

Toleration, Past and Present

TOLERATION IS VERY APT to be thought a rather simpler matter than it really is. We plume ourselves because we no longer persecute people for their religious beliefs or observances, and condemn the persecutions inflicted in earlier ages by the church and state as a kind of irruption of irrationality, malice and barbarism.¹ The very idea of persecution in the name of religion seems absurd or abhorrent to us; and inconsistent both with the demands of the religions in whose name it has been perpetrated and with the proper purposes of the state, which we take to include the safeguarding of certain rights and liberties of the individual with which state persecution for the sake of religion is perfectly incompatible. In short, toleration appears to us pretty self-evidently preferable to its opposite, and the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century intellectual and political effort to focus and vindicate it appears, to borrow John Dunn's phrase, 'a strenuous and not over-rapid march towards the obvious'. So too it has often appeared to historians who have traced the development of the idea of toleration in the West. Typically, they have presented this development as a progress, the history of an upward movement in which the changes they identify are changes for the better.²

There are at least two significant difficulties with presenting matters in these terms. One is that the sense in which things have changed for the better is ambiguous between two possible constructions – either that things have got better as a matter of fact, or that those who have registered the facts (whatever they are) are disposed to think that things have got better. On the first construction, the question of whether or not things *have* got better should be capable of being settled by a simple comparison: we know something of how we live today and something of how people lived in the past, and comparing the two will tell us whether things have improved, deteriorated or remained more or less the same. The problem with trying to settle the question this way is that the same comparison can deliver all three answers depending on how and by

The concept of 'toleration' has been the subject of two meetings organised by the British Academy. Two participants, **Dr Jon Parkin** and **Dr Timothy Stanton**, challenge our complacent assumption that increasing toleration is a historical inevitability.

whom it is made – as Daniel Defoe showed when, in attempting to illustrate the superiority of toleration by satirising the diabolical barbarities of persecution, his *The Shortest-Way with the Dissenters* (1702) made so persuasive a case for those barbarities that it rallied support to the position it was mocking and he found himself charged with seditious libel, pilloried and gaoled (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Daniel Defoe is pilloried in London for anonymously publishing a pamphlet called 'The Shortest Way With The Dissenters', satirizing the intolerance of the Anglican Church by pretending to share its views. (Three Lions/Getty Images)

Defoe's case suggests the second construction – that progress and deterioration are not matters of fact but merely or at least partly reflections of habits of mind or ways of looking at and describing matters of fact. On this construction, whether a course of events

is upward or downward depends not on it but on how it is represented, and how it is represented is a function of the dispositions of those doing the representing.

This way of construing matters is open to two obvious objections. The first is that it threatens to reduce history to a story told to flatter or to edify the contingent preferences of a particular group of people. If some philosophers, most notably Richard Rorty, have regarded this less as an objection than a recommendation, historians on the whole have found it more problematical. The second objection, which is effectively a more refined version of the first, is that once matters of fact are discriminated and

represented according to individual dispositions, an appeal is no longer being made to history at all, but to one's arbitrary fancies. To go to history in order to pick out the arguments or positions of which one approves and to construct a chain of

doctrines across the centuries that point to what is approved as right and true is not historical but eristical: an attempt to win an argument in the present or to reinforce a particular persuasion of opinion.

Some historians have objected to the typical story of the development of toleration in the West on just these grounds. For example, John Christian Laursen and Cary J. Nederman have insisted that toleration was by no means a seventeenth-century invention and identified its pervasive presence in writings of the classical and medieval periods.³ Argument from history for them means argument from the whole of history, not just the bits that one likes. The danger with developing the objection in this way is that, since toleration is still being presented in progressive terms, it looks as if the whole of recorded history is being invoked as revealing an unbroken process of development. Progress cannot begin at the very beginning of thought unless it is imagined that all of thought and all of history is a continuous sequence of logic gradually working itself out. This idea of a universal history was very much in vogue in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but it has more recently fallen from favour and it would be surprising if Professors Laursen and Nederman intended to revive it. The alternative is that history is a series of waves upon whose troughs and crests toleration ebbs and flows, or else that toleration is simply a ubiquitous feature in human life; in either case it is hard to understand the sense in which it signifies progress.

The same objection can, however, be developed in more telling ways. It seems to lie behind Professor Dunn's discussions of John Locke and toleration, for instance, which appear to have been undertaken with half an eye to unsettling the complacent self-approval of modern liberal accounts of both. The thought here is not that toleration is not in fact to be preferred to its opposite, but that it might not be as easily grasped and retained as we think, or as neutral in its pre-suppositions as it is sometimes presented as being. In effect, this is an attempt to complicate the history of its development. This development is still a progress because it is a development into something better. But the progress is not so straightforward, and the

point towards which we have progressed or are progressing more closely specified, than is typical in many histories of toleration. Indeed, it is only with a very particular understanding of its development in place – of its beginnings, its sequence, and the point at which it has culminated or would culminate – that it is possible to speak of the progress of toleration as a march towards the obvious in the first place.

Putting these points generally, we can say that the very notion of progress presupposes a point of origin somewhere in time from which a series of steps may be seen to make sense as cumulative, and to converge on an end point in virtue of their common direction. Putting the points more particularly, we can say that in order to make sense of toleration, or indeed of any concept which has developed through a body of substantive thought, it is necessary to focus not simply on an end – the concept of toleration as it figures in contemporary thinking – or on a sequence – the more so if that sequence is indistinguishable from the whole of thought – but on a determinate point of origin too. Conceptual description or analysis by itself is inadequate. As the late Bernard Williams observed, if we are to know what reflective attitude to take to our own conceptions, we need to know whether there is a history of our conceptions that is vindicatory (if only modestly so), because 'this makes a difference to what we are doing when we say, [as] we do say, that the earlier conceptions were wrong'.⁴ That is to say, there can be no teleology without genealogy and, more pointedly, no adequate grasp of toleration for us, here and now, without a sense of whence and how it came down to us and acquired the content and the value it possesses for us, here and now.

It was with these points very much in mind that the present writers participated in two recent events, generously supported and hosted by the British Academy. The first event, a British Academy workshop on 'Natural Law and Toleration in the Early Enlightenment', was held on 13 April 2007. The workshop was convened by Jon Parkin and Susan Mendus (both University of York); speakers included Ian Hunter (University of Queensland) and Knud Haakonssen (University of Sussex), and Ian Harris

(University of Leicester), Simone Zurbuchen (University of Fribourg), Thomas Ahnert (University of Edinburgh), Petter Korkmann (University of Helsinki) and Maria-Rosa Antognazza (King's College, London). The aim of this event was to examine the relationship between natural law theory and toleration in the seventeenth-century, the development of that relationship into the eighteenth-century and its residual importance for thinking about toleration in the present day. Through this examination it sought to focus attention on the origins, development and present state of thinking about toleration, with a view to constructing the kind of history that makes sense of toleration for us and (at least by implication) puts question marks against other, less satisfactory histories of the same thing that fail to make sense of it.

The origins of present thinking about toleration were found to lie in the grim experience of belligerent relations between the followers of different religions (or followers of different branches of the Christian religion) in the wake of the Reformation in the West. Seventeenth-century Europe was beset by religious conflict and religious violence on a very large scale. In response to this conflict, and in revulsion against the violence it evoked, natural law thinkers such as Samuel Pufendorf, Christian Thomasius and John Locke developed positions about religion, politics and toleration that continue to inform discussions of these topics even today. They bequeathed to their eighteenth-century successors views which could be elaborated in a number of different, and sometimes opposed, directions. Those successors, notably Jean Barbeyrac and Francis Hutcheson, brought sharply into focus the ambivalent legacy of natural jurisprudence to the idea of toleration: on the one hand, natural law theory could and did create the conceptual space for ideas of liberty of conscience and policies of toleration which have hardened in liberal modernity into guiding assumptions about the proper purposes of the state; on the other hand, it was also used to legitimize state control over external religious practices and to support intolerant civic religions whose role in securing political stability was taken to be indispensable – and may yet be so

taken again. Contemporary discussions of toleration continue to grapple, explicitly or otherwise, with this legacy; and since this legacy is both complex and poorly understood, an examination of how it was handed down to posterity by the thinkers of the Early Enlightenment remains very much in order. To this end, it is intended that a volume of essays arising out of the workshop will be published in the *Proceedings of the British Academy* series.

The second event was a British Academy public discussion on 'Toleration, Past and Present' on 8 October 2007, chaired by Professor Mendus and involving Professor

Dunn. Here the aim was to draw some of the lessons from the history sketched in the workshop for thinking about toleration in the present. One implication of the points developed above, of course, is that this history is not just an optional extra but something to which we *must* attend if we are to work through the difficulties of toleration, both intellectual and practical, here and now, with even moderate hope of success. Some further reflections on this discussion and additional materials relevant to it are available on the British Academy's website and so it is unnecessary to give a detailed account of it here. What *is* necessary is to underline the connection between the two

events. For on the view outlined here, to think about toleration's past is indispensably a part of thinking about its present and future prospects, and thinking about its present and future prospects in a productive way demands from us a properly historical understanding of its past. The inescapable and sometimes terrifying difficulties involved in managing societies

divided along religious lines and marked by religiously-inspired difference, misunderstanding and mistrust make toleration a matter of continuing intellectual and practical importance. The fact that our own increasingly threatens to become such a society only sharpens this importance for each and every one of us. It presses upon us all the need to reflect upon why and how we came to think toleration better than its opposite and to protect it in all its fragility against those who would undermine it, whether by violent irruptions of barbarism or unwittingly through their own forgetfulness or neglect.

Notes

- 1 This is not to deny that some people still regard persecution as a necessary corrective to infidelity or that others regard religion itself as irrational, malicious and barbaric.
- 2 See e.g. Wilbur K. Jordan, *The Development of Religious Toleration in England* 4 vols. (Cambridge, 1932–40); Henry Kamen, *The Rise of Toleration* (New York, 1967); Perez Zagorin, *How the Idea of Religious Toleration Came to the West* (Princeton, 2003).
- 3 See e.g. John Christian Laursen and Cary J. Nederman (eds.), *Beyond the Persecuting Society* (Philadelphia, 1998); John Christian Laursen (ed.), *Religious Toleration* (New York, 1999).
- 4 Bernard Williams, *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline* (Princeton, 2006), p. 191.



Figure 2, from top to bottom:

December 2004, a banner placed by members of the Sikh community outside Birmingham Repertory Theatre, in protest at the theatre's decision to put on the play 'Behzti'. (Reuters)



January 2005, members of Christian organisations burn copies of TV licences outside BBC Television Centre, in protest at the decision by the BBC to broadcast 'Jerry Springer: The Opera'. (Stephen Hird/Reuters/Corbis)



February 2006, Muslims gather in front of Regent's Park Mosque, to march to the Danish embassy in Sloane Street, London, in protest at the publication of cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammed in Danish and French newspapers. (Ian Langsdon/EPA/Corbis)

Dr Parkin and Dr Stanton work in the Politics Department, University of York. Both are members of the Morrell Centre for Toleration at York. Dr Parkin was a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow 1998–99.

The article by Professor Sue Mendus FBA on the October 2007 discussion meeting, along with links to an audio recording of the event, can be found via www.britac.ac.uk/perspectives/
