

Religious Tolerance, Diversity, and Pluralism

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Introduction

The theme of this paper can be introduced in this way: does a pluralist approach to religion entail a pluralist approach to religion? My theme is not *that* odd, because I have two notions of pluralism in mind. There is what I will call ‘tolerant pluralism’ and what I will call ‘religious pluralism’. And thus my question is ‘Does tolerant pluralism re religion entail religious pluralism?’

In more detail, the problem I wish to explore begins from the recognition that tolerance toward and by religious believers is a highly desirable virtue, one that should be cultivated in any liberal state. Religious tolerance involves a form of pluralism: that is, the welcoming and fostering of religious diversity. Religious believers should be pluralists in this sense. Given that conclusion, the following questions arise. Can religious individuals be tolerant and exhibit pluralism while retaining full commitment to the truth of their own religious beliefs? Or, is it the case that society’s demand for religious tolerance, and the pluralism that grows out of it, is really a call for revision of how believers see their faith? Is a demand for tolerance and the welcoming of diversity a demand to see all religious convictions as uncertain to a substantive degree? As I shall explain, the stance in the philosophy of religion that is labelled ‘religious pluralism’ contains a core commitment to agnosticism about the truth of religious beliefs. Is such agnosticism the necessary price of religious tolerance?

In two recent articles,¹ the late Philip Quinn offered an argument for the following claim: tolerance between believers of the major world religions may be based on an appeal to religious scepticism. Appeal to religious scepticism, Quinn contends, is a sound means of dealing with opposition to religious difference fuelled by religious demands to create uniformity in belief and practice. Behind his argument is the portrayal of a clash between, on the one hand, injunctions

¹ Quinn ‘Religious Diversity and Tolerance’, *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* **50** (2001), 57–80; ‘On Religious Diversity and Tolerance’, *Daedalus* **134** (2005), 136–39.

in such religions to compel the whole of humanity to accept the religious truth and, on the other, our awareness of moral principles that forbid the visiting of harm and coercion upon others. A religious obligation to compel or persecute confronts the moral obligations bound up with the thought that tolerance is a virtue. Quinn aims to show the way out of this tension. A central plank in his method of dealing with the clash between religious demand and moral principle is the assertion that the very problem generating the tension – the diversity of religious belief in the world – provides the resolution. The following quotation introduces his path out of the tension: ‘there is a clear connection between the epistemological problems posed by religious belief and the political problems posed by diversity’.² In other words, we must move toward *religious* pluralism, and the thought that no religion has a monopoly on the truth, in order to support the *tolerant* pluralism that welcomes diversity. Is Quinn’s underlying thought correct?

Tolerance and tolerant pluralism

In order to discuss the questions I have raised so far it is necessary to lay out in a brief, and therefore somewhat dogmatic, manner the main elements of tolerance as a virtue of individuals and communities. I am interested in ‘tolerance’ as the name of a serious moral or political virtue – not merely in tolerance as the disposition to put up with that which is found disagreeable. As a serious virtue of individuals and societies, tolerance has the following separately necessary and jointly sufficient conditions. A person tolerates some opinion or behaviour when there is:

1. *difference*
2. *importance*
3. *opposition*
4. *power*
5. *non-interference*
6. *requirement*.³

Difference: agents who tolerate other people’s behaviour, words, or thoughts note that others’ behaviour etc. is different from their own. Importance: the difference between the tolerators’ mode of

² Quinn, ‘On Religious Diversity and Tolerance’, 136.

³ Adapted from C. McKinnon *Toleration* (London, Routledge, 2006), 14.

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behaviour, speech, and thoughts and the tolerated's' is not minor or trivial. The difference matters, at least potentially, to the tolerators. Opposition: in noting the fact of difference they also note that the behaviour etc. is not something they like or approve. Power: the others' behaviour is something they could do something about. If they do not have the means to suppress or change it altogether, they can take steps towards its suppression. Non-interference: they in fact take no steps to interfere with that which they oppose. Indeed, a tolerant person may even act to protect and encourage another in behaviour that he or she thinks is mistaken. Requirement: tolerant behaviour is, in general, morally right and tolerant attitudes are good. Tolerance is a virtue, something that we can recommend to all and something for which an agent is prized and praised.

Much can be said about the separate elements in this analysis of tolerance. For example, we may wonder what exactly is meant by 'opposition'. Is mere dislike of someone's behaviour enough to fulfil this necessary condition of tolerance? I dislike the way my elder son rises late each morning (hours after I am up and active). If I don't use my power over him to get him to be more like me in his daily habits, do I count as being tolerant toward him and this fact of difference? Arguably not: for I cannot represent even to myself that my son's different way of starting the day is wrong from any objective point of view. By the same token, I would find it hard to view it as an important difference – at least not on one of my rational days. This is linked to requirement. If my leaving him to get up late and go to bed late manifest tolerance on my part, I deserve praise for it. But if I can find nothing in the difference of habit but something that is mildly irritating and another example of the sad fact that Peter Byrne's way of going about things is not generally followed by the rest of humanity, then I don't deserve any commendation for not badgering number one son.

It has to be admitted that there is a gradation in ordinary talk of tolerating that stretches from tolerating that which we merely dislike to tolerating that which we disapprove of from a moral, objective point of view. But if 'tolerance' is the name of a serious moral and political virtue, it seems that both the importance and opposition conditions for tolerance entail that one can, by definition, tolerate only that which one disapproves of. Disapproval in this context must amount to thinking that the thing to be tolerated is objectively and non-trivially wrong or mistaken. If it is opinions or expression, they must be thought of by the tolerator as mistaken, false, or significantly short of warrant. If it is practice, then it must be thought of as morally wrong or based on false beliefs, so that it is likely to be productive of harm – at least to the

individual performing it. Moreover, the line of reflection that takes us toward this conclusion and that is influenced by the thought that tolerance is *required* bids us go one step further. It is not enough for the evincing of tolerance that the agent regards that which is opposed but not interfered with as objectively wrong. The would-be tolerator must hold the relevant beliefs marking out this objective wrongness in a reasonable manner. This point is demonstrated by the stock example in the literature of the ‘tolerant’ racist.

Suppose we have a man who is racially bigoted. He may nonetheless behave toward members of racial minorities in a manner which exhibits difference, importance, opposition, power, and, crucially, non-interference. He obviously recognises difference. He may think racial difference is important and feel that ‘racial pollution’ is a pressing matter. But for reasons other than sheer laziness he does not use such power as he has to harass those who are ‘polluting White civilisation’. It is highly plausible to say that, whatever may be true of this ‘gentle racist’, he is not a tolerant man. His non-interference is not an expression of tolerance the virtue. True, his non-interference may make him better, or less bad, than an active member of some neo-Nazi grouping, but he is not possessed of one of the virtues. His sense of others and of his relation to them is thoroughly corrupt from the moral point of view.

Suppose we find an agent exhibiting what appears to be tolerant behaviour to another. We find key conditions of tolerance present: difference, importance, opposition, and power. These go along with non-interference, and we detect that opposition is based upon disapproval of something perceived as objectively wrong or mistaken. There are then at least two stances we can take toward this agent. One involves attacking the fact of opposition. We judge the agent’s disapproval of the other’s behaviour (or whatever it may be) to be unreasonable. The agent’s beliefs and attitudes need to be changed. Her attitudes toward that which she opposes need to change. Opposition is not a reasonable position for her to take up. In this light, her non-interference is not part of an ensemble of attitudes and thoughts which is commendable and virtuous. The other stance is to accept the agent’s opposition as entirely reasonable and right, given her background beliefs and attitudes. But she deserves all due praise for allowing others to think and live as they see fit. Now our agent is judged as truly tolerant and that means we feel no inclination to get her to re-think the opinions and attitudes that produced her opposition. She is perfectly entitled to them. They are not the result or expression of mere prejudice, palpable ignorance, or moral blindness. They are reasonable. That does not mean, of

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course, that we who praise this tolerant person agree with her. To say that her opposition-producing opinions are reasonable, warranted, or in some other way justified, is not to declare that they are true. But they may have all that belief requires in order to be knowledge, save truth. No epistemic, or other, vices are manifested in the holding of these beliefs. It is only the agent with reasonable opinions defining her opposition who can be truly tolerant.

Tolerance as a significant moral virtue is revealed to be more than putting up with behaviours, opinions, etc. that are different than ours. The tolerator has to be opposed, in a principled manner, to that which she puts up with. Given this, the way is open to argue that it is an impossible virtue.⁴ Toleration has been defined so that it is inherently paradoxical and impossible of manifestation in a coherent style of life.

The paradox of toleration is summed by Susan Mendus thus:

where toleration is based on moral disapproval, it implies that the thing tolerated is wrong and ought not to exist. The question which then arises is why, given the claim to objectivity incorporated in the strong sense of toleration, it should be thought good to tolerate.⁵

Matters are worse when we remind ourselves, as Mendus does, that to see something as morally wrong is to see it as wrong from a universal, impartial standpoint. So, the would-be tolerator believes the behaviour to which she is opposed is, from a universal and impartial point of view, better absent from the world than present. It is something that should be interfered with from this standpoint. Why then is it virtue not to interfere with it?

Non-interference with that which agents regard as objectively wrong can only seem to be something that leads in the long run to indifference about good and evil, or to a detachment by agents from their convictions about goodness and truth. An attitude of 'live and let live' toward difference can only be a 'virtue' in a society that has encouraged its members to have no strong convictions about what is right and wrong, true and false, from an impartial, objective standpoint. Thus it is no virtue at all. If toleration is a paramount virtue in liberal societies, that can only be further evidence that liberalism encourages the privatisation of conceptions of the good.

⁴ For this phrase see B. Williams 'Toleration: an Impossible Virtue?' in Heyd, D. (ed.) *Toleration: an Elusive Virtue* (Princeton, Princeton University Press), 18–27.

⁵ S. Mendus *Toleration and the Limits of Liberalism* (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1989), 19.

It may thus appear to be unacceptable for liberal individuals and communities to press those with strong religious convictions to tolerate the religious beliefs and practices of others. For that now seems to be tantamount to pressing religious individuals with the demand to give up, or at least weaken, the religious convictions that gave rise to the thought that what others believe and do is mistaken and wrong.

The air of paradox surrounding the virtue of tolerance can be dispelled quickly if we accept this thought: the would-be tolerator faces a conflict of goods and evils. It may be good if behaviour which is seen as morally wrong and opinions which are seen as objectively mistaken did not exist, but it is a bad thing if their suppression is brought about by the means of interference in the lives of others. The tolerator sees the liberty and autonomy of others as a good. Out of respect for that good the tolerator does not interfere, having the power to do so, because the loss of that good outweighs the good of removing error from the world. Toleration can be seen in this light to be a doctrine of means. The would-be tolerator can be as keen a champion of moral rectitude and truth as anyone, but she has equally strong commitments to a doctrine of the proper means for promoting these things. They are only to be properly promoted amongst adult, compos members of the community by persuasion, debate, and example – not by forceful interference. This is because amongst the tolerator's moral commitments are ones to the integrity of persons. That means she is committed to respecting others as having the right to form their own opinions and choose their own life-styles. Tolerance is a virtue in a complex world. In this world we have strong commitments to goodness and truth. We face a conflict between aspects of those commitments. Given the fact of human diversity, then those commitments bid us respect the ability of others to function as autonomous agents while they also entail that we enter judgements about the success and failure of their efforts to determine what is good and true. Recognition of these facts by the tolerant does not mean that they cease to attempt to judge conduct and opinions from an objective standpoint. It means instead that they prosecute the differences they have with others that arise from such exercise of judgement in a certain way, namely by persuasion, debate, and example. Difference is thus not met with indifference.

There is therefore no paradox in toleration, merely recognition that it is one of those areas in which the complexity of the good and its pursuit manifests itself.

I am now going to make a concession to the idea that there is a paradox of tolerance. Once we see the other's behaviour as the expression of their nature as an autonomous being, its wrongness

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from an impersonal standpoint has to undergo alteration. To see it as the expression of another's selfhood, a selfhood that we respect and wish to foster, is to see a value in it that cannot be present to reflection when it is viewed in the abstract. The value in this other person that resides in their embodiment of autonomous selfhood permeates what they do, think, and say. In this way, it is not quite right to say that the tolerant weigh the good of respect for persons against the bad of wrong behaviour etc. in others. The value in persons leaks into the value of that which displays a person's nature and characteristics. This is a dimension to behaviour and expression that the tolerant will be particularly alive to because they see others as worthy of respect.⁶

It is still the case that the tolerant also need to have a clear sight of the wrongness in that which they tolerate to avoid toleration degenerating into a form of vice. We should also note that acts of toleration should, on occasion, properly be the outcome of genuine struggle. The tolerant are individuals with strong convictions about the good and the true. So they should feel the wrongness, from a detached point of view, of that which they tolerate. If they do not feel it, then they practise live and let live out of indifference, laziness, or the like. Then they do not deserve any commendation for their so-called 'tolerance'. So, whatever perspective they have upon the persons they tolerate, it cannot blank out the fact of opposition.

The above account of tolerance needs to be related to Oberdiek's three-fold distinction between bare toleration, mere toleration, and full toleration.⁷ This is how he explains his classification. Bare toleration is found when the tolerator puts up with the tolerated but has no respect for them as persons. The tolerated are a nuisance. The barely tolerant have no interest in them as persons and would rather they go away. We may say that the barely tolerant have only a grudging recognition of the fact of difference. The merely tolerant, by contrast acknowledge the existence of others and their deep interest in living lives of their own choosing. They do not wish that the fact of difference go away. But they have no interest in the alternative ways of living or opinions of those they tolerate. They are not prone to reflect on their own ways of living and opinions in the light of the

⁶ For the idea that tolerance involves a change of perspective towards belief and behaviour see D. Heyd 'Introduction' in Heyd, D. (ed.) *Toleration: an Elusive Virtue* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1996), 11–14.

⁷ H. Oberdiek *Tolerance: Between Forbearance and Acceptance* (Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 28–33.

recognition of difference. The fully tolerant, however, are prepared to see value in difference. They welcome the fact that others have the freedom to choose a way of life of their own. Alternative ways of life gain value because of the manner in which they express the autonomous choices of human beings. Because of this, the fully tolerant will be prepared to facilitate other persons' choices of alternative ways of living. While not endorsing that which they tolerate, they will support institutions and social structures that foster the development and expression of difference – within the limits of that which is tolerable. Moreover, the fully tolerant will be prepared to go further and examine whether the different life-styles and opinions they confront provide grounds for re-examining the worth of their own life-styles and opinions.

Oberdiek's full tolerance is consonant with the notion that tolerance is based on respect for others as autonomous persons in their own right. It is evident that full tolerance brings with it a form of pluralism. The fully tolerant do not merely put up with the fact of difference; to some degree or other, they welcome difference and wish it to be enabled and cultivated. Difference of opinion and life style is a means whereby the integrity of individuals as autonomous beings can be fostered. Pluralism and full tolerance do, however, bring the paradox of tolerance into sharper relief. The fully tolerant individual – the pluralist – enables and cultivates that which she regards as wrong and mistaken. How can that be? Is not this stance incoherent? But recall, that which is wrong and mistaken from a detached point of view may be seen as of value insofar as it is the authentic expression of a respect-worthy person's mode of living. The value of autonomy leaks into that which displays it. And then there is a further value in cultivating difference and thus things one disapproves of. Through doing so a variety of opinions, values, and life-styles exist in the community. This variety facilitates the choices of individuals and enables a market-place of ideas and values to exist. This in turn promotes necessary discussion and debate about what is good and true.

Religious tolerance and religious pluralism

Let us remind ourselves of the list of necessary conditions for the presence of tolerance as a serious moral virtue: *difference, importance, opposition, power, non-interference, and requirement*. The demand for non-interference in the religious beliefs and practices of others may seem straightforward *if* we have made the move toward religious

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scepticism or indifference typical of many modern liberal thinkers. (See for example Locke on religious certainty in Book IV of the *Essay concerning Human Understanding*.) But very many religious believers do not sign up to such a picture of religious truth. For them, religious diversity presents differences with others that pertain to matters of supreme importance and are associated with confidently held beliefs that give rise to strong, compelling judgements of opposition. This makes restraint upon the exercise of opposition to difference especially hard to justify. What can compel a religious believer with compelling convictions to exercise such restraint? Can respect for the other as an autonomous agent with a life of her own to lead be sufficient to justify non-interference by the religious in the 'mistaken' opinions and practices of those who do not belong to the faith?

The above question can be sharpened. Can religious believers ever attain to full tolerance of the opinions and practices of those of other faiths, or of no faith, and remain true to the commitments that define their own religious allegiance? If a religious believer lives in a liberal society, she may be forced by the structure of its laws and institutions to a bare tolerance of those outside the faith. Laws and institutions may force the believer to put up with the non-faithful even while she cannot respect them as persons. Bare tolerance of non-belief will be encouraged if the perception that someone has 'turned their back' on the Truth and the Way, indeed upon God, produces a damning indictment of their worth as a human being. In being an infidel (or whatever) they are lost. If a barely tolerant believer had her own way – not possible in a liberal state – measures would be taken against unbelief. The merely, as opposed to the barely, tolerant lack such hostility to those outside the faith. They are simply indifferent to them. Not possessing the Truth and the Way, the opinions and life-styles of unbelievers are not worth of study or reflection. They provide no occasion for the faithful to re-examine their beliefs. For the merely tolerant believer, alternative religions or world views are in no sense a challenge. So, in a similar manner, one might not hate or wish to shut up the person who goes around saying that the world is flat, but their stance is not respect-worthy enough to make one think again about matters geographical and astronomical. In contrast, the fully tolerant religious believer will actually see value in the rival systems of belief and unbelief of others. The value will reside in the perception that these others are able to express their autonomous selfhood via these alternative systems. This tolerant believer will want society to provide the means and opportunity for 'other faiths' to exist and for their members to engage in their own forms of worship. Crucially, the fully tolerant believer will see in the alternative belief

systems of others something of potential value to herself. This is the opportunity to engage in critical reflection on the truth and value of the tolerator's own convictions. That respect-worthy human beings are capable of living in accordance with contrary beliefs and apparently of living fulfilled lives guided by those beliefs is occasion to join with them in debate as to what is true in religion, and perhaps to modify the tolerator's own opinions, even if the modification is only of how she understands her own faith.

The full tolerant individual is, we said, a pluralist. Without abandoning her own beliefs, she wishes to enable and encourage the adoption and outward expression in speech and action of alternative ones. Pluralism welcomes diversity. Pluralists, though not having to abandon their beliefs, as some readings of the paradox of toleration maintain, inevitably put themselves in a position whereby their opinions are open to the possibility of revision. Crudely put, they implicitly take up a second-order stance of fallibilism. Tolerant pluralists who are religious see in religious diversity the occasion for a worthwhile, perhaps necessary, re-examination of their faith commitments.

Tolerant pluralism vs. religious pluralism

It is important to note that the pluralism in the religious sphere defined above (let us call it 'tolerant pluralism') is different from the kind of pluralism picked out in many discussions of the challenges posed for religious diversity (let us call it 'religious pluralism'). It is common to distinguish four main responses to the issues around the interpretation of religion provoked by religious diversity: scepticism, exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. The fact of religious diversity gives rise to such questions as: Which, if any religion is true? Which, if any, contains the genuine path to salvation? The sceptical response concludes that there is no way any one religion can be shown to be true or salvific and that the best explanation of religious diversity is that all religions are fictions. Notice that the sceptical response affirms a mode of equality between the faiths: they are all false. An exclusivist response by contrast affirms that there is truth and salvation in one religion, but it is exclusive to that one. An inclusivist response to diversity affirms that there is truth and salvation in one religion, but that other religions can partake of these. Usually, inclusivists are keener on asserting that their religion is uniquely true but that salvation is available to folk in other faiths and through those faiths. A simple version of an inclusivism-in-salvation view is

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found in those Jewish theologies that state that, whilst Judaism has the truth about the Almighty, people in other faiths can still be saved. They can so be if they know of, and adhere to, the seven Noachide laws (a set of fundamental socio-ethical norms). Other religions may be of use and value if they preach the Noachide laws, for all that the definitive truth about God is in Judaism.⁸ A religion may also be inclusivist about the truth, as when some Islamic theologies affirm that Judaism and Christianity are 'Religions of the Book', containing knowledge of the one true God, albeit that it is not perfect or complete. Both exclusivist and inclusivist views are founded upon a judgement of inequality. Religious pluralism, by contrast, affirms a rough equality of the faiths, but it is an equality of success not of failure. Pluralism views all, or at least the major, religions as partial successes. It can be summed up in the following three propositions. (1) All major forms of religion are equal in respect of making common reference to a single, transcendent sacred reality. (2) They are likewise equal in respect of offering some means or other to human salvation. (3) All religious traditions are to be seen as containing revisable, limited accounts of the nature of the Ultimate; none is certain enough in its specific dogmatic formulations to provide the means of interpreting the others.⁹

Pluralism with respect to religions of this kind is an epistemic and interpretive stance toward religions. Epistemically, it is a form of agnosticism toward religions. In contrast to the religious sceptic, the pluralist affirms that, between them, the religions provide enough grounds for postulating a religious ultimate. In contrast to religious exclusivists and inclusivists, the pluralist concludes that the grounds for the specific doctrinal claims of the religions cancel each other out. Adherents of different religions may be entitled to their religious convictions, but no set of creedal claims is objectively more certain than another set. Different versions of religious pluralism will provide different pictures of the overall character of human religion. The most well-known version of pluralism is that advanced by John Hick in his *An Interpretation of Religion*. This account of pluralism centres on Hick's 'pluralist hypothesis', according to which we must distinguish between two ways of thinking about the ultimate reality (styled by Hick 'the Real'). We may consider it as in itself and as it appears to human beings. In the former guise it is

⁸ See N. Solomon 'Is the Plurality of Faiths Problematic?' in Sharma, A. (ed.) *God, Truth and Reality* (Basingstoke, Macmillan 1993), 189–99.

⁹ See P. Byrne *Prolegomena to Religious Pluralism* (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1995), 12.

unknown and unknowable. The Real is only known to human beings as it appears to them in one stream of human culture or other. Each of the gods or ultimates that belong to a particular religion's pattern of worship or contemplation is but an appearance of the Real. The distinction recalls Kant's distinction between the world as it is in itself and as it appears to human beings. Hick's distinction is based on the Kantian thought that human modes of cognition (in this instance the conceptual structure supplied by a culture or a religious tradition) shape our awareness of reality. Since we cannot but cognise the Ultimate via the concepts furnished by a given human tradition, we cannot have an unmediated apprehension of it. All this is set out at length in chapters 14–15 of *An Interpretation of Religion*. With the pluralist hypothesis there goes a re-interpretation of truth in religion. At one level, different religions have pictures of the divine that are true of different things, for there are many ways that the Real appears to human beings in history and the different religions contain true accounts of those different phenomenal manifestations. At another level, different religions contain metaphorically true accounts of the Real as it is in itself, and for that metaphorical truth the incompatibilities between their accounts when literally interpreted do not matter. This is because metaphorical truth in this context is, for Hick, a form of pragmatic truth. A religion is true of the Real in itself insofar as its concepts and practices provide a successful way of orienting its followers in behaviour; that is: it puts believers on a path toward genuine moral and spiritual transformation. Hick calls this theory of religious language and truth a 'mythological' reading of them.¹⁰

It will be seen immediately that tolerant pluralism and religious pluralism both entail that religious citizens should not actively oppose or interfere with, but rather welcome, the divergent beliefs and practices of fellow citizens who belong to other religions. Oppositional attitudes or behaviour towards others' religious beliefs is absurd given religious pluralism, since this stance toward religious diversity concludes that all religions (or all the main ones) have an equal claim to truth and salvific efficacy. All religions are partners in a common enterprise; all worship or contemplate the same ultimate reality, albeit indirectly. While there are differences between one religious citizen and another, there can be no meaningful opposition. If religious pluralism is true, then the beliefs and practices of those of other faiths cannot be judged to be objectively wrong by a religious

¹⁰ See J. Hick *An Interpretation of Religion* (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 2004), ch. 19.

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citizen. Though the behaviour of the tolerant pluralist and the religious pluralist towards those in different religions may be similar in many respects, they would not both be manifestations of tolerance. The religious pluralist would not have anything to tolerate in the manifestations of religious difference. No more would the citizen who notes that her neighbour takes his holidays in a different location from hers have anything to tolerate in this fact of difference.

Both religious pluralists and tolerant pluralists do more than simply accept, without active opposition, the divergent religious beliefs of others. Both will welcome and encourage the expression of religious difference. Both will be interested in learning about the beliefs of others. But note that it is only the tolerant pluralist who will see in the different religious beliefs of others the occasion to re-examine her own. The beliefs of religious others (excluding the beliefs of the non-religious) cannot challenge those of the religious pluralist, for there is no opposition between the beliefs of religions covered by a pluralist hypothesis. The religious pluralist can learn from the beliefs and practices of other faiths, but not by way of finding them a challenge to her own; rather they might provide supplements and additions to her inherited beliefs. The tolerant pluralist facing religious difference sees in the opposing and conflicting religious positions of others reason to question the certainty and truth of her own. For her, the thought 'But what if they are true?' has the implication 'I need to re-examine my own beliefs; they may be false'.

Tolerant pluralism and religious exclusivism

Is it possible for a fully tolerant religious believer to be a religious exclusivist? Must she, by virtue of having the attitudes of the fully tolerant, be embarked upon a journey that moves her inexorably toward religious inclusivism, if not to pluralism and then scepticism? This question has no simple answer. We need to be sensitive to the dimensions of religious exclusivism. We need in particular to distinguish doxastic exclusivism from soteriological exclusivism. Doxastic exclusivists make a stand on the truth and warrant of their religious beliefs. They hold that their beliefs are exclusively true and possessed, to the exclusion of other sets of rival beliefs, of genuinely truth-indicative grounds. Truth and warrant belong to their religion, but not to others.

Prima facie the religious exclusivist who is a tolerant pluralist need not give up the affirmation that her beliefs are exclusively true. She recognises and respects the selfhood of individuals who are religiously different. She welcomes the expression of these individuals'

religious convictions and is prepared to re-examine her own beliefs in the light of them. But that does not mean that she is unsure of her religious beliefs or that the re-examination of them will lead to the conclusion that they need modifying, still less that they are false. Like all those who exhibit full tolerance and tolerant pluralism, she sees value in the differing and opposing convictions of others, but the value is an expressive one. The value is discerned through considering such convictions not in the abstract or from an impersonal point of view. It resides rather in the way opposing convictions express the autonomous life of others. A sense of this value can be reinforced by reflection on the way in which these convictions support and direct important forms of life that are evidently rich in cultural meaning. In all this a religious exclusivist exhibiting full tolerance is in the same position as the atheist who nonetheless fosters and respects the expression of religious belief. None of this need seem paradoxical if we recall that the set of attitudes in question is similar to those found in many walks of life. Consider the historian who, while having her own firm historical convictions, supports a structure in her discipline that promotes a rich diversity of opinion.

In the above we have argued that there is nothing in the attitude of full tolerance per se that undermines doxastic exclusivism. That contention does, however, connect with an important issue in epistemology. It is the issue of whether recognition of disagreement between epistemic peers leads to agnosticism/scepticism. There is a thriving literature in both general and religious epistemology on the epistemic significance of disagreement.¹¹ A key question in the literature on the epistemic significance of disagreement is this: if we find two individuals who are epistemic peers with respect to some proposition, who recognize this fact, but who disagree over the truth of that proposition, does it follow that their stances toward the proposition's truth should thereby be weaker? It is tempting to conclude that confrontation with someone who is recognised as an epistemic peer but who disagrees with one over the truth of some proposition ought to lessen one's confidence in its truth. The notion of an epistemic peer in this argument needs spelling out. It

¹¹ For a survey of the issues in general epistemology see T. Kelly 'The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement' in Gendler, T. Z. and Hawthorne, J. (eds) *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*, vol. 1 (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2006), 167–95, and for survey of the issues in the epistemology of religion see J. Kraft, 'Religious Disagreement, Externalism, and the Epistemology of Disagreement: Listening to our Grandmothers', *Religious Studies* 43 (2007), 417–32.

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is someone whose cognitive equipment is functioning as well as one's own – they are not, for example, suffering from defective memory, senses, or reasoning powers. It also includes the acceptance that they are as well informed about matters other than the truth of p as oneself. These conditions entail that disagreement between epistemic peers cannot be diagnosed by reference to either party being ignorant of general matters, or through either party suffering from defective reasoning or information-gathering powers. Recognition that there is epistemic disagreement of this sort over the truth of a given proposition suggests agnosticism/scepticism with regard to that proposition because it makes the following inference highly tempting. There is disagreement in such a case because the matter is undecidable and opinions on both side of the case are objectively uncertain.

There is a great deal more to be said about the implications of epistemic peer conflict. The important question for us is whether full tolerance/tolerant pluralism in the face of religious diversity entails a verdict of uncertainty that would in turn undermine doxastic exclusivism. A provisional, initial answer is that it need not because believers who opt for full tolerance/tolerant pluralism do not have to admit that those who differ from them on religious matters are their full epistemic peers. What is needed for full tolerance is respect for the other as a person. In exploring the nature of that respect we have employed a set of notions surrounding the value of autonomy that in turn point to a commitment to a basic form of humanism. This humanism bids us to respect all human beings as having an interest-based right to live a life of their own. The exclusivist could maintain this necessary respect for religious others while not judging them to be her full epistemic peers. Adherents of other religions may lack epistemic parity with the exclusivist believer because they have not been inducted into a revelation that provides the divine's only genuine self-disclosure. Or they may be ignorant of an array of apologetic arguments demonstrating that the only true faith is indeed true. How can they know of such an array if they have been brought up in a different religious tradition? There are ways, then, in which the religious other can be a person of integrity, generally well-informed, and possessed of the standard set of cognitive faculties (that function normally), but still be someone who misses the one, exclusive religious truth by a mile. This is to make the same distinction between *general* epistemic parity and *specific* epistemic parity that Kelly uses to block the move from disagreement to uncertainty.¹² The exclusivist stops the inference to uncertainty from the fact of disagreement

¹² See Kelly 'The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement', 179.

by asserting that unbelievers cannot be the full epistemic peers of believers.

Doxastic exclusivist intolerance

In very general terms, the defence of full tolerance as a virtue in this paper prevents any inference that might be drawn from ‘crime, to criminal, sin to sinner’. That is to say: opposition to that which is different is noted; the fact of error on behalf of the other is thereby recorded; but the ‘crime’ does not make the other a ‘criminal’. The other to be tolerated retains worth as a person despite the verdict of error. Thus they are not due coercion but become partners in a debate about the true and the good. I have contended thus far that the perception of, what is to the believer, major religious error may still allow sin and sinner, crime and criminal to be separated.

‘May still allow sin and sinner, crime and criminal to be separated.’ It has to be conceded that some doxastic exclusivist perspectives may not allow sin and sinner to be kept apart. Let us cite the commentary by an Iranian theologian on article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (this clause grants freedom of thought, conscience and religion to all human beings, including the freedom to change religion):

No man of sense, from the mere fact that he possesses intelligence, will ever turn down the better in favour of the inferior. Anyone who penetrates beneath the surface to the inner essence of Islam is bound to recognise its superiority over the other religions. A man, therefore, who deserts Islam, by that act betrays the fact that he must have played truant to its moral and spiritual truths in his heart earlier. If he pleads doubt as his reason, he must be saved from uttering falsehoods by a calm discussion. Other motives may be operative: e.g. another religion has been bribing him with material gain or with false promises; or he may feel that some wrong or injury has been done to him within Islam and drop his religion out of spite against the man who he fancies is the cause; or he may have been led astray by carnal lusts into actions he knows Islam forbids.¹³

The upshot of this way of analysing religious difference is that apostates born into Islam are to be executed without possibility of

¹³ S. Tabandeh *A Muslim commentary on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Goulding, F. J. tr, (Guildford, F.J. Goulding, 1970), 71–2.

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repentance. Apostates are to be given three days for repentance before being done to death.¹⁴

Tabandeh's analysis of the religious apostate evidently excludes the possibility of separating the sinner from the sin. The only way he can explain the change of heart over the truth of Islam is by an account which entails that the decision and its author cannot be respected: 'he must have played truant to its [Islam's] moral and spiritual truths'. Respect for other human beings with a right to live lives of their own does not enter into this account. It has been excluded from the picture by the dominant thought that apostates have done violence to their own nature as human beings – they are human beings who have heard God's call and then turned their backs on that call. In this instance, the minimal humanism on which liberal tolerance rests is being implicitly rejected. Rather than viewing human beings as having interest-based rights to live autonomously, they are viewed primarily as having an interest in achieving right relation to God. There can be no value in a wilful, conscious decision to withdraw from that relationship – seen in the case of Islam as a relationship of submission and obedience – because such a decision can only stem from a perverted will. There cannot be any genuine reasons for the acts of apostates, since the truth they abandon must be evident to them. Only a sick perversion of the chief mark of humanity (our ability to know of and submit to the Almighty) can explain what they do. Their decisions are thus not respect-worthy.

Tabandeh is in effect contending that unbelievers are not the full epistemic peers of believers. They are unbelievers because they are ignorant of the grounds of Islam, or because they have been distracted by non-rational factors from acknowledging its truth, or because they have wilfully hardened their hearts against its obvious truth. Unbelief is either the result of non-culpable ignorance of Islam or of culpable rejection of its truth. So we can say that here we have religious exclusivism with a rejection of full epistemic parity between believer and unbeliever.

Acceptance of full epistemic parity between believer and unbeliever creates problems for doxastic religious exclusivism because it prompts the inference 'if there is disagreement the matter must be objectively uncertain'. It is just this inference that a religious pluralist such as Hick wants to rely on. A central pillar of Hick's pluralism is the claim that the universe is religiously ambiguous.¹⁵ Religious

¹⁴ Tabandeh, *A Muslim Commentary on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, 72–3.

¹⁵ See Hick *An Interpretation of Religion*, Part II and also R. McKim 'On Religious Ambiguity', *Religious Studies* 44 (2008), 373–92.

ambiguity is shown by the very fact that equally reasonable individuals can belong to different religions or none. They can be equally reasonable because there are no neutral facts about the world that objectively show one major religious tradition to be true and the others false. Pluralism and some doxastic exclusivists are, in this regard, playing the same game; both accept the hypothesis that equal reasonableness plus equal information on the part of those with conflicting religious opinions entails uncertainty. The exclusivist then denies that religious others have equal reasonableness and equal information. That can lead, as we have seen, to an intolerant stance toward some religious others.

To maintain that full tolerance does not entail the denial of doxastic exclusivism we need to show that the inference from epistemic peer conflict to uncertainty does not hold in the case of religion. Tolerance in this area need not be based on a form of scepticism. As we noted above, the religious exclusivist might be able to point to a variety of factors that explain why individuals who are epistemic peers in general are differently situated with regards to the perception of the exclusive religious truth. Further grounds for questioning the inference from epistemic peer conflict to uncertainty can be provided if we accept the following plausible account of the justification of religious beliefs: successful justification depends upon a cumulative case. I will outline this account very briefly.

The idea of a cumulative case is neatly encapsulated in John Wisdom's analogy: in some arguments different pieces of evidence are the like the legs of a chair, not like the links in a chain.¹⁶ Each leg of a chair plays some part in keeping the chair upright, but it cannot keep the chair up by itself. Moreover, though each leg separately contributes to keeping the chair upright, its power to do so is dependent on the contribution of the other legs. In similar vein, it is plausible to suppose that the various truth-indicative grounds for any one religion each function to provide some evidence for that religion's truth, but none on its own makes it more probable than not. Moreover, the epistemic force of any one ground depends on it being seen in the context of the other. Likewise, the fact that the suspect in a murder case was seen at the scene of the crime shortly beforehand may in itself be of little probative significance, but becomes so when taken with the discovery that she had a motive to kill the victim. The grasping of a cumulative case for a religion's truth may

¹⁶ J. Wisdom 'Gods' in Wisdom, J. *Philosophy and Psychoanalysis*, (Oxford, Blackwell, 1953), 157. See also B. G. Mitchell, *The Justification of Religious Belief* (London, Macmillan, 1973).

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thus be a matter of a *Gestalt*, like seeing an aspect in Wittgenstein's famous discussion of puzzle pictures in the *Philosophical Investigations*.¹⁷ Someone might be aware of the individual pieces of evidence but not grasp the pattern that connects them all. The ability to acquire the *Gestalt* that enables the full force of the cumulative case may itself be something that is acquired only by of induction into a way of judging and experiencing. Another analogy: I may be able to explain to a birding novice each little visual difference that enables a mistle thrush to be distinguished from a song thrush. It is another matter whether the novice is then able to make the discrimination in the field. To do that, the way these individual differences form a pattern of difference that enables discrimination must be grasped. And that takes time and practice. The practice may only be acquired through training by an expert whose judgement can be trusted. A way of seeing must be created.

The application of this model to judging the truth of religious world views should be clear. When applied it gives force to Kelly's distinction between general and specific epistemic parity. The religious other may not see the religious truth the religious exclusivist advances, but she need not be in general less well-informed or cognitively defective. The religious other lacks that training, that inwardness with a way of seeing, that allows an accumulation of individual phenomena to be seen as probative. She may be the exclusivist's general epistemic peers and be guilty of no epistemic sin or moral failing; her personal worth need not be in question. This model would permit the doxastic exclusivist to retain the thought that religious matters admit of objective certainty. To re-use one of my analogies: it may appear, quite properly, objectively certain to the experienced birder that this is a mistle thrush and not a song thrush even though lots of equally intelligent and generally well-informed people just cannot 'see it'.

Soteriological exclusivism and tolerance

A liberal defence of tolerance rests on an appeal to rights, and rights, as resting upon needs and the fundamental conditions for human well-being, generally trump the opposition condition in tolerance. Provided the person in question is not thereby violating the mutual respect for others as persons with a life to make for themselves

¹⁷ L. Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations*, tr. Anscombe, E. (Oxford, Blackwell, 1963), 193ff.

found in a tolerant society, his or her conduct is simply off limits to interference and control. If we accept the linking of tolerance to the core liberal insistence on respect for the value and worth of others as persons with a life to make for themselves, then we must acknowledge that there is a further question to be raised about the compatibility of exclusivist religious convictions and tolerance. Do the exclusivist religious beliefs on matters of soteriology found in many of the world's religions destroy the perception of all as due a minimal respect? We have noted that doxastic religious exclusivism need not go hand in hand with soteriological exclusivism. But it often does. The link is frequently made between having right beliefs and being in a position to be saved. Only those who live and die in the right faith (where that includes having the right beliefs) have a chance of salvation. Those who do not are lost to God. With the move to soteriological exclusivism unbelief and apostasy take on new dimensions. Full tolerance is now under threat. Here we allude to the stigmatising effect of categories that grow out of exclusivist forms of religion. Many things can block off the awareness of rights that respect for others creates. The perception of racial difference, or of sexual orientation, or of disability can result in the other being perceived not as a fellow human being with a life to make for him- or her-self, but as a non-person who merits only hatred and persecution. In a similar fashion, the perception of someone as hated by God, lost to him, fated only for damnation may block off interpersonal recognition and acceptance. We might ask whether the switch to hatred and disrespect that may follow perception of religious difference is avoidable or not. Is it at all possible for one human being to look at another, see him or her as damned and hated by God because of unbelief or apostasy, and yet still see him or her as deserving of respect, as having value and worth as a person with a life to make for him/herself? Rousseau certainly thought that the answer to this question can only be 'no':

Those who distinguish civil from theological intolerance are, to my mind, mistaken. The two forms are inseparable. It is impossible to live at peace with those we regard as damned; to love them would be to hate God who punishes them: we positively must either reclaim or torment them.¹⁸

There is continuing debate in the philosophical literature on religious diversity over whether religious exclusivism is or is not

¹⁸ J. J. Rousseau (1968) *The Social Contract*, tr. Cole, G. D. H. (London, Dent, 1968), 114.

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‘arrogant’. I suggest that the question to which Rousseau gives so clear an answer is the more important one: is soteriological exclusivism necessarily destructive of respect for persons? Soteriological exclusivism does have its contemporary defenders. In Christian thought, it goes with the assertion that only if individuals have explicit faith in Christ can they be saved.¹⁹ Whether or not it is arrogant, it threatens mutual, interpersonal respect. The question at issue is, of course, not whether as a matter of fact folk with exclusivist religious views have the stance toward ‘the other’ notable in the racist or the homophobe, but whether an attitude of respect and acceptance of others makes sense alongside the opinion that the other is God-hated and damned for eternity.

The case can be made that soteriological exclusivists are not seeing others as fellow human beings but as unbelievers, the damned, traitors to God, or as vermin. Soteriological exclusivism, as opposed to mere doxastic exclusivism, surely has the power to undermine a liberal defence of tolerance. A liberal defence of tolerance rests on the perception of the other as due respect in virtue of being a fellow human being. As noted, this could be described as a minimal kind of humanism: the view that each and every human being has an intrinsic and high value just in being a human being. In soteriological exclusivism we have the view that those not ‘of the faith’ do not merely have wrong beliefs but are cut off from God. It is evident that this kind of exclusivism may end up denying the value claim in my minimal humanism. The unbeliever, the faithless one, may be incapable of being pictured as having intrinsic value as a human being if s/he has forsaken God or been forsaken by him. Behind such a thought may lurk another: in forsaking God, the unbeliever has spurned any chance of partaking in human flourishing. Only through being rightly, soteriologically aligned to God can there be any chance of sharing in the human good. On such a perspective, far from liberty of thought, speech, and action being intrinsically and instrumentally important for the human good, the reverse is true. For liberty may lead to wrong belief and thus estrangement from God. Such exclusivist beliefs are opposed to my minimal humanism. They will tend to divide human beings into an in-group and an out-group. The out-group are not deserving of the fundamental respect due to those in the in-group. There is no value in them as human beings. They are cut off from the only source of value there is:

¹⁹ As in William Lane Craig “‘No Other Name’: A Middle Knowledge Perspective on the Exclusivity of Salvation through Christ”, *Faith and Philosophy* 6 (1989), 172–88.

right relation to God. From such a perspective, we do not serve any one's good or acknowledge anything respect-worthy in human beings by allowing unbelievers liberty of thought and expression. Their very existence may be a standing temptation to the weak, enticing them by example into losing that faith which alone will give any hope of participation in the sole thing that makes human life of value: right relation to God.

Soteriological exclusivism thus appears to be the potential enemy of full tolerance. It also appears to be something that liberalism and its minimal humanism will be hard put to argue with. Insofar as soteriological exclusivists cannot respect religious others as persons with their own lives to lead, then they seem to live in a different moral universe than the liberal humanist. Of course, it does not have to be the case that a soteriological exclusivist is opposed to bare or mere tolerance. The barely tolerant exclusivist may actively regard unbelievers with contempt but consider that it is not worth doing anything about them. They may reason that it is impractical to 'compel them to come in' or that punishment of the lost is for God and not for human beings. Or the exclusivist may be merely tolerant of religious others, regarding them with indifference. This exclusivist may simply be content to let each work out their own salvation; if some are lost to God in so doing, then that is their funeral. Rousseau may then be wrong: we may be able to 'live at peace' with those we regard as lost to God. But he is right that it will be difficult to have that respect for their welfare that goes along with an active sense of shared citizenship. We might also fear that a view of unbelievers as lost to God is always liable to disrupt an attitude of 'live and let live'. The soteriological exclusivist may regard it as pragmatically expedient not to interfere with the ability of others to express and propagate their religious beliefs. But it would be hard to see how such a person could see the expression of what is unbelief to her as valuable in itself. Indeed, it surely must be seen as harmful in itself. There can be no value in the fact of religious difference.

If Quinn, Hick, and McKim are correct on the epistemic effects of diversity, are correct in thinking that diversity points to substantive uncertainty in religious beliefs, and if we could convince some doxastic exclusivists of this, then we might shake them out of soteriological exclusivism. They may make the move: 'if all religious beliefs are to a substantial degree uncertain, perhaps having the correct ones is not necessary for salvation'. Even if we do not think that the doxastic brand entails the soteriological brand,

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many exclusivists do. And we must use whatever strategies are to hand to wake them up.

But there is an air of unreality in the above suggestion. The persecutors and killers in the name of religion might be better, more directly, woken from their nightmarish visions by being asked to stop and appreciate their potential victims as human beings. Perhaps then they will see through their religious delusions.

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