

Worldview Debate and the Tolerance of Ideas

At the end of the spring season, 489 years ago, a two-month public disputation was waged between two of the most gifted debaters and intellects of the movement known today as the Reformation. The 16th century Reformation in Europe incorrigibly split religious, social, and political institutions apart on a level unparalleled in history, but more fundamentally the Reformation brought drastic transformation at the level of ideas—changing the way people in the West thought about the world around them. Martin Luther, the passionate and, to many, infamous contesteer of the old and traditional ways, came to the city of Leipzig in what is today Germany to debate the renowned Roman Catholic defender and polemist John Eck. The birth pangs of the modern world were just being felt across Europe when Luther entered the hostile city, protected by an armed guard of around 200.¹ Luther was well-aware of the fate that befell one of the last major challengers of Rome, the Bohemian reformer John Huss, a century prior: Huss objected to the Roman Catholic Church over many of the same issues that would occupy Luther's life in controversy, and in 1414, Huss, promised safe conduct by the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, came to the city of Constance to debate in a general council called by the church in order to clarify and, if possible, end the issues between Huss and his growing group of followers and the Roman Catholic Church. Within weeks, however, the council turned into a trail, and a few months later Huss was condemned and burnt to death.

Luther had vehemently questioned various practices of the Roman Catholic Church at least since 1517 when he wrote his *95 Theses* against the Church, but his debate with Eck was a turning point in the Reformation's history. The results of the Leipzig debate were significant in altering the course of the Reformation, leading Martin Luther to be identified as a proponent of

the ideas of John Huss, and, ultimately, to his excommunication and exile over the next few years. Europe would only be further engrossed and divided over the issues being disputed by laymen and scholars alike—and after the disputation, the divide seemed more irredeemable than ever. As the historian Donald Ziegler remarks in commentary on the debate, “Luther came to Leipzig as a reformer within the established church. He departed as an accused heretic, as one who would shortly inaugurate one of the most far-reaching mass movements in modern times.”²

This crucial disputation between Luther and Eck, lasting some two months, touched on numerous topics but it centered around one of the most significant questions of the Reformation, a question that, once it was raised, would shape the next five centuries of Western history: What is the authority of the church? Indeed, the question went much deeper and would soon become a dominate concern in Western thought: What is our authority in belief and life? “Luther’s speeches at Leipzig laid the foundation,” writes Thomas Lindsay in his classic history of the Reformation, “of that modern criticism of institutions which has gone so far in our own days.”³ Luther had only begun to see the implications of his challenges to the authority of the Church—it was not until his pivotal debate with Eck that Luther and the wider European world involved in the Reformation began to see the full implications of this question and the answers that can be given to it.

What importance does Luther’s debate with Eck have for us today, for us as students facing a world rampant with prejudice, discrimination, and violence over matters of belief? Besides being of historical importance, the debates of the Reformation can teach us as students, both positively and negatively, ways that we can fight prejudice and intolerance over ideas and beliefs. The Reformation abounds in examples of the power of debate in shaping the worldviews of others and fueling the intellectual growth of communities, as well as showing the terrible

levels that prejudice and violence over ideas can reach when left unchecked. Above all, the lesson to be learned is this: the best method we have for fostering tolerance and combating prejudice is debate at the level of worldviews.

Worldviews, to clarify, are the set of basic beliefs we all have, answering questions about the fundamental concerns of human life and existence—questions which are commonly called religious or philosophical, but are not limited to such categories. These fundamental beliefs about God, reality, truth, and the world and people around us—beliefs which we all have with varying levels of commitment and depth—are the perspectives from which we interpret our experiences and the world around us. It is over these central beliefs that people have typically faced prejudice, discrimination, and violence over (and these beliefs that people are most often willing to die for). College students are in a context highly conducive to questioning and debating such fundamental issues of human life, issues that have divided people and societies throughout history, and we would be wise to take advantage of our intellectual freedom to pursue this opportunity.

The impassioned but sometimes misguided defender of radical tolerance might, at this point, object to both the example used above and the suggestion for combating prejudice and intolerance of ideas. Doesn't debate over worldviews and the beliefs that form them only cause further intolerance toward others, rather than alleviate it? And didn't the debates of the Reformation only lead to countless acts of violence, even war and massacre, over the ideas of others? Rather than argue about matters of belief, shouldn't we all just agree to disagree, or even downplay or ignore our differences? The objections are not without warrant, but they will prove to strengthen and illuminate the example and thesis made above.

If the 16th century Reformation was a century filled with debate—perhaps witnessing more debates over essential questions of human existence than any other period in human history—it was also a century of incessant and innumerable religious wars and atrocities. From the Peasants’ Revolt to the Inquisition and the massacre of St. Bartholomew’s Day, there is no doubt the Reformation furnishes us with a plethora of examples of the extreme repercussions that unbridled intolerance and prejudice toward ideas can have. In America, we are well aware of the discrimination towards groups of different race or gender that still continues today. However, for better or worse we have been somewhat sheltered from experiencing the reality that throughout history people and societies have killed each other over matters of belief. It is a reality hard to face, both disappointing and perturbing, but we dare not downplay or ignore the susceptibility people and societies have had to carrying out acts of persecution. While the Reformation often failed to implement the ideas taking shape—such as Luther’s rejection of the ultimate authority of the Church—at the national, social, and institutional levels, it succeeded in laying the groundwork, through debate (both public and written), for the modern advancement of religious and intellectual freedom and tolerance, among many other progressions in Europe seen after the 16th century. The Reformation is thus both a negative and a positive example of the thesis: negatively, of the consequences that intolerance and prejudice toward others with different beliefs can have; and positively, of the power that debate has played throughout history, and the power it still has, in fostering intellectual tolerance and advancements.

The second objection still remains: Is worldview debate really an effective way to reduce intolerance and prejudice over differences in belief, or would such debate only prove to spread intolerance instead? It is of course doubtful that prejudice, discrimination, and violence over matters of belief will ever be completely eliminated, or that debate could ever put an end to

intolerance or persecution. Someone bent on killing another over differences in belief is, arguably, beyond the possibility of being reasoned with. Nonetheless, debate is one of the best ways—if not the only way—we have to combat intolerance and prejudice. Many reasons could be given to warrant this conclusion, but one in particular will be broadly considered. In her seminal work on genocide, violence, and ‘bullying,’ Barbara Coloroso elucidates what the history of genocide has made evident. The main precondition for genocide is contempt (or ‘bullying’) towards another differing group or belief system. “Once the authorization process is in full swing,” Coloroso summarizes, “and people become involved in actions without making any decisions (following orders), and without reflecting on the implications of these actions (unquestioning obedience), they find themselves in social situations that, in a sense, take on a life of their own.”⁴ She charts, sociologically and historically, how genocide results from something as banal and common as bullying and contempt. The process she describes can be shaped to fit violence and persecution toward belief in general: from a foundation of dogmatic and ignorant intolerance develops the beginnings of prejudice—prejudice rooted in misunderstandings and fallacies like straw-men caricatures spread by those who have already progressed further down the path to violence. When the power in a society shifts to the “bully” group, Coloroso describes, the “bullies” silence dissenters, discriminating socially, politically, and intellectually against the opposed group, and thus making it only a short step into physical violence, persecution, and even future genocide.⁵ The advance toward violence is most feasibly stopped at the level of prejudice and intolerance. Intolerance is dangerous when it is, as was mentioned, ignorant and dogmatic, based on fallacies, misrepresentations, and outright lies (one need only recall the false blame the Nazi government placed on the Jews, from the country’s economic difficulties to its social issues), which serve to desensitize the public to acts of discrimination and later violence against

the group. On the other hand, ignoring differences of belief will only heighten susceptibility to prejudice because opposing worldviews will face a low amount of criticism and questioning—there will not be enough “checks and balances” between opposing belief systems, in other words, which makes for fertile ground for misunderstandings and misrepresentations that can quickly become prejudices. Continuing debate between worldviews is thus needed to expose fallacies in reasoning, correct misconceptions, and prevent dangerous, prejudice-inducing deceptions from forming. It could be said that we have a moral obligation, in a sense, to keep people questioning, and to make sure they do not progress down the intellectually dogmatic, ignorant road to discrimination and violence.

We are often the worst critics of our own beliefs. No matter how certain we are that our worldview is correct, there is a constant need to be exposed to the beliefs and critiques of others to keep us questioning and reviewing our beliefs and the reasons we have for holding them. This is all the more true for the beliefs which have severe social and political implications, or when it seems a group is becoming prejudiced and dogmatically, dangerously intolerant toward other worldviews. As periods of history like the Reformation have unmistakably shown, debate at the level of worldviews is both a necessary and powerful means of advancing or changing a society. Such periods have also demonstrated the unfortunate consequences that rampant, unchecked prejudice and discrimination can have. We as students are in an optimum context for such debate, but also in a context where prejudice and bigoted intolerance can easily flourish. College might very well be the only period in our lives where we are learning with and around a large number of people who do not share many of our basic presuppositions and commitments. It might be the only chance in our lives to truly question and debate such beliefs and shape

ourselves and each other into people considerably less susceptible to committing prejudice or discrimination towards others of differing worldview.

¹ Thomas Lindsay, *History of the Reformation: Reformation in Germany from its Beginning to the Religious Peace of Augsburg*, Vol. 1 (Kessinger Publishing, 2003). 236.

² Donald Ziegler, ed., *Great Debates of the Reformation* (New York: Random House, 1969), 34.

³ Lindsay, *History of the Reformation*, 239.

⁴ Barbara Coloroso, *Extraordinary Evil: A Short Walk to Genocide* (New York, NY: Nation Books, 2007), 108.

⁵ Coloroso, 55-56.