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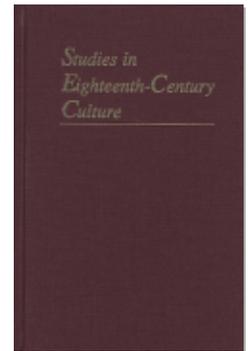
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Dissensus and Toleration: Reconsidering Tolerance in the Age of Enlightenment

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What do we mean when we speak of the Age of Enlightenment as the Age of tolerance? This contribution seeks to address what may at first glance seem an obvious question but turns out upon reflection to warrant serious consideration. For we know that the so-called Age of Reason was also an era of religious and political strife during which violence and fanaticism were omnipresent. Indeed, Enlightenment Europe was largely dominated by the conflicts that arose from the presence of rival faiths vying for political power and control. In the British Isles as well as on the continent in the lands regulated by the Treaty of Westphalia, violence and war fueled by religious zeal were regular and common occurrences. The period witnessed countless cases of intolerance and persecution, some of which continue to be uncovered even today.¹ Thus the legacy of the Enlightenment includes numerous examples of fanaticism, of which the Calas Affair, thanks to Voltaire, is arguably the most famous.²

Indeed, recent studies have challenged the narrative of tolerance. A number of revisionist histories have shown in particular that in early-modern Europe the relatively peaceful coexistence of individuals of different faiths—Christians, Jews, and Muslims—was the result of a series of negotiations and arrangements that affected the rituals and practices of everyday life.³ Today, however, Western Europe seems to have forgotten this history of

dissension, and together with it the lessons it ought to have learned from the experience of conflict. In the wake of the Charlie Hebdo affair, it seems essential to recall the fanaticism and persecution that continued to exist during the Enlightenment.

It is time to revise the myth of the age of tolerance as a period of consensus and to focus instead on the antagonisms surrounding this question. Recalling the violence and sharpness of this dissensus might actually lead to a better understanding of the current phenomenon of religiosity and plurality of beliefs in the West today. It might help us reconceptualize models for peaceful coexistence between different groups and help formulate new ways of handling what Etienne Balibar refers to as “dissonance” in the public sphere.⁴ More specifically, a return to the dissensus produced in and by the Enlightenment around the question of the free exercise of religion might also help us understand the problems raised by the new visibility of non-Christian religions in the west (Islam and Judaism) and allow for a better assessment of the phenomenon of religiosity today.

But first, it is important to recall that the idea of toleration that emerged from the period of Enlightenment does not consist in a minimal form of acceptance reluctantly granted to minority groups but in a true theory of human freedom and civil rights. A brief examination of John Locke’s *A Letter concerning Toleration*, one of the key texts of this tradition, reveals a forceful argument for an active duty of tolerance and a truly global vision of the question of religious freedom.⁵ Locke’s *Letter* offers a theoretical discussion of toleration as the foundation for the possibility of political freedom and civil rights that is accompanied by a series of pragmatic proposals. Largely neglected today, this text deserves serious reconsideration. In the context of the new rise of intolerance and fanaticism, Locke’s *Letter* still holds important lessons for us and for our modernity.

Written in the wake of the Exclusion Crisis and in the immediate aftermath of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, Locke’s *Letter* argues that religious persecution is as much a crime against religion as against the state.⁶ Locke opens his argument by positing tolerance as grounded equally in the Gospel and in human reason, defining toleration as “the chief characteristic mark of the true church.”⁷ For Locke, “true and saving religion consists in the inward persuasion of the mind” (18), and sincerity of belief is fundamental to salvation. To coerce or be coerced into believing are properly sins against God and incompatible with salvation: thus, nobody (no person or institution) has “any just right to invade the civil right and worldly goods of each other under pretense of religion” (26) just as no one can oppose the dictates of conscience.

Having posited toleration as fundamental to the Church, and forced concessions as improper and illegitimate, Locke goes on to establish a radical distinction between spiritual matters and civil ones, between the Church and the State. Outlining side by side the jurisdiction of the Magistrate and that of the Church, Locke declares that only the latter can be extended to the care and salvation of souls. Conversely, Locke argues that, although they are free to make their own laws and accept and reject whomever they please, churches have no jurisdiction in worldly matters. There is no overlap between what Locke calls the business of religion and the business of the commonwealth: such is his radical formulation of the separation of Church and State. The aim is to restrict the power of civil government “confined to the care of the things of this world” (19) so as to prevent it from interfering in the business of conscience.

Locke’s *Letter* does not stop there: it also outlines a positive duty of toleration. Toleration for Locke cannot simply be passive: it does not suffice to abstain from violence and all manners of persecution. Toleration must also be active: it includes the duty to act against intolerance. Here lies a dissymmetry: Locke can only exhort Churches to perform their duty of tolerance. He can only appeal to charity and imagine how happy Church and State might be “if the pulpits everywhere sounded with this doctrine of peace and toleration” (27). On the other hand, in the case of the commonwealth, Locke sees it as the Magistrate’s explicit duty to guarantee to all freedom “from all dominion over one another in matters of religion” (32). The Commonwealth must command with actions and not just persuade with words. It must be in the business of toleration: such is the full active meaning of the term as distinct from the more passive “tolerance.” Toleration conveys the full force of the laws that must be enacted on its behalf.

The commonwealth must thus provide freedom of worship and protect any actions that may be indifferent in their nature but are highly significant in their religious use, such as “the sprinkling of water and the use of bread and wine” (35). The commonwealth must make sure that nothing that is permitted for ordinary use is forbidden for a religious one. The commonwealth must act for political reasons, not from religious motivation. Locke’s example is the conditions under which the state could legitimately ban the ritual slaughter of animals. Only if the state were threatened with the possibility of famine could such an action be taken, in which case “the law is not made about a religious, but a political matter” (37).

Extending the idea that the care of each man’s salvation belongs only to himself, Locke’s argument in favor of toleration is applied not only to European minorities—Jews and Muslims— but to Native Americans as well. He analyzes the power dynamic between Muslims and Christians in the

Ottoman Empire, as well as the forced conversion of natives in the Americas. The text thus offers a global vision of the question of religious freedom. Locke argues that freedom of worship be granted to all, including dissenters.⁸ This is an argument for full toleration and not simply for “comprehension” or “indulgence” in the terms of the day.

Far from being a timid formulation of toleration, Locke’s *Letter* promotes a robust concept of freedom and civil rights. It is not a naïve dream but a concrete and pragmatic proposal. In this new era of religious fanaticism, the Enlightenment still has much to teach us. Locke’s *Letter concerning Toleration*, along with many others texts from this period, are resources for modern political theory and law.⁹ In conjunction with a new notion of the rights of inwardness and conscience, the period was preoccupied with the question of religious fanaticism. The philosophical problem addressed by the Enlightenment of how to find ways to curb the excesses of individual belief without impinging on the freedom of inner conviction continues to be ours today.

NOTES

1. See Benjamin J. Kaplan, *Cunegonde’s Kidnapping. A Story of Religious Conflict in the Age of Enlightenment* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2015).

2. The Protestant Jean Calas, accused of murdering his son Marc-Antoine to prevent him from converting to Catholicism, was sentenced to death on the wheel in 1762.

3. Benjamin J. Kaplan, *Divided by Faith: Religion, Conflict, and the Practice of Toleration in Early-Modern Europe* (Harvard Univ. Press, 2007) challenges the intellectual history of toleration proposed by Perez Zagorin, *How the Idea of Religious Toleration Came to the West* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2003).

4. Etienne Balibar, “Dissonance dans la laïcité,” *Mouvements* 33-34 (2004): 148–61.

5. First written in 1685 in Latin under the title *Epistola de Tolerantia* while he was in exile in Holland, Locke’s *Letter* was published in English translation in 1689. It is the first of four letters written by Locke between 1685 and his death in 1704.

6. The Exclusion Crisis resulted from Parliament Bills designed to prevent the Catholic James II from succeeding to the throne of England, Scotland, and Ireland (1679–1681). The 1598 Edict of Nantes, which granted some modicum of tolerance to French Protestants, was revoked by Louis XIV in 1685.

7. John Horton and Susan Mendus, eds. *John Locke: A Letter Concerning Toleration In Focus* (London: Routledge, 1991), 14.

8. Although Locke does not explicitly refer to Catholics, they are targeted in this passage.

9. Most notably, Pierre Bayle's *Commentaire philosophique*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Profession de foi du Vicaire Savoyard*, and Voltaire's *Traité sur la tolérance*.