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Lecture 2

Religion and Toleration

In the previous lecture I noted that where religious conviction has a salvationist character, it will often be very difficult to justify toleration: what matters for salvationist religious believers is not that people lead their lives in their own way while recognising that others are different; what matters is that everyone shall attain life everlasting, and for most salvationist religious believers life everlasting does not depend on leading one's life according to one's own beliefs, it depends on leading one's life according to the correct beliefs – beliefs that are pleasing to God. It is for these reasons, then, that religious toleration is especially problematic. Although, in general, arguments from diversity and autonomy will suffice to show why toleration is a virtue in both individuals and states, in the religious case, diversity and autonomy are trumped by considerations of truth and salvation, and this fact is graphically illustrated by the religious intolerance and persecution that characterised 17th century Europe.

However, 17th century Europe does not only show us how religion may be allied to violence; it also shows us how, over time, religious violence yielded to religious toleration. Insofar, then, as our problem in the 21st century is a problem about how to understand and respond to religiously motivated acts of violence, it is a problem which was both encountered and answered in 17th century Europe. We may

therefore gain some insight into the problem of religious toleration generally and into our own problems in the 21st century in particular by looking back to 17th century Europe and to the ways in which the religious conflict and religious persecution which disfigured Europe for over 100 years were finally overcome.

In this lecture, then, I will try to do three things: first, I want to suggest some ways in which our world (the world post 9/11)¹ is like 17th century Europe; second, I want to explain how religious intolerance was overcome in 17th century Europe; and finally I want to foreshadow the topic of the next lecture by indicating what lessons the 17th century may contain for us. I begin, however, with the claim that our world (the world post 9/11) is like 17th century Europe.

Religious Toleration then and Now

The most obvious way in which our world is like 17th century Europe is that both worlds are characterized, in no small part, by religious intolerance, violence, and persecution. This may seem too obvious to need mentioning, but I do mention it because, perhaps surprisingly, it is a characteristic of our world that has only recently emerged. For most of the 20th century violence in general and terrorism in particular, were not associated with religious conviction, but rather with political or ideological commitment. In short, religiously-motivated violence is - for us - new. Bruce Hoffman of the Rand Corporation emphasises this in his article 'Lessons of 9/11' when he writes:

¹ I should emphasize that I use the expression 'post 9/11' as a kind of shorthand and I don't mean to imply either that 'the world changed' on September 11th 2001, or that there were no historical precursors to 9/11. On the contrary, part of my claim in this series of lectures is that, in various important respects, our world is not unlike 17th century Europe.

While religion and terrorism do share a long history, until the 1990s this particular variant had largely been overshadowed by ethnic- and nationalist-separatist or ideologically motivated terrorism. Indeed, none of the 11 identifiable terrorist groups active in 1968 (the year credited with marking the advent of modern, international terrorism) could be classified as “religious.” Not until 1980 in fact—as a result of the repercussions from the revolution in Iran the year before—do the first “modern” religious terrorist groups appear: but they amount to only two of the 64 groups active that year. Twelve years later, however, the number of religious terrorist groups had increased nearly six-fold, representing a quarter (11 of 48) of the terrorist organizations who carried out attacks in 1992. Significantly, this trend not only continued, but accelerated. By 1994, a third (16) of the 49 identifiable terrorist groups could be classified as religious in character and/or motivation. In 1995, their number increased yet again, to account for nearly half (26 or 46 percent) of the 56 known terrorist groups active that year. Thus, by the middle of the decade, the rise of religious terrorism was clear. (Hoffman, 2005)

So the statistics show that religiously-motivated terrorism is, for us, comparatively new. However, it is not the statistics that interest me most. What interests me most is the fact that, for much of the 20th century, political philosophers, too, believed that religious toleration was a ‘done deal’, a completed chapter in the history of western liberal democracies. Thus, in his 1986 Morrell Address on Toleration, the late Maurice Cranston concluded that ‘to a great extent, we can perhaps say that the Locke’s battle for religious toleration [the 17th century battle] has been won – not in

the Islamic world, to be sure, and not in Ireland; but among Christians generally' (Cranston, 1991, p.93). Similarly, in his 1996 Castle Lectures, later published under the title *On Toleration*, Michael Walzer writes: 'most people in the United States, and in the West generally, believe that religious toleration is easy. They read about religious wars near to home (in Ireland and Bosnia) or far away (in the Middle East or Southeast Asia) with incomprehension. Religion in these places must be contaminated by ethnicity or nationalism, or it must take some extreme, fanatical, and unusual form. For haven't we proved that freedom of worship, voluntary association, and political neutrality work together to reduce the stakes of religious difference?' (Walzer, 1997, p.66). And finally, John Rawls comments on 'our settled convictions' in favour of religious toleration and goes on to note that 'our most basic problems' are not problems of religion but problems of race, ethnicity and gender. Indeed, Rawls goes so far as to compare religious intolerance with slavery – both are ideas whose time has gone, and he seems to think that there is no more chance of a revival of religious intolerance – no more question of restrictions on religious freedom - than there is of a revival of slavery. (Rawls, 1993)

I make no apology for emphasising (and perhaps over-emphasising) the fact that the rise of religiously motivated violence is a comparatively recent, and largely unexpected, phenomenon for us. Part of my argument in this lecture series as a whole will be that the fact that it is a comparatively recent phenomenon is highly significant. With the benefit of hindsight, we can certainly see that Cranston, Walzer, and Rawls were mistaken in thinking that religious toleration was a done deal or a settled conviction, but it seems to me that their - and our - certainty that religious toleration was 'no longer a problem' is itself a significant factor in the resurgence of religious intolerance. To put the point straightforwardly, we need to know why there has been

such a massive increase in religiously motivated violence and (connectedly) in religious intolerance. Why did something that, only 20 years ago, appeared ‘settled’ suddenly become problematic and urgent? Part of my answer will be that the belief that religious intolerance was dead itself constitutes a contributory factor in the explanation of its resurgence. We are told that those who forget history are doomed to repeat it, and my hunch is that this is the case with religious intolerance and religiously motivated violence.

In a book entitled *John Locke’s Politics of Moral Consensus*, Greg Forster makes the point graphically when he writes:

Western liberalism has come full circle. It was born when members of western societies gradually learned, over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, to tame their violent religious fanaticisms and co-exist as members of shared political communities. This accomplishment was so successful that fundamental moral disagreement and religious violence became steadily less threatening to society, and various other types of problem moved to the top of the agenda. Liberal political theory became less and less involved with what was, historically, its foundational concern: getting members of different religions to live together in peace Now the circle has closed, and in a very real sense, we are back where we started. Violent religious fanaticism and fundamental moral discord threaten the legitimacy and even the very existence of liberal societies. Liberal theorists are failing to cope with these challenges adequately because their longstanding neglect of moral and religious problems has left them unfamiliar with the basic philosophical concepts that once helped

them better understand religious belief and moral law, and hence the intricate relationship between religion, morality, and politics (Forster, 2005, p.1).

Forster's suggestion is that western liberalism is, in a sense, a victim of its own success. The triumph of toleration that occurred at the end of the 17th century was so thorough-going that we have forgotten not only the extent and depth of the problem, but also the nature of the solution. This strikes me as right, and I would add that, in forgetting the depth of the problem, we have acted in ways which almost guarantee its recurrence. It is not simply that our world is characterised by religious violence, it is also the case that it is characterized by religious violence in part because we have forgotten the lessons of the 17th century; lessons which emphasise both the distinctive nature of religious belief and its singular significance for believers. It is those lessons that we need to re-learn if we are to understand and combat the religiously-motivated violence of the 21st century.

And so, in fulfilment of the promise I made in the first lecture, I will now try to explain how toleration may be commended as a good even to those who have a salvationist understanding of religion. To repeat the problem with which I ended the first lecture, it is exceedingly difficult to see how toleration could be commended as a good to those who have salvationist religious beliefs. Although considerations of diversity and autonomy can provide a principled defence of toleration in many cases, the case of religion is one in which truth and salvation appear to trump diversity and autonomy, for where could be the value in permitting people to endanger their immortal souls by behaving in a way that is displeasing to God? The value of

autonomy appears slight when set against the significance of life everlasting and this fact renders religious toleration problematic. Or so it seems.

However, in the 17th century, John Locke provided a defence of religious toleration which remains powerful and compelling. It is also, I believe a defence that has important lessons for us. I therefore turn now to Locke's *Epistola de Tolerantia* (*Letter Concerning Toleration*) (Locke, 1991), and to his argument in defence of religious toleration.

The Taming of Intolerance

How does Locke justify toleration even in cases where religious belief takes a salvationist form? I will discuss two answers to this question: first I will say something about the 'traditional' answer (that is to say, the answer usually attributed to Locke by commentators on the *Letter*); second, I will suggest an alternative answer – an interpretation of Locke which, I think, offers a better understanding of his reasons for commending toleration to religious believers and for insisting on toleration on the part of the state. This second answer is also one which may be helpful for us when we try to deal with problems of religious intolerance and religiously motivated violence in our own times.

The Argument from Irrationality

According to what I have called the 'traditional' answer, Locke's defence of religious toleration rests upon his claim that religious persecution and coercion are irrational

because they cannot make people have the beliefs that are necessary for salvation. So, although it is indeed of the first importance that people attain salvation, and although salvation does indeed depend on having the right beliefs, it does not follow and it is not true (Locke says) that religious intolerance is justified. For that conclusion to follow, a further claim is needed, namely that coercion (persecution, intolerance) will induce the right beliefs – it will result in people believing the things that they need to believe in order to be saved. It is this that Locke denies. In particular, and crucially, he denies that the coercive power of the state can have any effect in bringing people to true belief. Thus:

The care of souls cannot belong to the civil magistrate, because his power consists only in outward force: but true and saving religion consists in the inward persuasion of the mind, without which nothing can be acceptable to God. And such is the nature of the understanding, that it cannot be compelled to the belief of anything by outward force. Confiscation of estate, imprisonment, torments, nothing of that nature can have any such efficacy as to make men change the inward judgement that they have framed of things. (Locke, 1991, p.18).

And again:

Neither the profession of any articles of faith, nor the conformity to any outward form of worship, as has been already said, can be available to the salvation of souls, unless the truth of the one, and the acceptableness of the other unto God, be thoroughly believed by those that so profess and practise.

But penalties are no ways capable to produce such belief. It is only light and evidence that can work a change in men's opinions; and that light can in no manner proceed from corporal sufferings, or any other outward penalties. (Locke, 1991, p.21).

The argument works, if it works at all, at both the individual and the political level: if coercion cannot, in fact, change belief, then persecution is irrational whether it is inflicted by one individual on another or by a political authority on its citizens. Salvation requires light, and light will not dawn as a result of threats, punishments, and coercive actions generally. Intolerance on the part of the state is therefore irrational because it is incapable of securing the ends it seeks to attain. This is the standard or traditional interpretation of Locke's central argument in his *Letter Concerning Toleration*.

Locke's claim that persecution is irrational has not gone uncriticized. In particular, Jeremy Waldron has argued vigorously that Locke is wrong to think that belief cannot be changed through coercion (torture, threat, imprisonment etc). He writes: 'Censors, inquisitors and persecutors have usually known exactly what they were doing, and have had a fair and calculating idea of what they could hope to achieve. If our only charge against them is that their enterprise was hopeless and irrational from the start, then we perhaps betray only our own ignorance of their methods and objectives'. (Waldron, 1991, p.120)

Although I concede that Waldron has a point here, I am not sure that it is as damaging as Waldron thinks. At one level, of course, Waldron is quite correct - coercion can change belief, and the fact that it can is, in part, what makes (for instance) the final chapters of George Orwell's *1984* so very chilling, for what has

happened by the end of the novel, and what Orwell relates to us, is the complete capitulation of Winston Smith to the Thought Police: 'He [Winston] put the white knight back in its place, but for the moment he could not settle down to serious study of the chess problem. His thoughts wandered again. Almost unconsciously he traced with his finger in the dust on the table: $2+2=5$. "They can't get inside you" she had said. But they could get inside you'. *1984* shows us that, as Waldron insists, and as Locke denies, it is possible to use coercion in order to change belief.

However, the crucial point here (or so it seems to me) is not whether persecutors can change beliefs, but whether, through coercion and persecution, they can secure the right kind of belief: belief that is pleasing to God. And it may be that, even if belief can be changed through coercion and persecution, any belief which is secured in that way is not pleasing to God. God, we might suppose, doesn't want coerced belief, but free and voluntary belief.

To see the point here, consider the following quotation from Locke's contemporary, Joseph Hall. Hall writes: 'The homeliest service that we doe in an honest calling, though it be but to plow, or digge, if done in obedience, and conscience of God's Commandment, is crowned with an ample reward; whereas the best workes for their kinde (preaching, praying, offering Evangelicall sacrifices) if without respect of God's injunction and glory, are loaded with curses. God loveth adverbs; and cares not how good, but how well' (as quoted in Taylor, 1989). In other words, God's interest may be not (or not only) in the truth of what people believe, but also (and more importantly) in their having those beliefs freely, voluntarily, willingly – adverbially, as Hall puts it.

So even if it is true (as Waldron alleges and as I agree) that persecutors can alter belief through coercion, this need not inflict a fatal wound on Locke's case

against religious persecution, for it may still be true that the belief which is brought about through coercion (through 'Fire and the Sword') is not the kind of belief that is pleasing to God, who demands free and willing worship, not coerced adherence.

There is a great deal more that could be said here, but I want to set the argument from irrationality aside because, in the end, and *pace* Waldron, I don't think that Locke's defence of toleration depends on the claim that persecution is irrational, but rather on the claim that it is irrelevant or – to use a word Locke employs himself – impertinent. In the remainder of this lecture I will try to spell out that claim and hint at some of the ways in which it might be instructive for us.

The Argument from Irrelevance

In order to understand Locke's position fully it is important to be clear both about the context in which he wrote and about his targets. The context, as I emphasised in the first lecture, was a Europe ravaged by apparently endless, and exceedingly bloody, religious disputes. To recall:

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>

This, then, was the world in which Locke wrote the *Letter Concerning Toleration*. It was a world in which Charles I had been executed, a world in which Locke's own close friend and patron, the Earl of Shaftesbury, was suspected (probably rightly) of being involved in a plot to assassinate Charles II, and a world in which (in France) Louis XIV had revoked the Edict of Nantes (1685) thus removing the last vestiges of toleration for French Protestants. It was a world in which Locke himself had been forced to flee Britain in fear of his life and to publish the *Letter Concerning Toleration* anonymously and in Latin. In short, this was a world of religious intolerance and of political confusion. Locke believed that the two were connected and that the political confusion was due, in no small part, to the widespread belief that the civil magistrate had both a right and a duty to enforce religious orthodoxy. At the beginning of the *Letter* he writes: 'I esteem it above all things necessary to distinguish exactly the business of civil government from that of religion, and to settle the just bounds that lie between the one and the other. If this be not done, there can be no end put to the controversies that will be always arising between those that have, or at least

pretend to have, on the one side, a concernment for the interests of men's souls, and, on the other side, a care of the commonwealth'. (Locke, 1991, p.17).

For Locke, the real mischief lay in the fact that, in 17th century Europe, 'heaven and earth' were mixed together, and no clear distinction was drawn between the political and the religious, between matters of State and matters of Church or, as Locke himself puts it, between the care of men's souls and the care of the commonwealth. Moreover, this intermingling of the religious and the political was not accidental. On the contrary, in 17th century England it was widely believed that political leaders had a legitimate interest in the souls of their subjects, and the Puritan divine, Richard Baxter, went so far as to declare that 'their doctrine is trayterous and intolerable who affirm ... that the Magistrate have nothing to do with matters of Religion, but are to leave all men to their consciences, and govern us as men, not as Christians, Churches, or Ministers' (as quoted in Stanton, 2006, p,89). Against this background, the challenge for Locke was to provide arguments for the separation of Church and State, and to provide arguments which would (or should) be acceptable to religious believers themselves. To this end, he first insists that Church and State should be separate, and then goes on to offer reasons for that separation. Interestingly, the reasons he offers are reasons from within religion itself. Thus, he defines the State (Commonwealth) in purely secular terms, insisting that it is 'a society of men constituted only for the procuring, preserving, and advancing of their own civil interests'. The Church, meanwhile, is a 'free and voluntary society'. 'It was' he says 'part of my liberty as Christian and a man to choose of what church or religious societies I will be as conducing most to the salvation of my soul of which I alone am judge and over which the magistrate hath no power at all'. So - Church and State are different kinds of things, with different purposes, and securing the salvation of

citizens is not part of the State's purpose or business: 'the care of Souls is not committed to the civil magistrate' Locke writes, and he continues 'it is not committed unto him, I say, by God: because it appears not that God has ever given any such authority to one man over another, as to compel anyone to his religion' (Locke, 1991, p. 18).

This, I believe, is the central point of Locke's argument against persecution and in favour of toleration. *Pace* Waldron, it is not the irrationality of persecution which most concerns Locke; it is the 'impertinence' (his word) of it. In taking it upon himself to try to secure salvation for another, the magistrate does, of course, act irrationally: he tries to do what cannot be done by external threat or punishment. Beyond that, however, and much more important for Locke, the magistrate who tries to secure belief by coercion interferes in what is not his business and, if he is a reflective and conscientious religious believer, he will know that this is not his business².

How will he know that it is none of his business? Here, Locke depends, ultimately, on two very simple propositions: the first is that salvation is of supreme importance; the second is that God is good. These propositions are ones, Locke thinks, to which (almost) all will agree. However, having once agreed that God is good, we must also agree that, being good, He will have provided us with all the faculties necessary for securing our own salvation and will not have left us prey to the care of others in this, most important, matter. It is because salvation is so important that there must be toleration; salvation is too important to leave to other people.

Let me just step back a moment and contrast Locke's position with the puzzle posed at the end of the previous lecture. The concern expressed there was that once

² In advancing this line of argument I am influenced by, and grateful to, my colleague Dr Timothy Stanton. See his excellent article 'Locke and the Politics and Theology of Toleration', *Political Studies*, Vol. 54, 2006, pp.84-102 (Stanton, 2006).

religion takes on a salvationist character, toleration becomes impossible to defend: the importance of attaining salvation seems to demand that people acquire the right beliefs by whatever means are necessary, and if that means exercising the coercive power of the state in an attempt to induce belief, then so be it. But this is not at all what Locke believes. For him, the salvationist character of religious belief, far from making religious toleration impossible, is in fact what makes it both necessary and desirable. Moreover, what is distinctive about Locke's defence of toleration is that it offers reasons for toleration from within religion itself; it 'speaks' to religious believers and aims to show them that as religious believers they should refrain from coercion and extend toleration to others. So, Locke takes the salvationist dimension of religion very seriously, and then uses it to show that, far from being impossible in the context of salvationist religious conviction, toleration is absolutely necessary, and that all who will but consult their consciences can see that this is so, for the requirement to tolerate is a requirement of religious belief itself.

The political philosopher John Plamenatz once suggested that although, in religious contexts, a stress on the right beliefs could be a source of fanaticism and persecution, it was also, historically, the source of a new conception of freedom. The religious conflict that marked (and marred) 17th century Europe resulted (he said) in one proposition 'Faith is supremely important and therefore all men must have the one true faith' gradually giving way to another 'faith is supremely important and therefore every man must be allowed to live by the faith which seems true to him'. And Plamenatz concludes: 'liberty of conscience was born not of indifference, not of scepticism, not of mere open-mindedness, but of faith' (as quoted in Coffey, 2000). To put the point very starkly, then: it is salvationist religion that gave us the problem of religious toleration, but it is also salvationist religion that gave us the solution to

the problem. Locke aims to show both the necessity and the morality of toleration for all who are religious believers, and he aims to do that by insisting, first, on a distinction between the proper sphere of politics and the proper sphere of religion, and second, on the paramount importance of each person being responsible for the care of his own soul.

Conclusion

My aim in this lecture has been to show how toleration might be thought morally good even by those who have a salvationist conception of religion. The problem, to repeat, is: if we believe that what matters is life everlasting, and if we believe that life everlasting can be attained only by having the right beliefs, then why should we extend toleration to those whose beliefs are, in our eyes, mistaken? How can it be good to allow people to endanger their own immortal souls? That was the question. The answer – Locke’s answer, given in the 17th century – is an answer that aims to show, first, that intolerance is irrational, since it cannot change belief (to which I have added the thought that, even if it can change belief, it cannot change it in a way that is pleasing to God. And that, after all, is what matters to religious believers).

Secondly, though, and more importantly, Locke’s defence of religious toleration is not simply a claim to the effect that intolerance is irrational; it is also a claim to the effect that it is ‘impertinent’. It is not the proper business of the magistrate, Locke says, to enforce orthodoxy. Crucially, this claim is made on the basis of an appeal to religion itself, for Locke’s conviction is that, if we will but think about it, we will see that the wrongness of coercion is dictated by religion, and the

moral necessity of toleration also springs from our religious beliefs. So Locke's argument operates from within religious belief and aims to show that religion itself calls for toleration.

This is all not the way we do things now. In the first lecture I noted that many (perhaps most) modern commentators on religious violence or religiously motivated terrorism deny that it is genuinely religious, and prefer instead to see it as either straightforwardly irrational (the manifestation of some kind of pathology), or as fundamentally political and strategic. For reasons which I hope are becoming clearer, I think this is a mistake: one lesson which we should learn from the 17th century is that the path from intolerance to peaceful co-existence consists (first) in taking religious belief very seriously indeed and (second) in trying to show that religious toleration is a requirement of religion itself. In the next lecture, I will ask how that lesson can usefully be mapped on to the modern world - the world 'post 9/11' - and in doing that I will take a close look at my central but, so far, unexplained, concept: the concept of terrorism.