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Lecture 1: Paradoxes of Toleration

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Lecture 1

Paradoxes of Toleration

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In his book, *Terror in the Mind of God,* Mark Jurgensmeyer writes: 'Perhaps the first question that came to mind when televisions around the world displayed the extraordinary aerial attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon on September 11th 2001 was why anyone would do such a thing. When it became clear that the perpetrators' motivations were couched in religious terms, the shock turned to anger. How could religion be related to such vicious acts?' (Jurgensmeyer, 2000, p.xi). Jurgensmeyer's question is the central question of these lectures and it is worth beginning by pointing out that he is not alone in expressing bewilderment (and disbelief) at the possibility that religion might be the cause of acts of violence and indeed of terrorism. In his book *The Lesser Evil* Michael Ignatieff is also perplexed about how and why religious conviction might prompt violence and he concludes that appeals to religion as a justification for violence are not genuine manifestations of religious conviction but nihilist 'perversions' of it. He writes: 'A nihilist use of religious doctrine is one that perverts the doctrine into a justification for inhuman deeds and ignores any part of the doctrine which is resistant to its violent purposes. The nihilism here engages in a characteristic inversion: adjusting religious doctrine to rationalize the terrorist goal, rather than subjecting it to the genuine interrogation of true faith' (Ignatieff, 2004, p.123). Again, and according to Ignatieff, there is no genuine connection between religion and violence, but only a distortion, or perversion

of religious doctrine to make it fit the terrorist's evil aims. And Benjamin Barber also asserts that even though the terrorist claims to be motivated by religious conviction, he is in fact 'divested' of moral principles and of moral control. 'Like a killing machine, he operates without shame or remorse' (Barber, 2003, p.76).

In short, then, there is widespread scepticism amongst modern commentators about the possibility that religious belief might dictate or license violence. Those who write about 9/11, about the London bombings of 7 July 2005, about the Bali bombings, and about other recent terrorist attacks, are prone to interpret them as manifestations of fanaticism, or of insanity, or of inhumanity, or of political ambition, but rarely as resulting from the dictates of genuine, and deep, religious conviction. This denial that religious conviction can prompt violence strikes me as a mistake – and a mistake which has serious, indeed potentially disastrous, political implications. So my overall aim in these lectures is to explain and defend the claim that there can be a direct and intimate connection between religion, on the one hand, and violence, intolerance, and persecution, on the other. However, in saying this, I am not claiming that religion is, by its very nature, evil. I am simply claiming that, both historically and conceptually, religious belief is closely allied to violence in ways which we ignore or deny at our peril. Indeed, the history of toleration in general and of religious toleration in particular, provide evidence that religion and violence are often very close companions.

My argument proceeds in four stages: in this, first, lecture, I will say something about toleration as a philosophical concept, about why toleration is, in various ways, problematic, and about why religious toleration is acutely problematic. To anticipate, we believe (most of us) that toleration is good, and that intolerance is bad. That is to say, at the individual level, and other things equal, we approve of

people who are tolerant and disapprove of people who are intolerant. Similarly at the political level we commend states which display tolerance and are hostile to those which do not. However, it is very difficult to say <u>why</u> we think toleration to be praiseworthy either at the individual level or at the political level, and it is even more difficult to explain why the toleration of religious difference is praiseworthy or desirable. In other words, toleration is a paradoxical concept, and the paradox is at its most stark in religious cases. This is the argument I wish to explain and defend in this, first, lecture.

In the next lecture, I will move from conceptual and philosophical considerations to historical ones. My aim will be to explain how problems of toleration (and especially of religious toleration) have manifested themselves historically. Here I will focus on the religious wars that disfigured Europe in the 17th century, and my claim will be that those wars offer us both a very stark example of the problems associated with religious toleration and also a solution to those problems. If we want to know why religious toleration is especially difficult, we should turn our attention to 17th century Europe; and if we want to know why religious toleration is nonetheless possible, we should also turn our attention to 17th century Europe. That will be the subject of the second lecture.

The third lecture will focus on modern understandings of religious violence and, specifically, of religiously-motivated acts of terrorism. Here, I will suggest that those modern commentators (Ignatieff, Goodin, Barber and others) who interpret terrorist acts as political or pathological rather than religious, ignore the lessons of the 17th century and, thereby run the risk of exacerbating our problems rather than ameliorating them.

In the fourth, and final, lecture, I will offer an understanding of modern religious violence which attempts to draw upon the lessons of history and to take seriously the distinctive nature of religious conviction and the philosophically problematic character of religious toleration. This understanding will, I hope, enable us to answer Jurgensmeyer's question 'How can religion be related to vicious acts?' I begin, however, with a discussion of the concept of toleration and of the paradoxes and puzzles associated with it.

The Concept of Toleration

In a justly famous article entitled 'Toleration as a Moral Ideal', Peter Nicholson defines toleration as comprised of the following 6 component parts:

1. *Deviance*. What is tolerated deviates from what the tolerator thinks, or does, or believes should be done.

2. *Importance*. The subject of the deviation is not trivial.

3. *Disapproval*. The tolerator disapproves morally of the deviation.

4. *Power*. The tolerator has the power to try to suppress or prevent (or at least to oppose or hinder) what is tolerated.

5. *Non-rejection*. None the less, the tolerator does not exercise his power, thereby allowing the deviation to continue.

6. *Goodness*. Toleration is right and the tolerator good.

In summary, then, and according to Nicholson, 'toleration is the virtue of refraining from exercising one's power to interfere with others' opinion or action although that deviates from one's own over something important and although one morally disapproves of it' (Nicholson, 1985, pp. 158-173). Disapproval is central to toleration and without disapproval we have only indifference, or licence[1].

However, so defined, toleration is somewhat puzzling, even paradoxical, for if toleration is a matter of permitting what we disapprove of or believe to be morally wrong, then the question arises: how can it be right to permit what is wrong? If something is wrong, then surely we should resist it and, if possible, prevent it. What reasons could we have for permitting it, and what grounds could we have for thinking it a positive virtue to permit it? These questions express what has come to be known as the 'paradox of toleration' – the paradox that seems to be inherent in claiming that it can be morally right to allow what is, or is believed to be, morally wrong. The paradox is eloquently expressed by D.D. Raphael in an article entitled 'The Intolerable'. Raphael writes:

> To disapprove of something is to judge it to be wrong. Such a judgement does not express a purely subjective preference. It claims universality; it claims to be the view of any rational agent. The content of the judgement, that something is wrong, implies that the something may properly be prevented. But if your disapproval is reasonably grounded, why should you go against it at all? Why should you tolerate? Why, in other words, is toleration a virtue or a duty? (Raphael, 1988, p.139).

[1] Some writers define toleration in terms of what is merely disliked rather than morally disapproved of. I do not discuss these writers here, as the important questions for my purpose arise when what is tolerated is not merely disliked but disapproved of. For a discussion of the claim that toleration requires only dislike and not disapproval see Mendus 1989, p.10ff.

One answer, of course, is that toleration is not always a virtue or a duty. Toleration has its limits and we do not tolerate, nor do we think it right to tolerate, rape, theft, or murder, for example. But these reflections on the limits of toleration merely compound the problem. We need to know how toleration can <u>ever</u> be morally right, how it can <u>ever</u> be thought to be a virtue in individuals and a duty on the state, so to be told that in fact it is sometimes a virtue (but not always) simply adds to our difficulties rather than solving them. What we need therefore is an explanation and justification of the conviction that toleration is a virtue, together with an account of its proper limits. In short, we need an answer to the question, 'Why tolerate?'. In attempting to answer this question my primary focus will be on toleration at the level of the state (political toleration), not at the level of the individual, though what I say may well have implications for toleration at the individual level.

<u>Why Tolerate? The Pragmatic Justification</u>

One answer to the question 'why tolerate?' draws attention to the practical dangers which may be consequent upon a refusal to tolerate and, in particular, to the possibility that intolerance will generate political unrest and civil strife. The thought here simply is that, in some cases, we must tolerate others lest they resort to violence against us and, when this danger threatens, we may judge that toleration is a price

worth paying in order to ensure peace and stability in the state. Indeed, this was one of the most important considerations to emerge during the Reformation period in Europe of which one writer notes:

> The latter half of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth century brought about one of the most passionate and calamitous series of wars that Europe had ever experienced. The early Reformation had been, in hindsight, remarkably free from bloodshed; the honeymoon, however, lasted only a short while. It was inevitable that the growing division between Christian churches in Europe would lead to a series of armed conflicts for over a century. Protestants and Catholics would shed each others' blood in prodigious amounts in national wars and in civil wars. These struggles would eventually shatter the European monarchical traditions themselves. The monarchy, which had always seemed an impregnable political institution, was challenged by Protestants unhappy with the rule of Catholic kings. The final result of these struggles would be the overthrow and execution of Charles I in England in the middle of the seventeenth century, an historical earthquake that permanently changed the face of Europe.
>
> (http://www.wsu.edu/~dee/REFORM/COUNTER.HTM) accessed 13 June 2008.

In 17th century (post-Reformation) Europe people had dramatically different and conflicting religious beliefs, and the attempt to 'tame' these differences through state imposition of orthodoxy proved disastrous. Religious intolerance delivered bloodshed on a massive and unprecedented scale, and by the end of the 17th century there were

compelling practical reasons for adopting a more tolerant attitude towards the unorthodox and the non-conformist. Whatever the moral status of toleration, the Reformation and the Wars of Religion demonstrated its practical necessity and historically toleration seems to have been, in no small part, the child of political exhaustion.

However, this pragmatic defence of toleration - a defence in terms of political peace and stability - has its limits. Most obviously, it is an argument which 'cuts both ways', for if there are cases in which toleration is necessary in order to secure political peace, there are also cases in which <u>intolerance</u> may be necessary for the very same reason. To put the same point slightly differently, if our main concern in politics is to secure and maintain peace and good order, then toleration will not always be advisable, for toleration can sometimes generate political unrest. To see this, consider a specific 17th century case - the case of John Bunyan, preacher, tinker, and author of *Pilgrim's Progress*. Bunyan was a Puritan, a man of profound religious conviction, who believed himself to have been called by God to preach the gospel and thus to ensure the salvation of souls. However, he also lived at a time of considerable political fragility when preaching was something that was likely to prompt unrest and, to that extent, was as much a political as a religious matter. In 1660 Bunyan was arrested for preaching without a licence and was sent to prison for 3 months. At the end of the 3 months, he refused to desist from preaching, and his period of detention was therefore extended. He spent, in total, nearly 12 years in Bedford gaol and was released in 1672 when Charles II issued the Declaration of Religious Indulgence. This extended period of imprisonment was (to recall) Bunyan's punishment for preaching without a licence. On the face of things, the punishment seems massively disproportionate to the offence he committed, and the treatment meted out by the

judges on behalf of the state seems grotesquely intolerant. However, commenting on Bunyan's case, the historian, Christopher Hill, writes:

> When Bunyan faced the Bedfordshire justices in 1661, he thought he was refusing to give up his God-given vocation of preaching: they thought he was a dangerous agitator who was stirring up class hostility in the very delicate situation of post-Restoration England, just recovering from a revolution in which the revolutionaries had spoken on behalf of the poor, as Bunyan did ... The Bedfordshire gentry believed it to be their duty to prevent disorder, and in particular to prevent any revival of the revolutionary activities of the forties and fifties. Bunyan's motives were religious, not political, not revolutionary. Nonetheless, they led him to take actions which the Bedfordshire justices could not but regard as seditious. (Hill, 1999, pp.31-2).

I will return to this quotation in later lectures. For now, however, the point I wish to emphasise is that, in the political circumstances of post-Restoration (17th century) England, toleration might not be a source of peace, but rather a cause of political unrest and civil strife. One of Bunyan's favourite Biblical texts - a text on which he preached many times – was Matthew 19.24: 'it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for the rich man to enter the Kingdom of God'. Preaching sermons based on this text was, to put it mildly, politically inflammatory. It suggested an opposition to monarchy which, a mere 12 years after the execution of Charles I (1649), was hardly helpful and which left the justices with little alternative but to imprison Bunyan as seditious, treacherous, and a dangerous influence on the lower classes. To quote Christopher Hill again:

For the Bedfordshire gentry Bunyan's preaching, even if it did not directly incite to rebellion, fanned the discontent that many felt with the restored regime and church. Subjectively, Bunyan could honestly deny subversive intentions. Objectively, his refusal to promise not to preach was threatening. The very claim that preaching was a vocation was subversive; his vocation was being a tinker. Mechanic preaching had been the cause of all the trouble in the 1640s and 1650s. Now was the gentry's chance at last to put mechanics back in their place. Bunyan 'could not be released unless I would promise to preach no more'. He was convicted in January 1661. (Hill 1988, p.107).

The case of John Bunyan highlights the fact that a pragmatic defence of toleration - a defence in terms of its tendency to promote political peace - will cut both ways and will, by its very nature, have nothing to say about why toleration might be thought a virtue in individuals and a moral duty in states. On this account, toleration is simply a 'police matter', and policies of toleration will be displaced by policies of intolerance and persecution should the latter turn out to be the best means of securing peace in particular circumstances.

If, therefore, we want to explain why toleration might be considered a positive good - if we want to explain why it might be thought to be a virtue in individuals and moral requirement of states - we must look elsewhere, and one very important place to look is in the work of the 19th century English philosopher, John Stuart Mill.

<u>Diversity and Autonomy</u>

In his famous essay *On Liberty* Mill offers a principled (rather than a purely pragmatic) defence of toleration when he writes:

> If a person possesses any tolerable amount of common sense and experience, his own mode of laying out his existence is the best, not because it is the best in itself, but because it is his own mode. Human beings are not like sheep; and even sheep are not undistinguishably alike. A man cannot get a coat or a pair of boots to fit him, unless they are either made to his measure, or he has a whole warehouseful to choose from: and is it easier to fit him with a life than with a coat, or are human beings more like one another in their whole physical and spiritual conformation than in the shape of their feet? (Mill, 1978, pp. 132-133).

Mill makes two very significant claims here, both of which have been hugely influential in defending toleration as a moral good and not merely as a police matter or a matter of political expediency: the first is that people are, by nature, different from one another ('human beings are not like sheep'); the second is that this is not something to be regretted, but is natural, predictable, and a reason for allowing people to determine the shape and character of their own lives unimpeded by others ('a person's own mode of laying out his existence is the best, not because it is the best in itself, but because it is his own mode').

These two considerations - considerations of diversity and considerations of autonomy - provide us with reasons for thinking that toleration is a virtue in individuals and a moral requirement on states. If we believe that people are naturally different in their temperaments and preferences, and if we also believe that it is important for them to be able to express those differences – to be, as we might say, the 'authors' of their own lives, then a requirement of toleration follows more or less straightforwardly. I should tolerate (some of) your behaviour even though I disapprove of it because, in the first place, I recognise that people are different from one another and, in the second place, I accept that they have a right to decide on the shape of their own lives. Moreover, and by extension, the state should tolerate different kinds of people, different 'modes of existence' as Mill puts it, because (again) differences between people are to be expected and because autonomy is a very great value for individuals and a value which the state should protect on their behalf.

So if, for example, we believe that different people naturally have different sexual preferences, and if we also believe that it is important for them, as adult human beings (not children or animals), to be able to live in accordance with those preferences, then we will be inclined to tolerate homosexual activity between consenting adults even if we ourselves dislike or disapprove of homosexuality. The naturalness of diversity, when coupled with the value of autonomy, can show us why toleration is not simply a police mater, but a virtue in individuals and also in the state. Indeed, Mill's arguments from diversity and autonomy were amongst the arguments invoked by the members of the United Kingdom Wolfenden Committee which, in the 1950s, recommended the de-criminalization of homosexuality.

Here, then, is a case in which appeals to diversity and autonomy work together to show both why toleration might be necessary (because people are different) and

why it might be morally good (because their well-being depends, in part, on being free to decide on a 'mode of existence' for themselves). Intolerance, on this account, is wrong because it is a denial of people's standing as autonomous beings. Obviously, this defence of toleration has its limits: as I noted earlier, we don't (I take it) think that those whose preferred way of life involves rape, or theft, or murder, should be tolerated. There are limits both to legitimate diversity and to the permissible exercise of autonomy. Nonetheless, the concepts of diversity and autonomy provide a defence of toleration which shows why it might be thought morally good and not simply politically expedient. They show why we can think it morally incumbent upon us to permit some (though not all) actions which we disapprove of and believe to be morally wrong.

However, and whatever its merits in defending the toleration of diverse styles of life or 'experiments in living' as Mill calls them, this defence of toleration seems to be of limited use when we turn to religious toleration, and the reason for this is that, in the case of religious belief, the values of diversity and autonomy are (often) thought to be insignificant by comparison with two different, and conflicting, considerations: truth and salvation. I turn now to these.

Religious Toleration: Truth and Salvation

In his book, *Political Liberalism*, John Rawls writes:

> When moral philosophy began, say with Socrates, ancient religion was a civic religion of social practice, of civic festivals, and public celebrations.

Moreover, this civic religious culture was not based on a sacred work like the Bible or the Koran … As long as one participated in the expected way and recognised the proprieties, the details of what one believed were not of great importance. It was a matter of doing the done thing and being a trustworthy member of society, always ready to carry out one's civic duties as a good citizen – to serve on juries or to row in the fleet in war – when called upon to do so. It was not a religion of salvation in the Christian sense and there was no class of priests who dispensed the necessary means of grace; indeed immortality and eternal salvation did not have a central place in classical culture. (Rawls 1993, p.xxi)

However, and as Rawls goes on to explain, all this changed in the 16th and 17th centuries when, with the rise of Protestantism, salvation gained centre stage, and when one's prospects of attaining salvation were thought to depend on having the right beliefs. Unsurprisingly, however, there was disagreement about which beliefs <u>were</u> the right ones – the ones necessary to secure salvation, and now the scene was set for intolerance and persecution on a massive scale. For what could be more important than life everlasting, and if obtaining life everlasting depended on having the right beliefs, then those beliefs must be secured by whatever means were necessary. Persecution and intolerance in this life would be justified by glory in eternity. It was this conviction (a salvationist conviction) that prompted intolerance in both individuals and states, and it was this conviction that led to religious persecution and religious violence.

The structure of the problem which is central to these lectures is as follows: toleration, I have said, is the virtue of refraining from interfering with the actions or

beliefs of others even though one believes them to be wrong and even though one has the power to prevent them. Toleration is a matter of permitting what we believe to be wrong, and toleration is a moral virtue when and insofar as we think it not simply expedient but right to allow what is wrong. This, however, is paradoxical. How can it be right to allow what is wrong? Answers in terms of political expediency are inadequate because they don't show us why toleration is right or good. They show us only (and at most) why it might be necessary in order to secure peace. They are also inadequate because there are circumstances in which securing peace requires intolerance, not toleration at all. In short, then, the argument from political expediency doesn't always commend toleration, and even when it does commend toleration, it commends it for the wrong reasons.

By contrast, arguments which appeal to the values of diversity and autonomy <u>do</u> tell us why toleration is morally good, but they seem to lack purchase in the most difficult religious cases. For those religious believers to whom salvation is central, diversity and autonomy are insignificant. What matters for these people is not that I lead my own life in my own way while recognizing that others are different from me; what matters is that I attain life everlasting, and attaining life everlasting does not depend on having my own (autonomous) beliefs or on living my life in my own way; it depends on have the <u>right</u> beliefs, and on living my life in a way that is pleasing to God. (As the 17th century French theologian, Bossuet, is said to have put it: 'I have the right to persecute you, because I am right and you are wrong, and you have no right to persecute me for the same reason'). So, even if the general problem of toleration can be partly addressed and alleviated by appeal to diversity and autonomy, the specific problem of <u>religious</u> toleration cannot – not, at any rate, once religion has a salvationist character. Indeed, it is exceedingly difficult to see how toleration could

be commended as a virtue to those who have salvationist religious convictions. From their perspective, where could the virtue be in permitting people to endanger their immortal souls by behaving in a way that is displeasing to God?

My central question is 'How can religion be related to violent acts?' and my answer (so far) is that when religion takes a salvationist form it is clearly compatible with - and may even seem to demand - acts of violence, persecution and intolerance. Salvationist religion is the place at which defences of toleration meet their Waterloo. Or so it seems. However if, as I have suggested, the 17th century was the point at which religious intolerance and persecution were at their most rampant, it was also, and for that very reason, the point at which a new defence of religious toleration was most needed. In 17th century Europe the phoenix of religious toleration arose from the ashes of religious violence, religious persecution, and religious intolerance. How that happened, and what its implications are for us and for the problems of the 21st century is the topic of the next lecture.