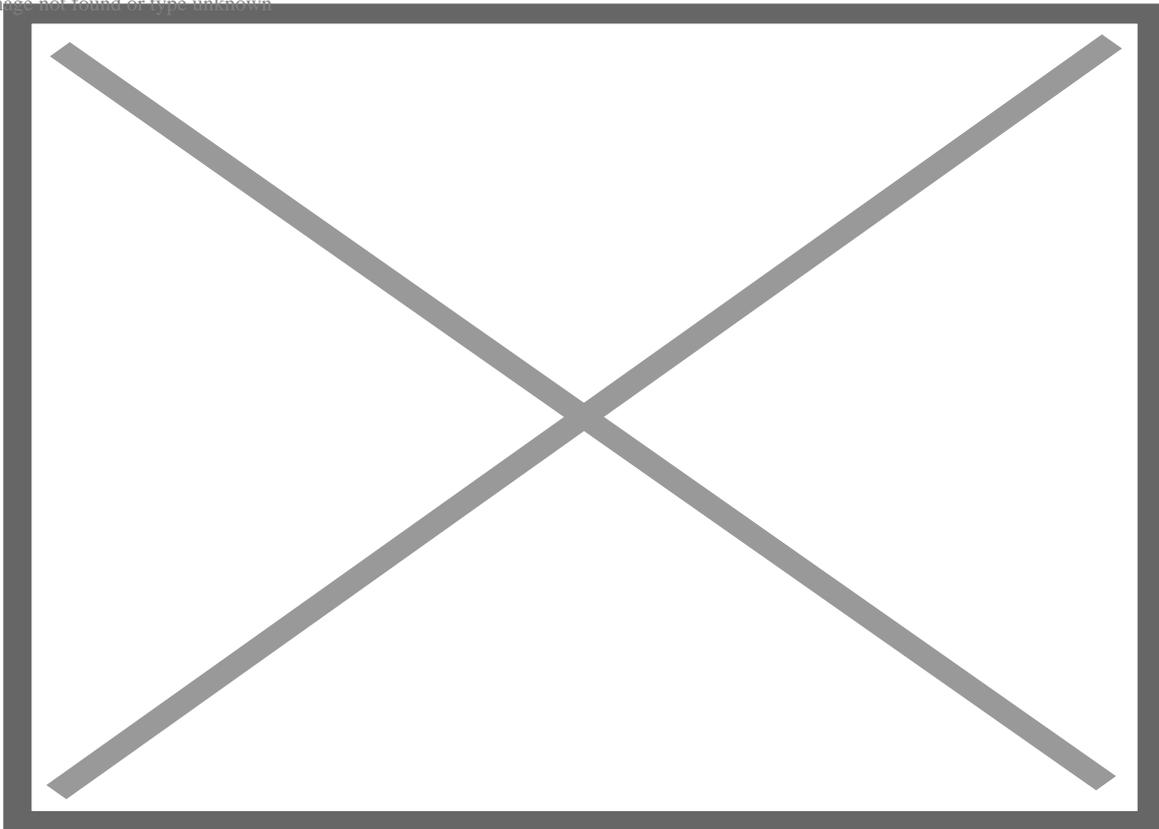


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Religious Toleration and the Blueprint for Free Society

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In recent years, there seems to have been an ever-increasing number of public controversies around some aspect of causing offence. From the Andrew Bolt case in Australia to the use of trigger warnings on United States campuses, there seems to be an inexorably growing trend towards prohibiting speech on the grounds that it may cause offence.

What is striking about these developments is that they appear to be reversing several hundred years of progress in the West. With many hiccups and hurdles along the way, there was movement towards societies where dissenting and potentially offensive voices were allowed to be heard in the public square. Now, the early 21st century is awash with demands for universities and other key parts of the public square to be 'safe spaces', where views which some may find offensive are not allowed.

One of the most noteworthy parts of this regressive trend is its impact on religious views. Religious figures with unfashionable attitudes, such as the Catholic Archbishop of Hobart who published an anti-gay marriage pamphlet, and atheists with robust anti-religious views, both run



the risk of being sanctioned by the law in ways which were unimaginable just a few years ago. As Mark Steyn once humorously explained, in Britain there was a case where an Islamic cleric was prosecuted for homophobia after expressing his view on gay rights, while his target was prosecuted for Islamophobia for responding by attacking the cleric's religion.

In a large measure, freedom came to the West through the growth of religious toleration. This was not toleration which precluded advocacy of certain religions or criticisms of other religions, but rather an understanding which meant that the state could not prosecute someone for promoting their religious views. The fact that religious tolerance was the foundation on which all other freedoms were built was crucial to the creation of modern, liberal democratic states. Traditionally, and because religion offered a complete world view, it had made it hard for those who passionately believe in their view to co-exist in a society with others who had a conflicting (and in their eyes often immoral) world view. The prevalence of this difficulty is underscored by the fact, as A.J. Ayer has noted, that religious intolerance has done greater harm across history than any other particular brand of intolerance.

In considering the growth of toleration, it is important to recognise that the West was not always the leader in indulging dissenting voices on matters of faith. In 1763, Voltaire wondered why one religion had historically been less tolerant than all others. He drew a comparison between his own France and the Ottoman Turkish Empire. In his view, it was Christian France which was the pre-eminent intolerant country, while the Islamic Ottoman Turkish Empire had a much better record of tolerating religious dissent. By the time Voltaire was writing, parts of the Christian world had already taken steps toward a level of toleration like never before. Some modern-day commentators wanting contemporary Islam to be more tolerant, have argued that what Islam needs is a Reformation. However this tends to overlook the fact that for well over a century after the Reformation, Christianity suffered from a wave of religious inspired violence probably never matched within any other religion. While the cost of the religious battles of the 16th and 17th centuries was horrendous, this period of bloodshed created an environment which generated debate about how those with opposing religious views might live together in society. In traditional Whig historiography, there was a tendency to give much of the credit for toleration directly to Protestants. In reality, the early advocates of Protestantism were no more tolerant than Catholics. For instance, Martin Luther made clear in 1541 that he:

Could not conceive any reason by which toleration could be justified before God.

While a few years later John Calvin argued that it was:

The duty of the magistrate to repress heretics with the sword.

Protestantism arose in an environment where religious violence within Christendom was already increasing. It wasn't long after Christianity had become the Roman Empire's state-sanctioned religion in the 4th century that the first execution for heresy occurred. However, until the later Middle Ages, heretics were generally excommunicated—not killed. This fact has led some

historians, such as Cary Nederman and Benjamin Kaplin, to argue that the history of toleration should be dated from the Middle Ages, although it's hard to see a direct lineage between that strain of comparative toleration and the modern post-Enlightenment version. The late Middle Ages saw a surge in the burning of heretics and the Reformation vastly increased the range of potential heretics.

One of the first post-Reformation scholars to consider whether all this killing was a good idea was the Dutch scholar Desiderius Erasmus, who suggested a form of de-facto toleration. Erasmus did not think that society should end up with competing churches, but he did think that diversity should be allowed for a period of time to allow the arguments to be thrashed out, and the correct universal position on doctrinal matters re-established.

Most of his contemporaries could not conceive of how a state could function with competing religions. Protestant and Catholic statesmen alike agreed that not only was religious uniformity a virtue in itself, but was also required for practical reasons of state to secure unity and internal peace. One of the first to challenge this view was the Dutch writer Dirck Coornhert, who argued that rather than being a danger to the state, religious freedom and pluralism might actually produce a more peaceful and better-functioning state.

One of the features of early Protestantism was the range of sects it produced. One of the most significant was the Anabaptists, who repudiated killing as a punishment for heresy, which was a key variation from what was otherwise considered a universal view. Equally important was while most early strains of Protestantism were struggling to displace Catholicism as the one true religion within their state, the Anabaptists were not trying to achieve state-sanction.

The fact that Catholics and Protestants were trying to dominate states meant that the schism within the church was also a matter for statesmen as well as clerics. As a result of the Reformation, there evolved numerous Protestant and Catholic states, many defined by the Treaty of Augsburg in 1555 however, some states remained disputed. In France, there were proposals for toleration as early as 1561, based on a practical desire among some statesmen to stop Catholics and Protestants killing each other. Nevertheless, neither Catholics nor Protestants welcomed toleration at that stage and proceeded to fight each other for control for the next four decades; that is until a more war-weary France in 1598 grudgingly accepted the Edict of Nantes.

While most of the early advocates of a form of toleration presented arguments based on political utility, one key exception was French theologian Sebastian Castellio, who made a coherent and principled case for the matter. One of the foremost writers on the history of toleration, Perez Zagorin, has commented that Castellio:

Was the first author at this juncture to plead for confessional tolerance ... on the religious and moral ground of respect for conscience.

A key aspect of Castellio's argument was that only Christ at the last Judgement can determine who is a heretic, thus removing any power of church or state to punish alleged heretics. The debate surrounding religious freedom stimulated thinking about the possibilities of a range of

freedoms. One of the first to do this was Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza, who by the middle of the 17th century, had extended the rationale of tolerance beyond religious freedom, to freedom of thought and expression—and a degree of political freedom too. Spinoza was able to use the practical example of Amsterdam as an example of a city where religious diversity and a degree of freedom of expression were producing a generally successful and prosperous society. Then there was England. Until the 1640s there was nothing to indicate that England would become a leader in toleration. However, the opposition to Charles I in that decade; the resultant Civil War; and the explosion of radical ideas through the Levelers and the Putney Debates, delivered challenges to both state and church which were previously unimaginable. As Zagorin has commented:

Not only did the revolutionary era give rise to a great body of tolerationist ideas; it produced a degree of religious pluralism impossible to eradicate after 1660 which made a substantial contribution in the long run to the achievement of religious toleration in English society.

Another crucial early exemplar of religious toleration was North America. A number of colonies were established by particular branches of Christianity to avoid persecution in Europe. A key figure was Roger Williams, the founder of the colony in Rhode Island, who argued that religious pluralism and civil peace were compatible. Unlike most otherwise tolerant Protestants, Williams even advocated toleration for Catholics. Whereas others argued that Catholics' allegiance to the Pope was incompatible with loyalty to the state, Williams asserted that provided they comply with the civil laws they should be tolerated. Moreover, it was the Catholic American colony of Maryland, which in 1649 became one of the first places in the world to enshrine in law toleration between Catholics and Protestants.

When the Amsterdam-based Swiss-exile Jean Le Clerc wrote in 1687 that the importance of toleration was so great that 'almost nothing else is spoken of today', he was reflecting on how instructive the lessons that had been taught across the previous two centuries had been. By this time, the likes of Pierre Bayle and John Locke were building systematic philosophical justifications for toleration, and as the next century unfolded, it became the obvious foundation stone for all the other ideas about political, economic and cultural freedoms which came with the Enlightenment. However, as Voltaire's 1763 observation, and numerous aspects of 19th and 20th century history attest, the process of increasing toleration was far from complete—or perfect. The fact that the modern version of toleration came to Christianity before other religions is not necessarily an argument in favour of Christianity. It is merely to the credit of those who pushed for toleration, some of whom were genuinely Christian, others only nominally so. It is also important to recognize that lots of conservative Christians, both Catholic and Protestant, opposed the growth of toleration at every stage.

In recent months, ABC Melbourne radio broadcaster Jon Faine has on more than one occasion taken issue with talkback callers who have spoken of the need for toleration. He does not think toleration is sufficient, instead arguing that as a society we should actively embrace all the different religions and cultures in our midst. Attacking toleration seems odd, when it has arguably been the greatest force for good in the world in the past five hundred years. Embrace might be



nice; toleration is essential. Coornhert, Castello, Spinoza, Williams, Locke and the others had to do the hard work to explain why religious toleration was the essential basis of any free society. We only need to read their work and understand the history of their times to appreciate why toleration should be defended and praised as it faces new threats in the 21st century.