

## **TOLERANCE - Michael Bennett ([www.michaelbennett.org.uk](http://www.michaelbennett.org.uk))**

We can develop a view of tolerance that is more rigorous and robust than the simple 'liberal' acceptance of other views and religions no matter what these views claim. From the start, we can be clear that any kind of fundamentalism, be it Christian or Muslim or Jewish, is simply not acceptable and is not to be tolerated. We have already established the preconditions for the role of secular communication and the deliberation in the official public sphere. These fundamentalisms deny these preconditions and therefore do not qualify for tolerant acceptance or treatment. Thus, whilst societies in the West must acknowledge that their responsibility for the destructive effects of capitalism, colonialism and unsuccessful decolonisation has played a significant part in the creation of religious fundamentalism, any sense of historical guilt must not undermine the need to stand firm on: the universal need for democracy, the separation of church and state, and the need to hold religious faith reflexively in the public sphere. Similarly, even though the move to rigid and pre-modern fundamentalist beliefs can also be understood as an epistemological and cognitive reaction to the dominance of a scientific outlook that reifies instrumental rationality at the expense of other forms of reason; and even though this move to fundamentalism can also be interpreted as a reaction to the debasement of certain important values in postmodern, relativistic cultures, we are still obliged to be crystal clear that fundamentalism is something that we cannot tolerate. This does not mean that we do not share with fundamentalist religious worldviews some of their concerns over the excessive individualism, hedonism and consumerism of Western societies, but this does not validate the fundamentalist's intolerance of others. This unacceptability on intolerant fundamentalisms is a philosophical stance. In the realms of political reality dealings with people and societies who hold fundamentalist religious views may require a great deal more circumspection than simply stating one's intolerance of them.

Having drawn a line around what tolerance does not permit, I want to be clearer about what tolerance means. Eagleton (2009: 136) gives us a clue: 'In a pluralistic age, conviction is thought to be at odds with tolerance; whereas the truth is that conviction is part of what one is supposed to tolerate, so that the one would not exist without the other.' Habermas helps us to develop this a little further. Tolerance, he argues, is not simply indulgence nor is it just a vague acceptance of any and all other views. Rather, it is specifically about our relationship to other citizens who have strong beliefs or convictions that we reject, or feel are false or

unacceptable. Given the precondition already mentioned outlining that which it is acceptable to be intolerant, strong convictions that we personally disagree with do not fall into this category (simply because of our personal disagreement) and should be tolerated. 'Tolerance is expected of those who reject the convictions and practices of others for good subjective reasons, in the awareness that it is a matter of cognitive, though in the long-run irresolvable, disagreement.' (Habermas 2008: 306) The caveat here concerns the issue of prejudice. Tolerance is based on having sound reasons (through public debate) for disagreeing with the conviction of another citizen. Prejudice, by definition, be it racial, sexual or whatever, is not based on a cogent argument and is therefore not worthy of receiving or gaining tolerance. As Habermas argues, we do not react with tolerance to a racist, but demand that she refrain from such prejudice. There is therefore a difference between discrimination and tolerance. In the first place we must refrain from prejudice or discrimination to others simply because they are different. Secondly, we should tolerate those who think differently, but with whom we disagree.

The burden of tolerance does not fall equally. Ironically, it falls more heavily on the believer than the unbeliever. For unbelievers, or secular citizens, there is no rigid or metaphysical commitment to a fixed or transcendent conception of the 'good'. Their outlook is moral rather than religious, and is based on conceptions of justice. Habermas's broad distinction between moral and ethical values enables us to understand that the secular citizen can more easily understand and accept a plurality of values and worldviews because these do not represent conflicting universal moralities, but instead reflect different value orientations that are different without being incompatible. The secular person can hold different cultures in equal respect without necessarily holding them in equal esteem. This position is often not possible for those religious people who hold a specific set of values to be universally true. From this perspective, other ways of life and other faiths or non-faiths, are not simply different, they are wrong or mistaken. The believer, therefore faces a much tougher cognitive, psychological and existential challenge in coming to terms with the necessity of accepting and tolerating the views of others that she most definitely does not agree with. This disagreement operates not only like an abstract mistake in discourse, it also cuts across the believer's whole orientation to the world, their relationship to a cosmos and their sense of self. Nevertheless, the state and society, in general, must expect of believers that they respect the separation of church and state and the secular nature of official public deliberation. And it must be expected of believers that they develop the necessary cognitive and emotional competencies that will

enable them to achieve this. Finally, it is also important that the state and educational establishment challenges the epistemic certainty with which fundamentalist faiths are held.

Following this line of argument we can generate a reasonable obligation on the part of those citizens who have a secular outlook. Just as people of faith have the epistemic, socialisation and political responsibilities already outlined, *secular people should be encouraged to move beyond the simplistic position of denying and dismissing religious views*. The reasons for this are as follows. In the first place, to dismiss religious faiths altogether and to deny their value not only for oneself, but also for the religious person, is to be intolerant. Secondly, this stance betrays a certain secular arrogance. Within the various religions, there are many valuable insights into the nature of existential and life-transforming state of affairs such as death, pain, suffering and isolation which provide consolation and a context of meaning. The *secular world does not yet have an adequate response to these experiences* and needs to engage in a process of translating, from religion into secular language, a greater sense of the possibility of experiencing emotional and existential consolation within a secular framework. It is also the case that the failure to understand this phenomenon will only exacerbate the process of comprehending what religion means to those who have faith in it and why they are reluctant to abandon such faith. Until we can provide a more convincing and attractive secular answer to these existential issues, the secular-minded will have great difficulty in persuading the faithful to adopt a secular worldview. I believe that communicative rationality provides us with a philosophical basis for this task. It does so by providing a philosophical basis for understanding that certain values are universal and have an immanent, quasi-transcendental status in communication; it enables us to treat these *values as a form of secular sacred*; and it provides an epistemological platform for the development of attractive and persuasive narrative forms that can provide consolation and meaning in a reflexive manner. This leads to the third reason for abandoning the secular habit of simply dismissing religion. We need to maintain a dialogue with people of faith not just to move beyond our intolerance, but in order to attempt to persuade them to move away from a belief in values that are held absolutely and are immune to reflexivity. This is because social solidarity is always at risk from people who have a commitment to a totalising way of looking at the world, and who hold the position that non-belief is a mistake. This is particularly, and obviously, true for those religious people of a fundamentalist persuasion, but is still an issue for those moderate believers who are currently able to have a productive and reflexive relationship with secular society.

From the basis of this tighter definition of tolerance that I have attempted to articulate we can be more discerning about the many and varied claims by religious, political and cultural groups to be victims of discrimination. There is no doubt that discrimination exists, but there is equally no doubt that various groups exploit the laissez-faire, 'liberal' tolerance of all forms of difference in order to claim victim status as a means of camouflaging their own intolerance. Activists from a plethora of movements (the National Front, Christian, Jewish and Muslim fundamentalists, and so on) deliberately exaggerate and exploit the injury to their identity, faith or culture in order to claim a bogus victimhood. The resulting accommodation that they have often received acts as a cover for their own intolerance and prejudice. The simple and confident rejection of prejudice supported by a clear and vocal intolerance of those who refuse to comply with the requirement to conduct themselves in official processes of public deliberation in a manner that is both secular and rational, provides us with a clearer way forward in this murky aspect of multiculturalism. It is not unreasonable to suppose that the democratic integration of such groups is more likely if they are exposed to the light of public reason than if they are permitted undue protection. Intolerance of the intolerant does not relieve us of the duty to attempt to understand how people adopt such views, and, when circumstances permit, to assist them in the personal struggle to abandon such intolerance.

#### **References**

- Eagleton, T. (2009) *Reason, Faith, and Revolution. Reflections on the God Debate*. London: Yale University Press.
- Habermas, J. (2008) *Between Naturalism and Religion*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

See *The Secular Sacred* – M. Bennett (2014) Kindle Edition.

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