The Evolution of Tolerance

From Legal Necessity to Moral Imperative

By
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Unitarian minister and scholar Earl Wilbur Morse died in 1956, before there was a Unitarian Universalist Association and long before there was a list of seven principles that many now consider the essence of Unitarian Universalism. In his two-volume work, *A History of Unitarianism*, written in 1945, Morse provides us with a prior list of what he calls Unitarian's "fundamental *principles* of freedom, reason and tolerance."[1] These, he says, "have evolved in its history and been ever increasingly realized as the necessary conditions of the fullest development of religious thought and life."[2] In other words, as Unitarianism has progressed, these principles have become even more essential to understanding what it is all about.

Although Morse acknowledges that Michael Servetus, the Spanish theologian who was burned at the stake in 1553 for writing his antitrinitarian book, is the theological founder of our religion, he says it is the 16th century French theologian, Sebastian Castellio who ought to be considered, "even more than Servetus, as the real founder of liberal Christianity":

> for the first and most essential of its three controlling principles . . . is that of generous tolerance of differing views. This is, at bottom, the outgrowth of an entirely new conception of religion as centered not on dogma but in life and character; and it is of the very essence of this conception of religion to regard freedom and reason not as incidental, but as fundamental conditions of a thoroughly wholesome existence of religion."[3]

Succinctly put, Unitarianism is more about tolerance than anything else. Which is why Morse goes on to explain that "Castellio was the first in Protestant history to emphasize and place on firm and enduring foundations this principle of tolerance,"[4] and so, as he argues, ought to be considered the true founder of our religion.

I need not go into Castellio's background here, for the only point I wish to make is that ours is not a religion rooted in theology. Despite our name, Unitarian, as opposed to Trinitarian, our connection to Servetus was more in response to his cruel execution than to his ideas. According to one account "the wood, being green, burned so slowly that Servetus took three hours to die."[5] So whether we attribute its founding to Servetus's antitrinitarian theology, whose was burned for his writings, or to Castellio's emphasis on religious tolerance, we are led to the fundamental belief that we must not burn people for their writings or otherwise punish or persecute them for their beliefs. Tolerance is what our religion is all about.

Our additional commitments to freedom and reason are because of how they facilitate this more fundamental commitment to tolerance. For tolerance requires us to deeply value and respect the freedoms of others to have and express their own beliefs. And it requires us to use reason to counter and encounter beliefs that are foreign to us, rather than meeting them

with irrational hostility and intolerance. To be open to the ideas of others, we must be reasonable.

Only five years after Castellio's death, Hungarian King John Sigismund Zápolya, who was the first ruler to officially adopt and recognize Unitarianism, passed the Edict of Torda in 1568, the world's first religious toleration law. To prove just how central toleration, as opposed to theology, was to Unitarianism, the Edict did not command that all of his subjects must embrace the King's new religion. Rather, it require them to not force theirs upon others, while also guaranteeing they would not be persecuted because of their own:

> Therefore, none of the superintendents or others shall abuse the preachers, no one shall be reviled for his religion by anyone, according to the previous statutes, and it is not permitted that anyone should threaten anyone else by imprisonment or by removal from his post for his teaching.

That such an edict was issued in the middle of the 16th century is astounding from a historical perspective and, sadly, remains a little-known historical fact. I say this because the idea of tolerance wasn't widely talked about until during the Enlightenment period beginning in the late 17th century, and it took some time before the concept evolved to the unprecedented standard first set by Unitarianism's Edict of Torda a century sooner. In fact, the Edict isn't even mentioned in historian Richie Robertson's new 900-page book on *The Enlightenment*, in which an entire chapter is devoted to the topic of toleration.

Until close to the start of the 18th century, the suggestion that we should tolerate different viewpoints was almost as unthinkable as it was offensive. "Through many centuries, intolerance seemed a virtue,"[6] Robertson explains. "It was no kindness to indulge people in error that would lead to damnation."[7] The notion of tolerance was initially so offensive that its mere mention could get a person in hot water. Toleration was seen as traitorous. Keep in mind, at the time, Christendom had been torn apart by the Reformation, which had led to all kinds of religious wars and cruelties. There was much animosity between the religious sects who were not only unwilling to harbor outsiders amongst them but were also terrified of doing so. The 17th century Anglican preacher Edward Stillingfleet likened tolerance to a Trojan Horse "which bring in our *Enemies* without being seen."[8] Additionally, Robertson points out, "Toleration was also considered wrong in principle, as it implied indifference to divine truth and disregard for ecclesiastical authority."[9] So, unlike today, when the ethic has been flipped, and those who are intolerant must at least pretend they are tolerant, no pretense was necessary 400-years ago. The idea of tolerance was considered an evil that itself could not be tolerated. The solution to all the violence and conflict, which was driven by ideological and religious differences, was obviously to force everyone to think alike.

Yet it was also at this time that people realized intolerance wasn't working. The extremely violent religious wars of the 16th and early 17th centuries were still fresh on everyone's minds. After a hundred years of constant bloodshed and brutality, something had to give. Robertson reminds us that in France the war between Catholics and Calvinist that lasted 36 years until 1598 and had desolated the nation. The Thirty Years War in Germany, between

Catholics and Lutherans, killed a third of the population. Horrific atrocities were committed during the English Civil War over issues of religious freedom. Thousands of Protestants in Antwerp, including men, women, and children, were murdered during the "Spanish Fury" in November of 1576. Estimates of 5,000 to 30,000 Huguenots were massacred in the streets by Catholic mobs over a three-day period in 1572 that has become remembers as "Saint Bartholomew's Night," which included the burning of thousands of their homes. There's no telling how many actually died due to religious intolerance during this century of violence. Estimates are between 40,000 and 200,000.[10]

Despite the ethic of the day that believed it wrong to tolerate wrong thinking, especially when it came to religion, governments and their citizens alike understood some toleration was necessary in order to end such chaos. Toleration had to happen for practical and political purposes if for none other. But toleration was still considered a bitter pill to have to swallow, if not a form of sin. Intolerance, on the other hand, was considered a moral duty. As Robertson succinctly explains:

> All these conflicts—Catholic Spain against the newly Protestant Netherlands, Protestant England against Catholic Ireland, Catholics versus Huguenots in France, Protestant armies afflicting Catholic populations (and vice versa) in Germany—were religious in origin. By the onset of the Enlightenment, therefore, it was increasingly felt that ways must be found for adherents of different religions to live together, if not harmoniously, then at least without open conflict.

But, again, although politically expedient, nobody liked the idea of tolerance. It was certainly not regarded as morally imperative, and, if anything, was considered the very opposite. As toleration laws began to crop up, they were more like treaties meant to curtail violence, more like the ceasefire negotiated between Israel and Hamas just a few days ago, than any sort of moral belief in the brotherhood and sisterhood of mankind. Robertson says, "The concept of toleration, in both theory and practice, has limitations. Toleration is sometimes granted reluctantly. What is tolerated is also disapproval of."[11] So, while some nondominant religious came to be tolerated, they were not condoned.

To better make the point, let's consider what some of these toleration laws entailed, thanks again to Richie Robertson's book, *The Enlightenment.* The French Edict of Nantes in 1598 recognized Catholicism as the official religion, but granted Protestants the freedom to worship, so long as they did so only in the areas they already controlled. "Huguenots [French Protestants] were obliged to observe Catholic Holidays, obey Catholic laws regarding marriage and contracts, and submit every book they printed to censorship."[12] Twenty-four years later, the French Protestants were no longer allowed to hold burials during the day, and they were no longer allowed to have government representatives. Marriage between Protestants and Catholics became illegal. Protestant women could not be midwives. Protestant could not practice law or medicine, and soldiers were sent to occupy their homes and communities. If they didn't like it, they were no longer free to emigrate elsewhere, and those who defied the bans had their belongings confiscated. That is what toleration meant at the time. It is in reference to those Huguenots that did manage to emigrate elsewhere that

we get the word *refugee*.[13] In 1787, 185 years after the Edict of Nantes, a new Edict of Toleration allowed them to "marry and to own and inherit property, but denied them their own worship and debarred them from public office."[14]

Similarly, in the United Provinces of the Dutch Republic, the Dutch Reform Church was the official religion, although others, were legally tolerated. But this meant Catholics could not hold public office, nor build their own churches, but, for a fee, could hold their services in buildings that weren't considered churches. Robertson says, "it was very limited liberty that allowed them to attend Mass only in private houses and usually under cover of darkness."[15] Although the Dutch tolerated other religions as well, they considered Socinianism, which was the precursor of Unitarianism, "an intolerable heresy."[16]

This is why Michael Servetus, as previously mentioned, was ordered to be burned alive by Reformer, John Calvin. As Robertson says, "This notorious event showed that Protestants could be as repressive as the Catholic Church whose authority they had thrown off."[17] By 1658, during the middle of the Enlightenment Period, "denial of the Trinity had become a capital crime in England."[18] It was not until 1669 that Jews, who had long been tolerated in Amsterdam, were allowed to have a synagogue. But the Jews there were still afraid to hold any public ceremonies for fear of persecution. And in late 17th century England and Scotland, laws prohibited anyone who wasn't part of the Established Church from "holding public office (including commissions in the army) or sitting in Parliament." They were often harassed and abused by others and were fined or imprisoned if five or more were caught participating in illegal worship.

These are but a few examples of what toleration initially looked like during the Enlightenment. The notion of tolerance began to evolve, however, toward the end of the Century, as certain Enlightenment thinkers began arguing that it is as wrong as it is absurd to try to force people to accept ideas they don't believe. This was the beginning of what would eventually flip the paradigm, so that tolerance would be considered right, and intolerance wrong. "The crucial argument for toleration was that the conscience could not be forced," Robertson says. "People could not be compelled to believe something that their consciences forbade them to believe."

This point is what makes Unitarianism so exceptional. The Edict of Torda, passed way back in 1568, not the late 17th century, unlike all of these other, so called, toleration laws that often barely tolerated minority beliefs, was not only the earliest toleration law, but guaranteed that no one, no matter their religion, would be accosted by another or forced to believe something they could not. "No one shall compel them," the Edict says, "for their souls would not be satisfied." It's an unprecedented notion that, rather than considering toleration something meant to benefit the government, Unitarians saw it as something that was good and right for the individual. It would take another hundred years after Torda that the Enlightenment thinkers saw this for themselves.

Long after Unitarianism's historic edict of toleration, those Enlightenment philosophers who inspired American Democracy, along with our American branch of Unitarianism, realized

tolerance is necessary because it is impossible to force beliefs on others, even if by torture. Philosopher John Locke, for example, began his 1689 essay, *A Letter Concerning Toleration* saying, "I esteem that toleration to be the chief characteristic mark of the true church."[19] Those who only emphasize their orthodox beliefs, he said, are simply "striving for power and empire over one another,"[20] are destitute of any charity, meekness, or goodwill, including for "those who are not Christians," and, thus, fall short of being true Christians themselves. It was also in this same letter that Locke began to argue for the separation of Church and State, as an outgrowth of religious tolerance. Profound as this idea of tolerance was, however, Robertson says, arguments like it "still assume that toleration is something undesirable," that it would still be better if everyone agreed. "It is not yet an argument against interfering with the sanctify of the individual conscience."[21] That is to say, "what one misses above all in Locke's argument is a sense that there is anything morally wrong with intolerance, or a sense of any deep concern for the victims of persecution or the moral insult that is involved in the attempt to manipulate their faith."[22]

Nearly another century would pass before another Enlightenment philosopher, Immanuel Kant, who agreed entirely with Locke's idea of church and state separation, and that it is wrong to force religion on others, or persecute them for theirs, would write that enlightened rulers must renounce "the arrogant title of *tolerance*."[23] So, in 1784, toward the end of the now 18th century, one of the Enlightenment's most important figures, considered tolerance and idea that was arrogant and should be renounced. This was so because he did not believe tolerance went far enough. It was not enough to merely tolerate those we disagree with. We had to fully accept them as equals, as citizens, and, hopefully, as neighbors. Preachers and scholars should be free to continue publicly disagreeing, but when it comes to laws and governments, it is their task, Kant says, "to leave everyone free to use his own reason in all matters of conscience."[24]

It was also in the late 18th century that the French philosopher Voltaire began campaigning against intolerance as immoral. Remember, for many centuries, intolerance was considered moral, and tolerance immoral. Voltaire, sickened by the bloodshed and murder intolerance led to, reversed the paradigm, calling tolerance the "hallmark of humanity."[25] Voltaire even took this definition beyond the scope of religion:

> It does not require any great art or studied elocution to prove that Christians ought to tolerate one another. Nay, I shall go still farther and say that we ought to look upon all men as our brethren. How! call a Turk, a Jew, and a Siamese, my brother? Yes, doubtless; for are we not all children of the same parent, and the creatures of the same Creator?[26]

This is the attitude that finally become dominant toward the end of the Enlightenment period. As Robertson puts it, "The reluctance that is implied in tolerance has been dropped: toleration has mutated into acceptance."[27] And it is this idea of tolerance that is still with us today, that we ought to respect one another because we are all fundamentally human, no matter our differences. Not that we always live up to this ideal and are not still struggling to do so, but if we don't, then we have to go through ethical contortions to try to justify our

intolerant behavior, usually by reverting to false *ad hominem* attacks so we can blame our abuses on those we claim deserve it. But the arc of the Universe does seem to bend toward justice, and we continue to strive toward becoming a society and, I hope, a planet that is more inclusive and accepting of one another.

Yet it is also true, it would seem, that today we find ourselves as divided as ever, even within our own liberal religion, founded upon the Enlightenment principles of freedom, reason, and, above all, tolerance, that we are reverting to the doctrine of intolerance, "striving," as Locke said, "for power and empire over one another." Yet I think about how far we have come, after much suffering and struggle, as a species and as a society, not only toward religious inclusion, but also toward greater inclusion around race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. Wouldn't it be sad if our religion of all religions, which has long been ahead of its time when it comes, not to merely practicing tolerance, but to upholding human dignity itself, should succumb now, at this crucial moment in history, to embracing intolerance, and all the dogma, self-righteousness, authoritarianism, and injustice that goes along with it.

I remain proud of my freely chosen religion's remarkable history and transformative principles dating back a hundred years before the Enlightenment even began, to courageous and visionary figures like Sebastian Castellio and King John Sigismund. And I will continue to uplift those fundamental principles our religion has long stood for and that have held us steady more than 400 hundred years—freedom, reason, and tolerance. Today, Unitarian Universalism itself needs to remember and reconnect with its precious Unitarian roots because the world needs it, it needs all of us, it needs our brand of tolerance, now more than ever.

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[1] Morse, Earl Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 1945, p. 208.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Robertson, Richie, *The Enlightenment*, HarperCollins, New York, NY, 2021, p. 131.
[6] Ibid., p. 88.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid., p. 89.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid., p. 86.
[11] Ibid., p. 87f.
[12] Ibid., p. 91.
[13] Ibid., p. 93.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid., p. 94.
[16] Ibid., p. 96.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid., p. 97.
[19] Locke, John, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, Huddersfield, Printied for the Editor by J. Brook, 1796, p. 5.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Robertson, ibid., p. 111.
[22] Ibid., p. 113.

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[23] Kant, Immanuel, *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* Konigsberg in Prussia, 30 September 1784
[24] Ibid.
[25] Robertson, ibid., p. 125.
[26] Voltaire**.** *Treatise on Tolerance*: From the French writer, historian and philosopher, famous for his wit, his attacks on the established Catholic Church, and his advocacy ... of religion and freedom of expression (p. 87), Kindle Edition
[27] Robertson, ibid., p. 132.