allows for the (civil) exercise of intolerance, yet respect also demands that we tolerate, indeed *welcome*, diverse religious beliefs, even those with which we disagree!

When tolerance is understood as a fundamental civic virtue, closely tied to respect, it is easy to see how a tolerant person would be extremely wary of publicly criticizing another’s religion. Harmonizing tolerance and criticism is certainly possible, but as we have seen it requires complicated philosophical positions and nuanced terminological distinctions. In my experience as a professor, many students are uncomfortable or unfamiliar with such distinctions. Consequently, they are unwilling to withhold respect from beliefs because they see doing so as a form of intolerance. And so, instead of being a place for vigorous disagreement and debate, the tolerant classroom—and, perhaps, the tolerant society—becomes something else entirely. It is to these tolerant spaces that we now turn, to observe what happens when tolerance is elevated as an unconditional good without clarity about its meaning:

**II. When Religious Beliefs Are False (And Some of Them Must Be!)**

In pastor Todd Burpo’s bestselling book, *Heaven Is for Real*, Burpo recounts his 3-year-old son Colton’s recollection of a near-death trip to heaven. Colton describes seeing Jesus’s rainbow-colored horse, a sister miscarried by his mother (unknown to him at the time), and his own pint-sized wings, among other details.

As part of a course on theories of religion, I had my students read portions of Colton’s account and then asked if he had really gone to heaven. The question got some giggles, but I was surprised when no one took a stand on the truth of his claims. Instead, they remained silent.

“Who am I to say if he’s right or wrong?” one young woman finally said. “I mean, if he believes it then it’s true for him. Right?”
Professors of religious studies are subject to this bumper-sticker postmodernism on a regular basis. It’s true for him so it’s true; there’s no way to prove beliefs right or wrong; facts are just social constructs—and so on. Head over to the astronomy department or the history department and you won’t hear these kinds of comments, at least not nearly as often. No one suggests that just because Holocaust denial exists, the Holocaust might not have happened for people who don’t believe in it. When astrophysicist Neil DeGrasse Tyson publicly debunked rapper B.o.B.’s flat-earth theory, people everywhere cheered—and no one suggested that the earth was actually flat for B.o.B. because he believes it—or that Tyson should tolerate the mistaken belief.¹³

But the value of religious tolerance—enshrined in the founding documents of nearly all modern liberal democracies—problematicizes the criticism of religious practices and beliefs. When it comes to religion, my students, together with a large portion of the general public, are what Stephen Prothero describes in God Is Not One as “good with ‘respectful’ but allergic to ‘argument.’”¹⁵ To tell someone that her identity is bound up with beliefs that are false or pernicious seems to be the very definition of intolerant. Better to Coexist, as the popular bumper sticker has it. For this reason, religiously tolerant political systems remain agnostic about religion. Martha Nussbaum puts it well: “Even if governments don’t coerce people, the very announcement that a given religion (or antireligion) is the preferred view is a kind of insult to people who in all conscience cannot share this view and wish to continue to go their own way.”¹⁶

Nussbaum allows that although governments should not pronounce on the veracity of religious views, individuals should be able to do so, at least by law. But legislation does not exhaust the reasonable mandates of religious tolerance. As Nussbaum notes, the virtue of civility

has extra-legal ramifications for what constitutes intolerance. It may be legal to say to a passing stranger in a hijab that Islam is misogynistic; nevertheless, doing so is uncivil—a clear-cut example, to my mind, of undesirable religious intolerance.

Yet the value of religious tolerance and the associated virtue of civility can tempt people into adopting intellectually irresponsible positions. Clearly it is challenging for many of us to refrain from criticizing other people whose core beliefs we find profoundly misguided or nonsensical—hence the persistent historical need for religious tolerance in the first place. To make tolerance easier, some popular authors and academics preach a comforting vision of religion that renders argument unnecessary, viz., all religions are essentially the same, and therefore fundamentally compatible. Core values are shared; differences are superficial and subjective—an understanding of the world’s religions that Prothero diagnoses as widespread and rejects as “dangerous, disrespectful, and untrue.” One sees this understanding reflected in comments like those made by Barack Obama on September 10, 2011. “ISIL is not ‘Islamic’,” he told the American people, no doubt acutely aware of the need to encourage religious tolerance. “No religion condones the killing of innocents.” The logic behind his statements is straightforward: If all religions are essentially the same and compatible “with respect to the treatment of innocents,” and our own religious convictions count as authentically religious, then ISIL cannot be a religion, for the simple reason that ISIL’s stated goals and beliefs are obviously incompatible with a conviction universally held by religions.

But religions—that is, religious doctrines, practices, and believers situated in particular times and places—are not essentially the same, and they are not all compatible. Ancient practices of human sacrifice count as religious, even if we find them repugnant today and would take action to stamp out their revival. Modern-day Catholics may regret the Crusades, but it was a religious act when Pope Urban II start-

ed them with a cry of *Deus vult!* (“God wills it!”) The same is true of contemporary religion. Obama is being intellectually irresponsible when he asserts that ISIL is neither religious nor Islamic. ISIL is Islamic and it is religious, notwithstanding the existence of pacifist Sufism, which is also Islamic and religious.¹⁸

My students’ relativism is a different form of intellectual irresponsibility, though it serves the same purpose: making tolerance easy. Instead of reconciling religions by narrowing the definition of religion, relativism broadens the definition of truth. For those who value civility and religious tolerance, “if it’s true for them then it’s true” is an easy way out. One can avoid insulting another’s religious beliefs by asserting there is no objective way to adjudicate their value or veracity. Better to embrace religious relativism than run the risk of bigotry.¹⁹

Relativism might work in theory, but it is impossible to implement. Even a government forbidden from elevating one religion over another cannot be consistently relativist. Debates about everything from biology to human rights demonstrate the impossibility of compartmentalizing religious beliefs. Should public education curriculums remain agnostic about the coexistence of humans and dinosaurs, given that it is a matter of religious debate? Should politicians refrain from pronouncing on the inhumanity of religiously inspired violence such as mass shootings and abortion clinic bombings? Surely not, and neither should even the most tolerant of individuals.

The religiously tolerant who refuse relativism (or refuse to pretend to be relativists) have another option, one that many of my students pick: silence. This option makes a great deal of sense in daily life. If one wishes to keep the peace, it is usually best to avoid arguing about

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¹⁹. Robert Trigg describes a similar problematic relationship between relativism and tolerance. See his *Religious Diversity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 23–27. Rainer Forst argues that it is possible to have “relativization without relativism,” but even if it is possible to relativize without relativism, failure seems like a distinct possibility, especially when one is not so philosophically sophisticated as Forst. Rainer Forst, *Toleration in Conflict: Past and Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 22, and also 22 n. 19.
religious beliefs with strangers, and sometimes even with friends and family, say, at a holiday gathering. “In most cases,” writes Nussbaum, regarding the controversy over Muslim women’s head-coverings, “it’s just rude to offer unsolicited opinions about the way a person is dressed, and one risks offense even if one knows the person quite well.” I think most people would agree this is wise counsel, particularly if the form of dress in question is religious, as is the case with head-coverings. Indeed, it holds for religious beliefs in general. I am intolerant if I stand in front of a church and inform entering congregants that their worldview is based on childish superstition, even if that is what I really believe.

Of course, no one thinks we must always hold our tongues. Supporters of religious tolerance acknowledge that a certain degree of intolerance is unavoidable, indeed desirable, both in government policies and individual behavior. Some combination of the harm principle (reduce suffering) and respect—in Leiter’s sense of minimal respect—for universal human rights (respect dignity and autonomy) means that liberal democracies must legislate against certain religious practices that cause suffering to non-consenting agents or otherwise impinge on their human rights. There are also certain beliefs that, while legal to hold, nevertheless deserve public criticism, civility be damned. Nussbaum, for instance, argues that “we all may and should condemn the expression of hatred.” It’s hard to imagine even the strictest advocates of religious tolerance calling on us to remain silent as Ku Klux Klan members march down our block with burning crosses. Contra President Obama, this is an expression, at least in part, of religious convictions, convictions that religiously tolerant people ought not tolerate.

Setting the limits of religious tolerance at harm and hate leaves us in an awkward position when it comes to religious attitudes that are not patently harmful or hateful, but still false and potentially pernicious. It is this position that my students—and I—face when we discuss Colton Burpo’s trip to heaven. There’s nothing obviously harmful or hateful about believing that the account presented in Heaven is for

21. Ibid.
Real does, in fact, accurately represent reality. Nevertheless, secular and religious commentators have both seen fit to pronounce publicly on its falsehood. In their pronouncements there is a sense of urgency—to believe Burpo isn’t merely false, but also betrays some kind of epistemological shortcoming, a failure to consider all the evidence or the inability to weigh it reasonably.

This is a crucial point. Irrational beliefs may be harmless, but irrationality is not. For those who see the trip to heaven as false, it is important to debate the truth of Burpo’s account, not because the belief is intrinsically harmful, but rather because being the type of person who can hold that belief may be harmful. As Peter Jones writes,

> It might be argued that a genuine state of well-being cannot rest upon beliefs which are evil or erroneous; people cannot really flourish on the basis of unsatisfactory identities. So, if we have an obligation to promote people’s well-being and if we confront someone with false beliefs, we must begin by transforming their beliefs and so transforming their identity.22

For our purposes here, where Jones says “transforming their beliefs” we can substitute “transforming their belief-forming faculty.” False belief is an indication of a faulty belief-forming faculty. It is this faulty belief-forming faculty that endangers people’s ability to flourish, and therefore false beliefs must be debated not only because of their potential harmfulness, but also because of the potential harmfulness of a belief-forming faculty that is able to hold them. In the case of those who criticize Burpo’s account, intolerance is directed at (potentially harmful) uncritical thinking as much the (potentially harmless) belief that results from it. Like all criticism, it can be civil or rude. But even civil criticism cannot avoid being intolerant and disrespectful, in the sense that it seeks to undermine the belief in question and change the identity of the person who holds it.

If you are seriously invested in religious tolerance, criticizing religious beliefs is difficult because doing so is insulting. It is to tell someone that she has misunderstood the realm of the sacred, and that her misunderstanding is due to a deficiency of knowledge or ability. Yet this is precisely what many people believe about each other’s religious beliefs! The vast majority of evangelical Christians regard the Chris-

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tian Bible as their god’s inspired word. Those who do not share their belief are profoundly mistaken—in ways that stand to harm them, and possibly society. Similarly, the so-called New Atheists see all revealed religions as patently false, and attribute belief in them to various intellectual and psychological shortcomings.

To be told that you are incorrect about a deeply held and highly significant belief is (for many) insulting and hurtful, particularly if you already feel underrepresented and persecuted. It feels as if respect for you as a human being—a human whose identity is bound up with religious beliefs—is being violated. Most people can find a good reason to feel underrepresented, even if others disagree with their position. Atheists feel underrepresented: they point to polls that show Americans are less likely to vote for an atheist president than any other demographic. Evangelical Christians feel persecuted: witness the popular trope of the “war on Christmas” and the philosophical complaint that liberalism unfairly squeezes religion out of the “public square” into the private sphere. Muslims in the United States feel underrepresented and persecuted, for reasons that hardly need articulation.

After reflection, then, the religiously tolerant person may judge that we should refrain from any public criticism of religious beliefs, since doing so is insulting and might very reasonably be called hateful and intolerant. This is precisely what happened in late 2015 when the student union at Britain’s University of Warwick decided to ban Maryam Namazie, a secular human-rights activist, from speaking on campus. Namazie, an Iranian-born former Muslim, routinely challenges radical Islamist beliefs and criticizes many aspects of Islam. Her positions were found to violate the student union’s policy, which forbids external speakers to spread “hatred and intolerance in the community” and says they “must seek to avoid insulting other faiths or groups.” Namazie’s critical views, the president of the student union concluded, could infringe upon the “right of Muslim students not to feel intimidated or discriminated against on their university campus.”