

Philip L. Quinn

*on religious diversity  
& tolerance*

Since September 11, 2001, the fragility of tolerance has become a source of acute anxiety in scholarly reflection on religion – as shown by some of the contributions to the Summer 2003 issue of *Dædalus* on secularism and religion. In that context, James Carroll asked how it was possible for people committed to democracy to embrace religious creeds that underwrite intolerance. Daniel C. Tosteson identified conflicting religious beliefs as a particularly serious cause of the plague of war.

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Such anxieties are reasonable. After all, Osama bin Laden professes to fight in the name of Islam. And in the aftermath of 9/11, the United States has experienced a significant rise in reported incidents of intolerant behavior directed at Muslims.

Moreover, tolerance has long been under assault in more limited conflicts fueled in part by religious differences. Religious disagreement has been a cause of violence in Belfast, Beirut, and Bosnia during recent decades. The terrorism of Al Qaeda threatens to project the religious strife involved in such localized clashes onto a global stage. In short, early in the twenty-first century, the practice of tolerance is in peril, and religious diversity is a major source of the danger.

During the past two decades, diversity has also been a topic of lively discussion among philosophers and theologians. What philosophers have found especially challenging about religious diversity is an epistemological problem it poses. Here the philosophical debates have focused primarily on the so-called world religions – Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Though most of the philosophers involved in these debates have not addressed the topic of tolerance directly, there is a clear connection between the epistemological problems posed by religious belief and the political problems posed by religious diversity.

Take the case of Christianity. One way to justify a Christian's belief in God is the arguments offered by natural theologians for the existence of God. Another source of justification is distinctively Christian religious experiences, including both the spectacular experiences reported by mystical virtuosi and the more mundane experiences that pervade the lives of many ordinary Christians. A third source is the divine revelation

Christians purport to find in canonical scripture. And, for many Christians, a fourth source is the authoritative teaching of a church believed to be guided by the Holy Spirit. When combined, such sources constitute a cumulative case for the rationality of the belief in God professed by most Christians.

Let us suppose, if only for the sake of argument, that these sources provide sufficient justification to ensure the rational acceptability of the Christian belief system. But this will be so only if there are no countervailing considerations or sources that present conflicting evidence. Before we can render a final verdict on the rational acceptability of that belief system, challenges to the Christian worldview must be taken into account. One of the most famous challenges is, of course, the existence of evil. The sheer diversity of religions and religious beliefs presents an equally vexing challenge. And the growth of religiously pluralistic societies, global media, and transportation channels has rendered this challenge increasingly salient in recent times.

A Christian today who is sufficiently aware of religious diversity will realize that other world religions also have impressive sources of justification: They too can mobilize powerful philosophical arguments for the fundamental doctrines of their worldviews. They are supported by rich experiential traditions. They also contain both texts and authoritative individuals or institutions that profess to teach deep lessons about paths to salvation or liberation from the ills of the human condition.

Yet quite a few of the distinctive claims of the Christian belief system, understood in traditional ways, conflict with central doctrines of other world religions. Though each world religion derives justification from its own sources,

at most one of them can be completely true. Each religion is therefore an unvanquished rival of all the rest.

To be sure, Christian sources yield reasons to believe that the Christian worldview is closer to the truth than its rivals. But many of these reasons are internal to the Christian perspective. Each of the other competitors can derive from its sources internal reasons for thinking it has the best access to truth. Adjudication of the competition without begging the question would require reasons independent of the rival perspectives. It seems that agreement on independent reasons sufficient to adjudicate the rivalry is currently well beyond our grasp.

It is clear that this unresolved conflict will have a negative impact on the level of justification Christian belief derives from its sources. In his magisterial book *Perceiving God* (1991), William Alston investigated the matter of justification for the Christian practice of forming beliefs about God's manifestations to believers. He argued persuasively that the unresolved conflict does not drop the level of justification for beliefs resulting from this practice below the threshold minimally sufficient for rational acceptability. He acknowledged, however, that the level of justification for such Christian beliefs is considerably lowered by the conflict, and that similar conclusions hold, *mutatis mutandis*, for analogous experiential practices in other world religions.

A generalization from the special case seems to be in order. For those Christians who are sufficiently aware of religious diversity, the justification that the distinctively Christian worldview receives from all its sources is a good deal less than would be the case were there no such diversity, even if the level of justification for the Christian belief system were not on that account reduced below

the threshold for rational acceptability. And, other things being equal, the same goes for other world religions. This reduction of justification across the board can contribute to a philosophical strategy for defending religious toleration.

The basic idea is not new. The strategy is implicitly at work in a famous example discussed by Immanuel Kant in his *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793). Kant asks the reader to consider an inquisitor who must judge someone, otherwise a good citizen, charged with heresy. The inquisitor thinks a supernaturally revealed divine command permits him to extirpate “unbelief together with the unbelievers.” Kant suggests that the inquisitor might take such a command to be revealed in the parable of the great feast in Luke’s Gospel. According to the parable, when invited guests fail to show up for the feast and poor folk brought in from the neighborhood do not fill the empty places, the angry host orders a servant to go out into the roads and lanes and compel people to come in (Luke 14: 23). Kant wonders whether it is rationally acceptable for the inquisitor to conclude, on grounds such as this, that it is permissible for him to condemn the heretic to death.

Kant holds that it is not. As he sees it, it is certainly wrong to take a person’s life on account of her religious faith, unless the divine will, revealed in some extraordinary fashion, has decreed otherwise. But it cannot be certain that such a revelation has occurred. If the inquisitor relies on sources such as the parable, uncertainty arises from the possibility that error may have crept into the human transmission or interpretation of the story. Moreover, even if it were to seem that such a revelation came directly from God, as in the story told in Genesis 22 of God’s command to Abraham to kill Isaac, the inquisitor still could not be

certain that the source of the command really was God.

For Kant, certainty is an epistemic concept. It is a matter of having a very high degree of justification, not a question of psychological strength of belief. Thus his argumentative strategy may be rendered explicit in the following way: All of us, even the inquisitor, have a very high degree of justification for the moral principle that it is generally wrong to kill people because of their religious beliefs. Our justification for this principle vastly exceeds the threshold for rational acceptability. It may be conceded to religious believers that there would be an exception to this general rule if there were divine command to the contrary. However, none of us, not even the inquisitor, can have enough justification for the claim that God has issued such a command to elevate that claim above the threshold for rational acceptability. Hence it is not rationally acceptable for the inquisitor to conclude that condemning a heretic to death is morally permissible.

No doubt, almost all of us will recoil with horror from the extreme form of persecution involved in Kant’s famous example. Other cases may not elicit the same kind of easy agreement.

Suppose the leaders of the established church of a certain nation insist that God wills that all children who reside within the nation’s borders are to receive education in that orthodox faith. No other form of public religious education is to be tolerated. These leaders are not so naive as to imagine that the policy of mandatory religious education they propose will completely eradicate heresy. But they argue that its enactment is likely to lower the numbers of those who fall away from orthodoxy and, hence, to reduce the risk of the faithful being seduced into heresy. And they go on to

contend that the costs associated with their policy are worth paying, since what is at stake is nothing less than the eternal salvation of the nation's people.

The claim that God has commanded mandatory education in orthodoxy might, it seems, derive a good deal of justification from sources recognized by members of the established church. It is the sort of thing a good God, deeply concerned about the salvation of human beings, might favor. Perhaps the parable about compelling people to come in could, with some plausibility, be interpreted as an expression of such a command. So if the challenge of religious diversity were not taken into consideration, the claim that God commands mandatory education in orthodoxy might derive enough justification from various sources to put it above the threshold for rational acceptability for members of the established church. But the factoring in of religious diversity may be enough to lower the claim's justification below that threshold, thereby rendering it rationally unacceptable even for members of the church who are sufficiently aware of such diversity. And an appeal to the epistemological consequences of religious diversity may be the only factor capable of performing this function in numerous instances. Thus such an appeal may be an essential component of a successful strategy for arguing against forms of intolerance less atrocious than extirpating "unbelief together with the unbelievers."

Of course, the strategy being suggested here is no panacea. It is not guaranteed to vindicate the full range of tolerant practices found in contemporary liberal democracies; it may fail to show that the religious claims on which citizens ground opposition to tolerant practices fall short of rational acceptability by their own best lights. This is because

the strategy must be employed on a case-by-case basis. However, such a piecemeal strategy has some advantages. It does not impose on defenders of tolerance the apparently impossible task of showing that the whole belief system of any world religion falls short of rational acceptability according to standards to which the adherents of that religion are committed. It targets for criticism only individual claims made within particular religions, claims that are often sharply disputed in those religions by believers themselves.

Nor can this strategy be expected to convert all religious zealots to tolerant modes of behavior. All too often religious zealots turn out to be fanatics who will not be moved by any appeal to reason. But in any event, the strategy should not be faulted because it cannot do something that no philosophical argument for tolerance, or for any other practice, could possibly do.

Religious diversity must be counted among the causes of the great ills of intolerance. It also happily shows some promise of contributing to a remedy for the very malady it has helped to create.