The Limits of Religious Tolerance

Levinovitz, Alan Jay

Published by Amherst College Press

Levinovitz, Alan Jay.
The Limits of Religious Tolerance.
Amherst College Press, 2016.

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The student union's decision sparked public outcry, and Namazie was eventually allowed to speak. If the argument I make about the value of religious intolerance holds, then the decision to allow Namazie was a good one. The veracity of religious beliefs, the origins of religious traditions, the purpose and utility of religious practices—these should be the subject of public debate, even if the substance of the debate entails people calling each other damned, ignorant, immoral, or irrational (however euphemistically or circuitously). My students can—and should—feel free to pronounce on the dubiousness or plausibility of Burpo’s journey, and they should feel free to defend their religious beliefs or lack thereof without fear of being labeled hateful and close-minded. The alternatives—silence, relativism, or dishonesty about one’s beliefs—are unacceptable.

In short: I believe religious intolerance has a valuable and necessary role to play in classrooms and on campuses, the ends of which are crucial to the broader ends of liberal democracy. The rest of this essay defends that claim, first by clarifying the meaning of religious intolerance, and then articulating its place in higher education and, by extension, our shared political and civil culture.

III. The Value of Intolerance

Tolerance has been a central value of liberalism for over three centuries, essential to the peaceful (and desirable) coexistence of people with diverse ideologies, and the foundation for a free “marketplace” of ideas. Yet despite its importance, the definition and proper scope of tolerance remain highly contested. Though he was a foundational figure in the history of religious tolerance, John Locke saw fit to advocate against tolerating Islam and Roman Catholicism. Catholics, he asserted, owed allegiance to no prince but the pope, and therefore could not be trusted to obey a non-Catholic government, and the same was true for Muslims’ allegiance to their religious leaders. Nor did Locke sympathize with atheism:

...[t]hose are not at all to be tolerated who deny the being of a God. Promises, covenants, and oaths, which are the bonds of human society, can
have no hold upon an atheist. The taking away of God, though but even in thought, dissolves all...24

Liberalism is indebted to Locke for articulating enduring liberal justifications of the need for tolerance, but he failed (by all modern criteria) to properly delimit its scope.

The problem of proper scope results in what Rainer Forst calls the “paradox of drawing the limits.”25 The paradox states that “toleration must always flip over into its opposite, intolerance, once it traces the inevitable boundary between what can and cannot be tolerated.” This paradox results from attempting to resolve two other paradoxes: the paradox of self-destruction, which states that “if toleration extends to the enemies of toleration, it leads to its own destruction,” and the paradox of moral toleration, which observes that toleration seems to result in the moral rightness of tolerating what is morally wrong or bad. Later, I will argue that collective civil pursuit of truth is a shared moral good. When coupled with the injunction that one should tolerate others’ beliefs, this entails a further paradox, the paradox of epistemological toleration, which states that it is morally good to tolerate falsehoods believed by others, but also morally good to pursue truth.

Various attempts to resolve these apparent paradoxes proceed by grounding the value of tolerance in other universal norms. Tolerance extends only to those practices and beliefs that do not conflict with basic human rights, say, or Rawlsian ideals of justice and liberalism. The ultimate end of tolerance is not actually toleration, but the realization of specific ideals: human dignity, autonomy, reduced pain, diversity, recognition of the Other, etc. To restrict illiberal beliefs and practices is to be tolerant—or at least not intolerant.

Yet all the attempted resolutions suffer from the same basic flaw, which Stanley Fish states in terms of liberalism (taken to be synonymous with tolerance): “All of liberalism’s efforts to accommodate or tame illiberal forces fail, either by underestimating or trivializing the illiberal impulse, or by mirroring it.”26 That is, tolerance either ignores

25. For the paradoxes discussed in this paragraph see Forst, Toleration in Conflict, 17–35.
the tough cases or refuses to tolerate them. This approach is eminently pragmatic—the only other option is self-destruction. “I do not fault them for [being illiberal],” writes Fish, “but for thinking and claiming to be doing something else.” Intolerance by any other name is still intolerance.

Thankfully, diagnosing the problem in this way also points to a potential solution. Fish argues that there is nothing inherently wrong with intolerance or illiberalism—the real issue is with refusing to call a spade a spade. If we accept Fish’s willingness to countenance some instances of intolerance, then there is no need to resolve paradoxes with strained definitions of tolerance. Instead, one can simply recognize that intolerance is occasionally valuable and leave it at that. This is the approach I will eventually advocate regarding religious intolerance, even in the case of religious beliefs that are not obviously hateful or harmful, such as belief in Colton Burpo’s trip to heaven.

Before discussing the potential value of religious intolerance it will be helpful to identify two generally agreed upon characteristics of tolerance:

- **Tolerance requires the presence of beliefs or practices judged false or pernicious.** It is neither indifference nor acceptance. If your friend has different taste in music, it does not make sense to speak of tolerating her taste. This is why embracing religious relativism obviates the need for tolerance; one merely accepts the existence of multiple ways of life, the superiority of which need not (and cannot) be adjudicated. As George Fletcher puts it: “If there is no salvation, or if salvation bears no relation to correct beliefs

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27. Fish, “Mission Impossible,” 2257.


29. Forst calls this the “objection component” (Forst 2013, 18). See also Williams 1996, 20, and Cohen 2004, 71.
and practices, I do not see why I should give a hoot whether my neighbor believes in one god or ten.”

- Tolerance can be exercised by multiple types of subjects towards multiple types of objects. Individuals, communities, and governments can all be tolerant, and they can all be tolerated. I may tolerate my friend’s loud praying though it keeps me awake; my community may tolerate prayers blasted over loudspeakers; and a tolerant government may legislate in favor of allowing citizens to blast those prayers, no matter what I or the neighbors want. Similarly, my community’s willingness to tolerate prayers blasted over loudspeakers depends on the object of that tolerance: our decision might well be reversed if the number of people blasting those prayers goes from one or two individuals to a sub-community of one hundred or one thousand.

A third commonly stated characteristic of tolerance is that the tolerating subject must have the power to change the beliefs of the object of toleration. For example, consider the definition proposed by the Morrell Centre for Toleration at the University of York:

…for something to be an instance of toleration, the following features are often thought essential:

• First, the tolerator must regard the beliefs or practices that are to be tolerated as objectionable (otherwise, the attitude might be closer to “indifference”);
• Second, the tolerator must have the power to interfere to change the beliefs or stop the practices of the tolerated;
• Third, the tolerator must forbear from such interference (this is sometimes thought to give rise to the “paradox of toleration”, if what is claimed is that it is morally virtuous to permit or put up with things that one believes to be morally (or otherwise) “objectionable”).

I see significant objections to this position, especially when considered from the perspective of what qualifies as intolerance. There are nu-


nerous fringe political groups that have no genuine political power, yet are virulently intolerant. Do they only become intolerant when they shift into a position of genuine political power?

Despite the fact that tolerance can be exercised by multiple types of subjects towards multiple types of objects, it is common practice to consider decontextualized questions of tolerance phrased in the passive voice. However, asking “Should X belief or practice be tolerated?” only makes sense when one is trying to decide whether X identifies an unconditional evil such as slavery, or an unconditional good such as respect for someone’s basic human dignity. (The respective answers would be “Never!” and “Always!”) The vast majority of beliefs and practices that may or may not qualify for toleration fall between these two poles—if such poles even exist. It is essential, therefore, to contextualize the subject that tolerates and the object of toleration, since doing so determines the answer to the question.

Take, for instance, the belief that the acquisition of personhood through ensoulment does not happen at the moment of conception. Should this belief be tolerated? It depends on the subject and the object of toleration, as well as the context. Understood as the question of whether a liberal democratic government should tolerate the expression of this belief by members of its citizenry, the answer is certainly yes. To state otherwise would be to endorse by proxy public school curriculums that teach the truth of ensoulment and the consequent murderousness of abortion, perhaps even to outlaw the expression of dissent to “life begins at the moment of conception” on the grounds that doing so presented a clear and present danger to the lives of unborn persons. The most basic understanding of religiously tolerant government forbids this kind of religious intolerance.

The answer changes when the object of toleration becomes the government itself. A liberal democratic government should be intolerant of official government proclamations against, or for, the truth of ensoulment. Though individual politicians might attempt to issue such a proclamation, other politicians would be justified in acting intolerantly, refusing to grant them permission and attempting to convince them
that their beliefs about the proper role of government are mistaken. In this context, with this subject and object, intolerance is now valuable.

But what if the subject is the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, and the object is belief among American Catholics? It seems perfectly reasonable that the USCCB should teach explicitly, as it does on its website, about the “evil of deliberate killing in abortion.” The USCCB should not tolerate the belief that abortion is acceptable, or the associated belief that ensoulment does not happen at the moment of conception. If increasing numbers of Catholics question the doctrine of ensoulment, the church should spare no expense putting their questions to rest.

The declaration of abortion as evil is no doubt insulting and offensive to many people, in and outside of the church. It is explicitly intolerant of the belief that abortion should be legal. Nevertheless, it would be absurd to argue that the governing bodies of religious organizations cannot speak publicly about their beliefs with the intent of persuading non-believers. To be the Catholic Church just is to be intolerant of falsehoods (Jesus Christ was just a man) and to want to replace them with religious truths (Jesus Christ was both fully human and divine). Conversely, to be an atheist organization that teaches about the harmful irrationality of religious beliefs just is to be intolerant of falsehoods (Jesus Christ was divine) and to want to replace them with non-religious truths (“divine” is a nonsensical category). In both cases, intolerance is not a shortcoming but rather a natural and necessary aspect of the subject’s identity. In both cases the intolerant statements will offend people—indeed, part of their purpose is to change the minds of those who take offense. And in both cases the organizations would maintain—in accordance with their respective foundational beliefs—that religious intolerance is not only a necessary part of their identity but also of value to the general public.

The questions become trickier with individuals, who play more roles than organizations and governments. What if you are a devout Catholic and the potential object of toleration is your neighbors, whose car sports a large Against Abortion? Don’t Have One! bumper sticker, right next to another that depicts a fish with legs eating an ichthys. Quite
reasonably you take these stickers to mean that your neighbors do not believe in ensoulment at conception—or souls at all, for that matter. Should you tolerate their beliefs, or should you intervene and attempt to convince them otherwise? Said differently, should you be intolerant of their beliefs?

On the one hand, you think their beliefs are false and potentially pernicious. Not only that, the bumper stickers themselves are insulting expressions of intolerance for your beliefs. On the other hand, you understand that basic standards of civility require you to mind your own business, and you realize that your own “Jesus is Lord Whether You Believe It Or Not” bumper sticker could also be construed as intolerant. In the end, you refrain from confronting your neighbor directly (tolerance), but you continue to vote for staunchly pro-life political candidates who publicly declare that “life is a gift from god,” in hopes they will eventually dominate public discourse and help to convince the general public of your position (intolerance).

As it turns out, your neighbors have made very similar choices. They, too, avoid conversations with you about religion (tolerance), but contribute to a foundation that puts up atheist billboards in hopes that irrational beliefs about “souls” will eventually fade away, and opposition to abortion along with it (intolerance). As a result, you all get along splendidly as neighbors while remaining true to the convictions of your respective consciences, acting intolerantly in the world to stamp out what you understand to be widely held false and pernicious beliefs.

These examples demonstrate the inevitability of religious intolerance, and the extent to which participants in civil discourse ought to understand the appropriate exercise of it as valuable. Opponents and advocates of legalized abortion will usually disagree on whether religiosity should inform one’s political position on the matter, and likely disagree on what counts as a “religious” belief in the first place. They will both vote their intolerance and hope the other side loses. And they will both justify the value of this intolerance with the same basic considerations: the intolerance, on balance, results in less overall harm and more human dignity, and avoids violating fundamental human rights. The question is not whether one side is being intolerant, but
rather why their considerations of harm and human rights manifest opposing conclusions about how to vote.

Here another set of beliefs comes in. An atheist might tell you that she does not believe in souls. In fact, she sees belief in revealed religion as a force for evil in the world, given that religions are historically violent and misogynistic traditions that mistake superstition and folklore for divinely revealed truths. The abortion issue is a case in point: countless women have suffered—and still suffer—needless harm and violations of their basic human rights because of widespread and mistaken religious beliefs about personhood. A Catholic, on the other hand, might see personhood at conception as a non-negotiable, indeed deeply grounding, truth. Deliberate killing in abortion is “evil,” says the USCCB (and Pope Francis), pure and simple. Furthermore, it is unjust and unrealistic to ask religious people to bracket their religious beliefs when considering questions of what ought to count as a person. To protest outside of abortion clinics is intolerant, but far from being harmful or hateful, it is actually a loving attempt to protect basic human rights.33

Questions about harm and human rights cannot be settled without reference to the validity and value of religious beliefs, which returns us to Colton Burpo and Maryam Namazie. To pronounce on the validity and value of deeply held religious beliefs is to risk insulting those who disagree with you. It is an act of religious intolerance, the same religiously intolerant act forbidden (in theory) to our government. Like the neighbors who never bring up religion with each other, my students remain silent about Burpo because they do not see the value of religious intolerance. If forced to speak publicly, they are most comfortable taking a relativist position recommended primarily by its inoffensiveness. The student union faced with the prospect of hosting Maryam Namazie also does not see the value of religious intolerance. Best to all get along and avoid voicing beliefs that could be taken as hateful or harmful.

It is a profound mistake, however, to confuse students with neighbors or professors with presidents. Institutions of higher education

33. See, for instance, Priestsforlife.org, a website for priests who organize civil disobedience.