs carefully, subjecting our faith to our reason and vice versa. The act of doing so will ensure that we will not act purely out of faith (and will instead tolerate those whom we have no

³ Appealing to Genesis or the Qur'an is legitimate for faith-based arguments, but it does not apply to rational arguments, because appealing to a book has nothing to do with evidence, probability, etc.

rational grounds for disliking), and also that we will not become stagnantly skeptical (and possibly complaisant in watching others not be tolerated) from pure reason.

On Doubt and Trying

. . . My friend suggested, — "But these impulses may be from below, not from above." I replied, "They do not seem to me to be such; but if I am the Devil's child, I will live then from the Devil."

-Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Self-Reliance*

Regardless of our efforts, maybe faith and its passions are destined to control our faculty of reason. There is evidence to support this—after all, throughout history, people have often succumbed to the temptation of hating other people, a classic symptom of intolerance. However, even if we do not know whether it is possible to truly moderate faith with reason, we should still try to do so—striving to do right without knowing what right is, is part of the essence of being human. In other words, we cannot eliminate chance. We must simply try our best. Kierkegaard hails Abraham as the brave “knight of faith” because, in a moment of profound faith, he commits to killing his son Isaac, even though all reason tells him that he is mad. Although his actions are a great example of how not to moderate faith with reason, they do have an admirable grandeur, simply because Abraham wishes so fervently to do what is right. Perhaps we can have rationality itself as the lodestar of our faith. Who knows—in the end, despite my plan to cultivate reason as faith’s equal, I concede that the relation of reason and faith is to some extent an uncertainty.

Conclusion

What is certain is that the world would seem like a better place if humanity created more tolerant societies. When societies do not tolerate differences, then hatred, stagnancy of ideas, and violence against those who are different are a probable result. On the other hand, when societies are tolerant, people are open to new ideas, and civilization moves forward. Tolerant societies, in other words, are more practical in that they channel their creative energies towards more positive, less violent cultural goals. How does this happen? First, we need to take our own beliefs with a grain of salt. This would limit intolerance, and it is not difficult. After all, it does not diminish my beliefs to acknowledge that some people have other

beliefs and that they are not wrong for doing so. Only petty religions are threatened by peaceful differences of opinion. Second, we should educate ourselves, to actively create empathy and thus tolerance between and within groups of people. Religions bring lots of people together naturally, so they are rich practice grounds for the cultivation of empathy and tolerance, two virtues that require people of differing opinions and backgrounds. Or maybe this is not so easy to do. As they say in Mexico, it is easier to talk about bulls than it is to be in the ring. In this case, that means that it is easier to describe what steps are necessary than it is to convince many of the world's six billion people, including myself, that we are not living right. That proverb is very accurate. There is hope, though. Maybe the courage to 'get in the ring' and try to make the world better is where our blind faith, our human propensity to maintain faith against all odds, the cause of so much religious and philosophical discord, will come in most handy. At the very least, it will be far handier for this practical purpose than it ever has been to conceive rationally of which god created the earth. In the end, we probably cannot achieve the goal of a perfectly just humanity, but as individuals endowed with faith and reason, and blessed with many institutions that hold our societies together, we must struggle to create a more tolerant society.