

Tolerance

(2,739 words)

Article Table of Contents

1. [Tolerance as Response to Religious Conflicts](#)
2. [Mill's Truth Principle](#)
3. [Tolerance in Liberal Democracies](#)
4. [Bibliography](#)

Abstract: The origins of the concept of tolerance are explored via looking at the writings of Castellio, Locke, and Mill. The contest between rival religious and political opinions sparked discussions about tolerance. Mill accentuated the notion of the pursuit of truth to promote tolerance of differing views, and to enhance individual autonomy. Tolerance is not to be equated with apathy, indifference, or neutrality. The tolerator has strong negative opinion regarding a certain phenomenon, has the ability to curb it, yet decides to uphold overriding principles to permit it. □

The term “tolerance” comes from the Latin word *tolerare*, meaning “support, bear, endure.” In its earlier history, the expression implied the general notion of enduring beliefs (say religious beliefs) as well as forms of behavior. The idea is inextricably related to the history of liberalism. Tolerance arose, to a great extent, because it was viewed as the suitable alternative to endless religious rivalry, to mitigate tensions between different segments of society and to redress discrimination against minorities.

Tolerance as Response to Religious Conflicts

In the course of the religious-political conflicts throughout sixteenth-century Europe during the time of the Reformation, the idea of tolerance was reiterated in the philosophical and the religio-political discourse. The protestant humanist Sebastian Castellio (1515–1563) advocated mutual toleration and persuasion and not condemnation as a method of convincing others about the truth: “Let us who are Christians not condemn one another, but, if we are wiser than they are, let us also be better and more merciful” (Hillar 2002). Castellio criticized the intolerance of Catholic and Calvinist practices alike, argued for freedom of conscience and reason, and advised mutual love and peace in disagreement with one another on matters of faith. In this period, crucial elements of the concept of tolerance were formed: the distinction between church authority and individual religious conscience on the one hand, and the separation of religious and secular authority on the other. Tolerance was perceived as a necessary principle to secure peace, tranquility, and co-existence between communities (Forst 2012; Zagorin 2003; Grell and Scribner 1996).

In 1689, John Locke (1632–1704) wrote *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, a powerful tract for religious freedom. Locke wrote at the outset that toleration is the “chief characteristic mark of the true Church” (1689). The church is and should remain a free and voluntary society. The toleration of those who differ from others in matters of religion is both necessary and beneficial: it is “so agreeable to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to the genuine reason of mankind, that it seems monstrous for men to be so blind as not to perceive the necessity and advantage of it in so clear a light” (Locke 1689). Locke’s basic position was that no private person has any right in any manner to prejudice another person in his civil enjoyments because he is of another church or religion. Furthermore, the State “either by law or force” has no business in the realm of religious belief, because belief cannot be coerced (“liberty of conscience is every man’s natural right”), because no one consenting to government would possibly think it safe to trust the magistrate with the salvation of one’s soul, and also because people are not harmed by one another’s religious beliefs and practices. Salvation is a personal matter, not one for the state to interfere with. Therefore

“peace, equity, and friendship are always mutually to be observed by particular churches, in the same manner as by private persons, without any pretence of superiority or jurisdiction over one another” (Locke 1689).

While Locke was quite radical in his views on toleration, he did not extend it to atheists because they have no foundations for their promises and thus constitute a danger to the state. Locke explained that “Promises, covenants, and oaths, which are the bonds of human society, can have no hold upon an atheist. The taking away of God, though but even in thought, dissolves all; besides also, those that by their atheism undermine and destroy all religion, can have no pretence of religion whereupon to challenge the privilege of a toleration” (1689).

Locke had also reservations regarding Catholics because they have a primary obligation to Rome: “all those who enter into it do thereby ipso facto deliver themselves up to the protection and service of another prince. For by this means the magistrate would give way to the settling of a foreign jurisdiction in his own country and suffer his own people to be listed, as it were, for soldiers against his own Government” (1689). At the same time, Locke emphasized that “If a Roman Catholic believe that to be really the body of Christ which another man calls bread, he does no injury thereby to his neighbor” (1689). Locke was cautious to secure the basis of social order. According to him, atheists, by definition, undermine social order while Catholics might undermine it. They might produce immoral and anti-social actions.

Mill's Truth Principle

In 1859, John Stuart Mill published his most known work *On Liberty*. In promoting tolerance of action, Mill advanced the Argument for Autonomy, while in advocating tolerance of speech Mill postulated the Truth Principle. Although Mill was not the first or the last to develop the Truth Principle, still no other figure is associated with this argument more than Mill. Under his influence this argument came to be one of the keystones of the plea for tolerance. The Truth Principle postulates that one has to be tolerant of every irregular view simply because a possibility exists that one is wrong. Mill wrote: “If all mankind minus one were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind” (1948: 79).

The argument holds that one has to be somewhat uncertain even while being certain, for toleration is connected with the willingness and the ability to acknowledge the presence of different viewpoints that are remote from oneself. One may discover in time that while grains of truth reside in one's view, it nevertheless remains incomplete and could be completed by joining with other partial truths. Even if one believes that one knows what the truth is, one must not rest and still put one's truth under constant scrutiny in order to prove to oneself, as well as to others, that one is not mistaken (Mill 1948: 82).

Further, we should guarantee each and every opinion the opportunity to be heard, for otherwise we might put barriers to the discovery of the truth. To admit the possibility that the other's ideas may be true, though I do not believe in them myself, is to acknowledge the possibility that my ideas may be false. The widest possible scope should be available for people to promote totally different opinions. Suspicion of views simply because they are held by a small minority might hinder the discovery of new truths. After all, every new idea, every innovation, starts with a minority of one or of a small group of persons. We have to bear in mind that even the most unpopular idea may contain some truth in it and may contribute to the advancement of knowledge. Galileo Galilei, Isaac Newton, Charles Darwin, Sigmund Freud, and Albert Einstein are among the major innovative scientists who created schools of thought and inquiry that challenged accepted norms and led the way to different orders of

thought. Each of these great scientists encountered opposition and disbelief in varying degrees from religious, scientific, and academic groups who opposed their ideas.

That is to say that one has to be open to hear different views that sometimes contradict the ideas one holds, because of the respect one feels regarding others' freedom of thought and expression; because one realizes that one is not infallible; because of the desire to advance the search for the truth; because challenges to your truth compel you to think harder about the validity of that truth, and this is always a win-win situation: whether you affirm, consolidate, refute, or reject your given truth will put you in a better position. If you affirm your position, you enjoy knowing that your truth is right; if you reject your truth, you did the right thing because you would not like to live in a lie. You have advanced to a higher stage in the search for truth. In addition, debates on different views help citizens to become aware of the interests of others, which may be different from theirs, thus contributing to a sense of community.

This argument for tolerance implies that free speech must be granted to everybody, that all human beings are prone to err, and that we must not rely only on what appears to us as true. It also implies that "truth" can be found within our ambit of reach, after separating it from error by evidence and verification. The argument further postulates that each may hold her own truth, and by seeking truth a person develops her autonomy, her own faculties. Thus, if *A* offers *B* "The Truth," *A*'s promised truth, without offering *B* some alternatives for searching for the truth through the exercise of *B*'s power, then *B*'s autonomy will be diminished. This is because no party enjoys a monopoly on the truth. No one has full possession of an exclusive truth.

This argument may resemble an argument of sceptical spectators who watch a documentary. They say they believe the pictures they see are real and alive, yet question the objectivity of the photographer (or the director) who decides where to place the camera. Our spectators, therefore, wish to explore the same scene from every possible angle, not only from that of the photographer, so as to bring to light the whole picture. The underlying assumption is that the search for truth is infinite, and hence a free forum should exist for many competing truths, in which every person is able to advance that person's partial truth while considering other alternative and potentially contradictory truths (Cohen-Almagor 1994, 1997; Sahin 2010). By implication, no religion or ideology should posit itself as the only source of truth and be intolerant of other truths. All religions and ideologies should abhor coercion. Different paths for the discovery of truth should be made available, and the discovery process should be facilitated in an open, free and peaceful discourse with respect to others.

Tolerance in Liberal Democracies

Nowadays tolerance is one of the underpinning foundations of liberal democracy, and the practice of tolerance is perceived to be in the core of moral life. Tolerance has been described as a claim of our conscience, part of our conception of justice, a virtue acknowledged of being the distinction of the best people and the best societies. Tolerance has been perceived as a good in itself, not as a mere pragmatic device or prudential expedient. It is assumed that tolerance had to prevail to make living together possible. As no society is homogeneous, having diverse national religious and/or cultural conceptions of the good, living together requires tolerance toward plurality of ideas and ways of life. Tolerance is essential for finding a *modus vivendi* and common denominator to establish a society with a shared system of beliefs, a community of citizens who respect pluralism, diversity, and difference.

Tolerance, of course, is not to be equated with apathy or indifference. Tolerance could not also be equated with the concept of neutrality because neutrality is perceived as a specific

requirement of justice and, in this respect, its meaning is akin to that of impartiality. Tolerance, on the other hand, assumes that the agents are very partial, with dramatically opposing views to the phenomenon they disapprove. To be sure, tolerance is not about the pleasantries of life. It is not about one's views about the weather, dress or food. Instead, tolerance concerns very different opinions regarding conduct — action and speech of which we hold strong, negative opinions (Bollinger 1986). Furthermore, tolerance assumes imbalance of power. The tolerator has the ability not to tolerate but she decides that although she strongly disapproves of a certain conduct and has the ability to curb it, nevertheless the conduct is to be allowed.

Thus, toleration necessarily involves self-restraint (Scanlon 2003; Williams and Waldron 2008). The tolerator, by definition, is free to put into effect her disapproval of some group, idea, or conduct, and when she decides not to exercise her power against the unfavorable object she relinquishes a freedom she enjoyed. However, by suppressing the intended behavior, the tolerator may have increased her autonomy, her self-rule. For by deciding between her own conflicting trends the agent consolidates her opinions more fully and reviews the ranking of values for herself with a clearer frame of mind. The emphasis of the moral ideal of toleration is that it is rational that an individual should freely consent to being tolerant, that tolerance should be something the person actively wishes to exercise even though it curtails her freedom.

Justifications are given to oneself and possibly to others for the self-restraint. The tolerator upholds overriding principles to overcome her urge to curtail the highly disturbing phenomenon. The overriding principles should not be egoistic, for some personal profit. The reasoning behind them should stem from one or more of the following: appreciation of others, respect for others, respect for the liberties of others, the idea of not harming others, and/or wider considerations of public good and the preservation of appreciated societal norms. In other words, tolerance may evolve from two main sources: expediency, in terms of self-interest, and respect for others as human beings. I exclude the first from being considered as a tolerant act, because tolerance is concerned mainly with the preservation and promotion of liberty. An example is racism: No society is immune to racism. We understand that racism is harmful. Looking at the history of racism clearly shows its destructive power; yet liberal democracies do not ban racism *tout court* and tolerate it to varying degree. In democracies, limits are introduced only when racist ideas are translated into harmful actions (Cohen-Almagor 2005: 3-23; 2006: 123-183). Legally we differentiate between hate speech and hate crime. The limits to tolerance are prescribed by the Millian Harm Principle: conduct is to be tolerated as long as it does not harm others.

Liberal democracies are not ethnically and culturally homogenous. Therefore they need to explicitly address the needs and aspirations of their minorities. They should invest in cultivating tolerance. Indeed, the most significant measure to gauge the extent of democratization of any given society is the status of minorities in that society. The key for understanding the other is education, making what is foreign familiar, making what is remote closer. Pluralism can be enriching and most valuable. Liberal democracies should erect bridges and remove obstacles to the understanding of the other through mechanisms of awareness, of recognition, and of legitimacy (Galeotti 2005; Kymlicka and Cohen-Almagor 2000). At the same time, common grounds for coexistence between liberal and other cultures should be insisted upon and preserved. Continued dialogue and exchange of ideas will be instrumental in contesting boundaries by peaceful means, without resorting to coercion and abuse.

[Raphael Cohen-Almagor](#)

Bibliography

Bollinger, L.C., *The Tolerant Society*, Oxford, 1986

Cohen-Almagor, R., *The Boundaries of Liberty and Tolerance*, Gainesville, 1994.

Cohen-Almagor, R., "Why Tolerate? Reflections on the Millian Truth Principle," *Philosophia* 25 (1-4): 131-152, 1997.

Cohen-Almagor, R., *Speech, Media, and Ethics*, Houndmills, 2005.

Cohen-Almagor, R., *The Scope of Tolerance*, London, 2006.

Forst, R., "Toleration," in E.N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2012 Edition. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/toleration/>

Galeotti, A.E., *Toleration as Recognition*, Cambridge, 2005.

Grell, O.P., and B. Scribner (eds.), *Tolerance and Intolerance in the European Reformation*, Cambridge, 1996.

Hillar, M., "Sebastian Castellio and the Struggle for Freedom of Conscience," in D.R. Finch and M. Hillar (eds.), *Essays in the Philosophy of Humanism* 10: 31-56, 2002.

Kymlicka, W. and R. Cohen-Almagor, "Ethnocultural Minorities in Liberal Democracies," in M. Baghramian and A. Ingram (eds.), *Pluralism: the philosophy and politics of diversity*, London, 228-250, 2000.

Locke, J., *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, 1689. <http://www.constitution.org/jl/tolerati.htm>

Mill, J.S., *Utilitarianism, Liberty and Representative Government*, London, 1948.

Sahin, B., *Toleration: The Liberal Virtue*, Lanham, 2010.

Scanlon, T., *The Difficulty of Tolerance*, Cambridge, 2003.

Williams, M.S., and J. Waldron (eds.), *Toleration and Its Limits*, New York, 2008.

Zagorin, P., *How the Idea of Religious Toleration Came to the West*, Princeton, 2003.

Cite this page

Raphael Cohen-Almagor. "Tolerance." *Vocabulary for the Study of Religion*. General Editors Robert A. Segal, Kocku Von Stuckrad. Brill Online, 2016. [Reference](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/vocabulary-for-the-study-of-religion/tolerance-COM_00000499). Raphael Cohen-Almagor [aff. University of Hull]. 13 January 2016
<http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/vocabulary-for-the-study-of-religion/tolerance-COM_00000499>