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P A P E R S

towards a biblical mind

The myth of secular tolerance

by John Coffey

Religion is the tragedy of mankind. It appeals to all that is noblest, purest, loftiest in the human spirit, and yet there scarcely exists a religion which has not been responsible for wars, tyrannies and the suppression of the truth. Religion is not kind, it is cruel.

A. N. Wilson¹

Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.

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Summary

The resurgence of religious violence at the start of the twenty-first century has reinforced the myth of secular tolerance – the notion that whereas religious believers are instinctively intolerant, tolerance comes naturally to the secular mind. This paper challenges the myth. It suggests that secular people are not immune from the temptation to persecute and vilify others, and argues that the Christian Gospel fostered the rise of religious toleration.

Introduction

On 15 September 2001, four days after the destruction of the World Trade Centre in New York, Professor Richard Dawkins blamed the tragedy on something he called 'religion'. Religion, he suggested, is 'a ready-made system of mind control which has been honed over centuries', and 'teaches the dangerous nonsense that death is not the end'. It is thus ideally suited to brainwashing 'testosterone-sodden young men too unattractive to get a woman in this world [who] might be desperate enough to go for 72 private virgins in the next'. By holding out the promise of an afterlife, religion devalues this life, and makes the world 'a very dangerous place'. Dawkins issued a stark warning: 'To fill a world with religion, or religions of the Abrahamic kind, is like littering the streets with loaded guns. Do not be surprised if they are used.'³

In the wake of 9/11 Dawkins was widely praised for his 'courageous' statement, and other well-known commentators joined his private crusade/jihad against religion. The *Guardian* columnist Polly Toynbee was just as stentorian: 'The only good religion is a moribund religion: only when the faithful are weak are they tolerant and peaceful. The horrible history of Christianity shows that whenever religion grabs temporal power it turns lethal. Those who believe theirs is the only way, truth and light will kill to create their heavens on earth if they get the chance.'⁴ The chorus was swelled by Matthew Parris in the *Spectator*, who theorised that Christianity and Islam were potentially violent because of two common features: a claim to universality and a belief in the afterlife, which puts 'another world' before this one. By contrast, secular people who placed all their hopes in humanity and in the 'here and now' would not sacrifice temporary peace and prosperity for eternal glory. 'Godlessness', concluded Parris, 'is a humanising force'.⁵

It is easy to understand why these vigorous polemics against religion were published after the attack on the Twin Towers. Secular commentators felt the need to vent their frustration at the religious zeal which had apparently motivated the suicide bombers. They were, however, anxious to avoid charges of Islamophobia. Attacking Islam was taboo, but attacking religion *per se* was acceptable. Condemning one-sixth of the world's population was irresponsible; incriminating three-quarters of it was 'courageous'.

Underlying the polemics of Dawkins, Toynbee and Parris was what we might

1 A. N. Wilson, *Against Religion: Why we should live without it*, Chatto & Windus, 1991.

2 Matt. 5:44–45.

3 R. Dawkins, 'Religion's misguided missiles', *The Guardian*, 15 September 2001, p.20.

4 P. Toynbee, 'Last chance to speak out', *The Guardian*, 5 October 2001, p.21.

5 M. Parris, 'Belief in paradise is a recipe for hell on earth', *The Spectator*, 22 September 2001.

call 'the myth of secular tolerance'. The myth is not that secular people can be tolerant, for often they are. Rather, the myth of secular tolerance is that *tolerance comes naturally to the secular person, whilst intolerance comes naturally to the religious believer*. The myth suggests that simply by virtue of being secular, one is somehow immune from the temptation to vilify and persecute 'the other'. This is a myth in the vulgar sense that it is a commonly held belief without solid foundation, a figment; but it is also a myth in the technical sense – a moral tale that sustains and nourishes the culture and beliefs of those who hold it.

Before assessing the myth, we should begin with a definition. Tolerance has been traditionally defined as 'the policy of patient forbearance towards that which is not approved'.⁶ Tolerance is not the same as approval or indifference, for the tolerant person exercises *restraint* towards something that they dislike. A father may be said to tolerate his son's heavy metal music, for example, precisely because he dislikes it but refrains from banning it in the home. By contrast, intolerance involves the active attempt to suppress or silence the disapproved practice or belief. Of course, the means of suppression will vary greatly from context to context: a state may criminalise an activity and imprison or even execute those who practise it; a voluntary organisation may expel an offender from membership; and polemicists may attempt to discredit or destroy an opposing viewpoint by subjecting it to vilification and abuse. In this paper, we will concentrate on political intolerance (the use of state coercion), and polemical intolerance (the use of vitriol and stereotyping).

In the first part of the paper, I will question the myth of secular tolerance by arguing that secularists have often resorted to political and polemical intolerance. In the second half, I will suggest that the modern commitment to religious tolerance first emerged from within the Christian tradition.

The reality of secular intolerance

The roots of modern secularism are complex, but it is possible to identify a continuous tradition of secular rationalist thought stemming from the radical Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. The Enlightenment was a complex phenomenon, and in many places it had a distinctly Christian complexion. But radical Enlightenment thinkers were fiercely anti-clerical and antagonistic to the claims of revealed religion. Among the key figures in this movement were the Dutch Jew, Spinoza, the English radical, John Toland, the French *philosophes*, Voltaire, Diderot, and Rousseau, and the Scottish philosopher David Hume. Some of these men were deists, whilst others were atheists. But all emphatically rejected Christian claims to special divine revelation, and championed a sceptical and anti-supernaturalist worldview.

The founding fathers of this radical Enlightenment believed that their movement would form a steadily expanding oasis of secular tolerance in a desert of religious bigotry. Voltaire was convinced that rationalism would rescue Europe from the violence of the Christian past and propel it towards a tolerant future. He himself campaigned against the persecution of French Huguenots, and other deists like Thomas Jefferson and Frederick the Great of Prussia made major contributions to religious toleration.

However, it would be a mistake to think that deists, atheists and freethinkers have always been on the side of the angels (not that they believed in angels). The tendency to stereotype and stigmatise 'the other' goes back to the very roots of modern rationalism. Despite his impassioned pleas for toleration, Voltaire demonstrated little sympathy for traditional religions. A brilliant satirist, he was scathing in his attacks on Jews, Catholics and Calvinists, whose cherished beliefs he scornfully dismissed as absurdities. In this respect, Voltaire established a model for

discourse in modern societies, for he combined a commitment to tolerance with an equally strong commitment to free (and aggressive) speech. As he famously said, 'I disagree with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.' In many ways, this has been a positive legacy, for it is surely a mistake to think that when we sign up for toleration we forfeit the right to engage in robust intellectual critique or even satire.

But Voltaire's disdain for traditional religion had its dangers. He was surprisingly mealy-mouthed about the Roman persecution of the early Christians and the Japanese persecution of sixteenth-century Catholics – he seemed to favour worldly pagan persecutors over devout Christian martyrs. Moreover, Voltaire's disdain for the Hebrew Scriptures and for Judaism helped to foster a new kind of anti-semitism.⁷ In Voltaire himself, these strains of intolerance were kept in check, but in some later rationalists they ran riot. As the historian Richard Popkin has pointed out, the basically tolerant deism of the American Revolution stood in sharp contrast to the intolerant deism of the French Revolution.⁸ In France, the deist revolutionaries launched a fierce campaign of de-Christianisation during the Reign of Terror. Several thousand clergy were executed, and many more were imprisoned. Even nuns were sent to the guillotine.⁹ Given the right circumstances, deists could quickly forget Voltaire's commitment to tolerate those with whom one disagreed.

In this respect, the French Revolution established an ominous precedent. For among the greatest figures in the secular rationalist tradition was Karl Marx. The movement that Marx founded drew deeply from the well of radical Enlightenment contempt for traditional religion, and Marx was convinced that human emancipation would require 'the abolition of religion'.¹⁰ The militant atheism of Marx's followers was to be the major source of religious persecution in the world between 1917 and 1979. The Russian Revolution ushered in a period of repression and martyrdom almost unprecedented in its scale. By 1939, not a single monastery or convent remained open out of a thousand or more with which the Soviet period began. The number of churches was reduced to barely a hundred, and thousands of clergy were arrested and liquidated.¹¹ In Communist China, things were just as bad. According to one authority on religious persecution, the decade of the Cultural Revolution in China (1966 to 1976) 'was perhaps the largest intense persecution of Christians in history'.¹² Even in contemporary China, Catholic priests and Protestant pastors often live in fear of arrest.

The philosopher John Gray (himself a non-believer) has recently highlighted the history of secular intolerance:

The role of humanist thought in shaping the past century's worst regimes is easily demonstrable, but it is passed over, or denied, by those who harp on about the crimes of religion. Yet the mass murders of the 20th century were not perpetrated by some latter-day version of the Spanish Inquisition. They were done by atheist regimes in the service of Enlightenment ideas of progress. Stalin and Mao were not believers in original sin. Even Hitler, who despised Enlightenment values of equality and freedom, shared the Enlightenment faith that a new world could be created by human will. Each of these tyrants imagined that the human condition could be transformed through the use of science.¹³

7 On the ambiguity of Enlightenment attitudes see A. Sutcliffe, *Judaism and Enlightenment*, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

8 R. Popkin, 'An aspect of the problem of religious freedom in the French and American Revolutions', *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, 50, 1976, pp.146–61.

9 J. McManners, *The French Revolution and the Church*, SPCK, 1969.

10 Karl Marx, *Selected Writings*, ed. D. McLellan, Oxford University Press, 1990, pp.43–44, 51, 62, 64.

11 See S. Hackel, 'The Orthodox Churches of Eastern Europe', in J. McManners, ed., *The Oxford History of Christianity*, Oxford University Press, 1990, pp.558–9.

12 P. Marshall, *Their Blood Cries Out*, Dallas: Word, 1997, p.78.

13 J. Gray, 'The myth of secularism', *New Statesman*, 16–30 December 2002, p.70.

6 R. Scruton, 'Toleration', in *A Dictionary of Political Thought*, Macmillan, 1982. J. Horton, 'Toleration', in E. Craig, ed., *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 10 vols, Routledge, 1998.

Here then is a serious problem for those who subscribe to the myth of secular tolerance. Contrary to what Matthew Parris suggests, Godlessness is not always 'a humanising force'. One could justifiably amend the dictum of Polly Toynbee: 'The horrible history of atheism shows that whenever secularism grabs temporal power it turns lethal.'

Of course, some would argue that the blame for this 'horrible history' should not be laid at the door of secularism but of Marxist-Leninism or Maoism. There is merit to this argument, as there is to the parallel claim that the Crusades and Inquisitions involved an ideological distortion of authentic Christianity. But there may also be distinctive features of the secularist worldview which foster intolerance. The secular myth of progress tends to create a triumphalist and intolerant eschatology. People who believe that the future is secular, and that only backward religions stand in the way of progress, face a strong temptation to give history a helping hand by aggressively clearing these road-blocks from the highway to human emancipation. 'I'm the future, you're the past' is a slogan that breeds intolerance, particularly when the future must be realised in the here and now. In the radical Enlightenment tradition, contempt for religion has frequently been translated into policies of suppression.

Dawkins and Toynbee, of course, clearly stand in the line of Voltaire rather than of Lenin and Mao. Although they disagree with what believers say, they would (one hopes) be willing to defend to the death their right to say it. Yet there is something a little chilling about Toynbee's statement that 'The only good religion is a moribund religion.' For his part, Dawkins seems determined to match the radical feminist claim that all men are potential rapists, for he clearly implies that all believers are potential terrorists.

On one level, such fighting talk is harmless. Sticks and stones may break bones, but words do not. Yet one wonders whether modern commentators have not crossed the boundary-line between legitimate vigorous critique and the crude stereotyping which is the hallmark of polemical intolerance. By traducing the faithful as potential terrorists or atavistic bigots, secularists obviate the need for reasoned argument and sensitive engagement with 'the other'. Casting off polemical restraint, they foster prejudice and undermine the possibility of genuine conversation.¹⁴

Anti-religious polemics are particularly significant when they fuel an active campaign for state-sponsored secularisation. Polly Toynbee has written that 'religion should be kept at home, in the private sphere'. The worlds of education and politics should be religion-free zones.¹⁵ The secularisation of British society by the state is also advocated by the philosopher A. C. Grayling, who explains that this 'would mean that government funding for church schools and "faith-based" organisations and activities would cease, as would religious programming in public broadcasting'.¹⁶ Other commentators suggest that the state should stop treating religious communities with kid gloves, and should start imposing liberal or secular values.¹⁷ This echoes the argument of some political theorists, who maintain that the state should actively promote individual 'autonomy' at the expense of traditional communities. But as the philosopher William Galston warns, this autonomy-based liberalism 'exerts a kind of homogenising pressure on ways of life that do not embrace autonomy'. Rather than protecting legitimate diversity, it undermines it.¹⁸ All of this begs the question: how much pluralism can secular liberalism tolerate?¹⁹ If secular intolerance is relatively mild at present, it should not be underestimated.

14 For a revealing analysis of secular intolerance see P. Jenkins, *The New Anti-Catholicism: The Last Acceptable Prejudice*, New York: OUP, 2003.

15 P. Toynbee, 'Religion must be removed from all functions of state', *The Guardian*, 12 December 2001, p.18.

16 A. C. Grayling, 'Keep God out of public affairs', *The Observer*, 12 August 2001, p.26.

17 See Roy Hattersley, 'Religion can't be used as an alibi', *The Guardian*, 19 May 2003.

18 W. Galston, *Liberal Pluralism*, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p.23.

19 See J. Chaplin, 'How much cultural and religious pluralism can liberalism tolerate?', in J. Horton, ed., *Liberalism, Multiculturalism and Toleration*, Macmillan, 1993.

Christianity and the rise of toleration

What then of the second component of the myth, the claim that intolerance comes naturally to the religious believer? This is clearly a central conviction of Dawkins, Toynbee and Parris, and many secular people are convinced that the very idea of tolerance is a product of Enlightenment rationalism. During the Salman Rushdie controversy, the former Labour party leader, Michael Foot, put it this way:

How the world in general, and Western Europe in particular, escaped from this predicament, this seemingly endless confrontation [between religions], is one of the real miracles of western civilisation, and it was certainly not the work of the fundamentalists on either side. It was done by those who dared to deny the absolute authority of their respective gods; the sceptics, the doubters, the mockers²⁰

Foot's essential point – that religious dogmatism kills while religious scepticism heals – can seem persuasive. It is certainly true that in medieval and early modern Europe, devout Christians – like Thomas More and John Calvin – often supported policies of persecution. In the sixteenth century, several thousand 'heretics' were executed because the Catholic and (to a lesser extent) Protestant churches believed that this would save souls by halting the spread of the gangrene of heresy.²¹

But Foot was wrong to suggest that the reaction against this kind of persecution was initiated by secular rationalists or unbelievers. In reality, the early advocates of religious toleration in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe were devout Christians, and their case against persecution was fundamentally theological.²² They had become convinced that the use of coercion in religion constituted a betrayal of the Gospel. The Gospel, they argued, reveals that we are all recipients of divine tolerance.²³ Despite our rebellion against him, God the Father displays an almost incredible clemency and longsuffering towards us. Instead of treating us as our sins deserve, he endures our hostility and offers us forgiveness. Like the Father of the Prodigal, he longs for the day when we will return to his embrace.²⁴ Tolerationists argued that Christians, who are so indebted to God for his tolerance towards them, ought to display mercy and patience towards others.²⁵ They underlined the words of Jesus: 'Be merciful therefore, as your heavenly Father is merciful.'²⁶

Tolerationists pointed out that the mercy of the Father is embodied in his Son. Christ comes to inaugurate a new kind of kingdom, one not characterised by domineering rule or violence.²⁷ He is meek and lowly, persecuted but never persecuting. In his declaration of his kingdom's principles, he commands his followers to love their enemies, turn the other cheek, and do unto others as they would have done to themselves.²⁸ When his disciples try to call down fire on an unbelieving Samaritan village, he rebukes them.²⁹ He rides into Jerusalem on a donkey, not a charger.³⁰ He is led like a lamb to the slaughter.³¹ At his trial he declares, 'My kingdom is not of this world.'³² And in his Great Commission to his disciples, he teaches that his kingdom was to be extended by teaching, not by compulsion.³³

20 L. Appignanesi and S. Maitland, eds., *The Rushdie File*, Fourth Estate, 1991, p.244.

21 See B. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.

22 See P. Zagorin, *How the Idea of Religious Toleration Came to the West*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003; J. Coffey, *Persecution and Toleration in Protestant England*, Longman, 2000, ch. 3.

23 Rom. 2:4.

24 Luke 15:11–32.

25 Matt. 18:21–35.

26 Luke 6:36.

27 Matt. 20:25–6.

28 Matt. 5–7.

29 Luke 9:51–56.

30 Matt. 21:1–5.

31 Isa. 53:7.

32 John 18:36.

33 Matt. 28:19–20.

For tolerationists, the New Testament church offered a startling rebuke to contemporary Christendom. The primitive church relied on the Spirit and the word, not on worldly force. The Apostle Paul teaches that the weapons of the Christian's warfare are not worldly but spiritual.³⁴ 'Paul did war', wrote the tolerationist Henry Robinson, 'but not according to the flesh; he did not imprison, fine, nor cut off ears, his weapons were only spiritual, the power and might of Jesus Christ.'³⁵ The primitive church had taken the way of the cross; it had eschewed violence and suffered persecution. As John Locke put it, 'the Gospel frequently declares that the true Disciples of Christ must suffer Persecution; but that the Church of Christ should persecute others, and force others by Fire and Sword, to embrace her Faith and Doctrine, I could never yet find in any of the Books of the New Testament.'³⁶

Tolerationists highlighted the New Testament contrast between the sword and the word, force and argument, coercion and persuasion. Christ's Gospel is not spread through physical violence or abusive speech, but through the preaching of the word, persuasive argument, and holy living. As Paul teaches, 'the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead he must be kind to everyone...Those who oppose him he must gently instruct.'³⁷ If the Gospel undercuts religious coercion, it also fosters gracious speech. The Anglican Jeremy Taylor remarked that it was 'one of the glories of the Christian religion, that it came in upon its own piety and wisdom; with no other force, but a torrent of arguments and a demonstration of the Spirit...Towards the persons of men it was always full of meekness and charity, compliance and toleration.'³⁸

The determination to reform Christianity by returning to New Testament principles produced some remarkable results. In North America, three English tolerationists set out to create colonies that would guarantee freedom of religion. The radical Puritan Roger Williams founded Rhode Island, the Anglican John Locke helped to draft the constitution of the Carolinas, and the Quaker William Penn founded Pennsylvania, with its capital Philadelphia (the city of brotherly love). Through their writings and example, these men and others like them helped to transform Christian attitudes. By 1700, support for the enforcement of religious uniformity was breaking down in the face of new ideas of toleration and religious freedom.

Paradoxically, this modern commitment to toleration had arisen out of an attempt to go back in time to restore the simplicity and peaceableness of the primitive Christianity. As the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, has suggested:

the concept of tolerance, *stricto sensu*, belongs first of all to a sort of Christian domesticity. It is *literally*, I mean behind this name, a secret of the Christian community. It was printed, emitted, transmitted and circulated in the name of the Christian faith.³⁹

34 2 Cor. 10:3–5. See also Eph. 6:10–18.

35 Henry Robinson, *Liberty of Conscience*, London, 1644, pp.16–17.

36 John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, London, 1689, p.12.

37 2 Tim. 2:24–25.

38 Jeremy Taylor, *Liberty of Prophecy*, London, 1647.

39 J. Derrida and G. Vattimo, eds., *Religion*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998, p.22.

Derrida points out that even Voltaire supported his calls for toleration by appealing to the non-coercive character of the apostolic church. The Enlightenment critique of Christendom's religious violence remained profoundly indebted to the example of Christ and the early Christians. As Oliver O'Donovan explains, Christendom was 'the womb in which our late-modernity came to birth. Even our refusal of Christendom has been learned from Christendom.'⁴⁰ When critics of Christianity reprimand the church for its history of persecution, they echo the statements of Christian reformers.

Conclusion

The myth of secular tolerance is seriously flawed. There is no good reason to suppose that secular people are immune from the temptation to suppress or silence 'the other'. Indeed, in practice secularists have often been highly intolerant. Moreover, although the church has sometimes turned aside from the way of Christ by resorting to persecution, the Christian Gospel was one of the principal sources of the rise of religious toleration.

The myth of secular tolerance offers a convenient excuse for ignoring the truth claims of Jesus, and it provides a useful propaganda tool for those who wish to discredit the church and marginalise the Christian voice in contemporary debate. So Christians need to question this reigning myth of secular society, and challenge the tendency of some commentators to stereotype and stigmatise believers.

Yet we should resist the urge to retaliate in kind. We are called to love our enemies and do good to those who hate us.⁴¹ Our speech should be 'full of grace'.⁴² In a pluralistic society, where moral disagreement can be bitter and profound, we should display civility and defend open and reasoned debate.⁴³ The New Testament warns us that we will face hostility and persecution.⁴⁴ It also gives advice that could serve as a motto for Western Christians in the twenty-first century: 'Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.'⁴⁵

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40 O. O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p.194.

41 Matt. 5:38–45.

42 Col. 4:6.

43 See R. Mouw, *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World*, Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1992.

44 Matt. 5:10–12; John 15:20; 2 Tim. 3:12.

45 1 Pet. 2:12.

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