Religious diversity and religious toleration

PHILIP L. QUINN
University of Notre Dame

Awareness of religious diversity is nothing new under the sun. The early Christian martyrs were doubtless aware that others in the Roman Empire did not share their religious beliefs. Yet it is arguable that awareness of religious diversity has recently assumed qualitatively new forms. Among the factors that might account for this transformation is the increased contact people now have with religions other than their own. Modern technologies of travel and communication foster interchanges between adherents of different religions. Modern scholarship has made available translations of and commentaries on texts from a variety of religious traditions, and cultural anthropologists have recorded fascinating thick descriptions of the practices of many such traditions. People who live in religiously pluralistic democracies have ample opportunities to acquire personal familiarity with religions other than their own without leaving home. It now is therefore harder than it once was to hang onto negative stereotypes of or rationalize hostile reactions to the practitioners of religions other than one's own. But many people succeed in doing so; increased contact often enough produces greater friction. News media have bombarded us with the sights and sounds of religious conflict in Belfast, Beirut and Bosnia. In Africa Muslims clash with animists, in India Hindus and Muslims struggle bitterly, and in Europe Catholic Croats go to war with Orthodox Serbs. The city of Jerusalem remains a focal point for religious quarrels among Jews, Christians and Muslims. In the eighteenth century, Kant complained that the history of Christianity could justify Lucretius's exclamation, tantum religio potuit suadere malorum! At the beginning of the twenty-first century, support for Lucretius comes from several religions and many parts of the world. The religions of the world may be able to understand one another better now than ever before, but their ability to live together in peace still has not yet been secured.

Recent philosophical work that is responsive to the contemporary challenge of religious diversity has centered in the areas of epistemology and political philosophy. In epistemology, the main issue has been whether or not, given what we now know about religious diversity, exclusivism remains a defensible position. Exclusivism is the view that one religion is basically correct and all the others go astray in one or more ways. It has several dimen-
sions. Doctrinal exclusivism is the view that the doctrines of one religion are mostly true while the doctrines of all the others, where there is conflict, are false. Soteriological exclusivism is the view that only the path proposed by one religion leads securely to the ultimate religious goal, salvation or liberation. And experiential exclusivism is the view that the religious experiences typically enjoyed by the adherents of one religion are mostly veridical and conflicting experiences typical of all the others are nonveridical. It is, of course, entirely consistent to accept exclusivism in one of these dimensions while rejecting it in another. For example, some Christians who are doctrinal exclusivists hold that salvation is available to devout members of other religious traditions, though such Christians often insist that, unbeknownst to those outside Christianity, their salvation comes through Jesus Christ. Starting from the observation that, as far as we can tell empirically, all the world religions are more or less equal in their salvific efficacy, that is, their ability to transform their practitioners from being self-centered to being centered on a transcendent reality, John Hick has mounted a powerful attack on exclusivism in all three dimensions. While admitting that religious diversity does, or at least can, undermine the epistemic credentials of experiential or doctrinal exclusivism to some extent, William P. Alston and Alvin Plantinga have replied with arguments aimed at showing that Christian exclusivism of some sort continues to enjoy an epistemic status high enough to make it a rational option even when religious diversity is taken into account. And other philosophers have added their voices to the discussion of this issue. In my opinion, the debate on this topic has more or less reached a stand off. The positions that are live philosophical options have been fairly thoroughly mapped out, and the main arguments for and against each of them have been developed in some detail. I doubt that there is a realistic prospect of the issue which divides exclusivists from their philosophical opponents being decisively settled or even moved appreciably closer to a resolution by additional arguments.

One might think of exclusivism of another kind as the chief problem addressed by the response to religious diversity within contemporary political philosophy. In this case, exclusivism is the view, advocated by several liberal political philosophers, that religion ought to be excluded from the public square in modern liberal democracies. More precisely, political exclusivists hold that religious arguments should be excluded from the public political discourse of religiously pluralistic democratic societies on certain fundamental questions. Robert Audi has argued vigorously for a version of exclusivism that includes a prima facie obligation not to advocate or support any law or policy that restricts conduct unless one has and is willing to offer adequate secular reason for such advocacy or support. Appealing to grounds of fairness, Nicholas Wolterstorff has challenged Audi’s position
and forcefully criticized the general exclusivist point of view of which it is an instance.\textsuperscript{5} The most nuanced liberal exclusion of the religious so far developed is contained in the political philosophy of John Rawls. According to its ideal of public reason, which imposes a duty of civility, we are not to introduce into public political discourse on constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice reasons drawn from comprehensive doctrines, religious doctrines all being understood to be comprehensive, unless we satisfy the proviso that we do so in ways that strengthen the ideal of public reason itself.\textsuperscript{6} My impression is that, unlike the debate about exclusivism in epistemology, this dispute remains in flux to some extent and has not yet reached a stand off. Confirming evidence for this impression may be derived from the fact that Rawls has modified his position to allow that reasons drawn from comprehensive doctrines, religious or nonreligious, may be introduced into public political discussions at any time subject to the proviso that in due course reasons in compliance with the ideal of public reason are presented to support whatever the comprehensive doctrines were invoked to support.\textsuperscript{7} To be sue, the modified view still has a proviso attached, but it is more permissive than the proviso of the original view and so is less likely to raise the hackles of religious citizens of a democracy.

I confess I find it a bit odd that the main response to religious diversity in recent liberal political philosophy has focused on the issue of whether or not religious argument should be excluded from public discourse. Given the widespread religious conflict mentioned previously, I cannot help thinking that religious toleration is a more urgent global political issue and that the rather narrow focus on religious discourse in liberal democracies is a bit parochial. I have some ideas about factors that may contribute to explaining the narrow focus, though they are somewhat speculative. One factor is fear of divisiveness. It would be natural to search for moral grounds for constraints on the use of religious arguments in the public square if one were afraid that in a religiously divided society their use would be likely to be destabilizing. Jeffrey Stout expressed such fear not so long ago. Arguing against Basil Mitchell’s proposal that traditional theism be employed in order to revitalize public discourse, Stout claims that ‘the risks of reviving religious conflict like that of early modern Europe are too great’.\textsuperscript{8} I myself reckon that the probability of reigniting the Wars of Religion by including religious arguments in public political discourse is quite low, and so I think that such fear, however real it may be, is unrealistic. It seems to me that, even if the practice of religious toleration in Western democracies is no more than a modus vivendi, it is supported both by the settled habits of religious citizens and by the weight of their traditions to a degree that lends it great robustness. Another factor that may play an explanatory role is complacency about the historical achieve-
ments of political philosophy. It would be understandable if people saw no need for new arguments to clinch the case for religious toleration because they thought conclusive arguments were already available in the classic works of liberal political philosophy. One might, for example, look to John Locke's work as a source of arguments for religious toleration. According to Locke, religious persecution is bound to be ineffective and hence is irrational because its goal is to get people to adopt different religious beliefs and people do not have direct voluntary control over their religious beliefs. However, as Jeremy Waldron has recently shown Locke's case for this position falls apart under critical scrutiny, and there is no way to reconstruct it to meet the objections. Or one might look to John Stuart Mill for an argument for religious toleration that at least is successful by utilitarian standards. But David Lewis has shown that Mill will lose his case if he argues against a clever utilitarian religious Inquisitor. So complacency about the justification of religious toleration is, I think, unwarranted.

My main aim in this paper is to broaden the focus of the discussion of religious diversity in political philosophy to include arguments against religious intolerance. I shall not try to refurbish the arguments of Locke or Mill; indeed, I shall depart altogether from the British historical tradition of liberal thought. I shall instead exploit the historical resources of a continental tradition of liberal thought by examining arguments against religious intolerance developed by Pierre Bayle and Immanuel Kant. I choose these particular arguments for scrutiny because they enable me to reach a secondary goal, which is to bring the discussion of religious diversity in political philosophy into contact with the discussion in epistemology and to try to establish some connections between them. The idea that there should be such connections has been rendered intuitively vivid by Avishai Margalit. He draws attention to the parable of the three rings, made famous in Lessing's play Nathan the Wise. In Margalit's version of the story, a king leaves a legacy of three rings in his three sons; one of the rings is of great value while the other two are no more than good imitations. The religious analogy is clear. The king is God; the real ring is revealed truth; and the three sons are Moses, Jesus and Muhammad. Reflecting on the parable, Margalit points out that, apart from the king, 'no one else knows for certain which ring is the real one. This doubt should lead to an attitude of "respect and suspect", because it is possible that the truth is in another religion'. It is precisely the connection Margalit sees between epistemic uncertainty and the relatively tolerant attitude of respect and suspect that interests me. I propose to explore that connection and to try to clarify what its implications are through an examination of the arguments of Bayle and Kant. I do not pretend to return a final verdict on the general line of philosophical thought to which those arguments are meant to contribute.
In this paper, I shall ignore some of the issues that have been prominent in other recent treatments of toleration in political philosophy. I am not going to investigate the topic of whether ordinary language marks a conceptual distinction between toleration and tolerance. Nor do I plan to take a stand on whether it is a necessary truth that one can only tolerate things one views as bad or evil. I do not have a definition or an analysis of toleration to offer. I shall work with an intuitive notion of religious intolerance that has within its extension behaviors such as killing people for heresy or apostasy, forced conversions and preventing people from engaging collectively in worship. My interest here is restricted to the fairly specific topic of the ethical or moral status of such intolerant behaviors.\textsuperscript{14}

The remainder of the paper is divided into three parts. In the first, I rehearse arguments about the negative epistemic consequences of religious diversity. The other two parts address the question of what impact the conclusions of such arguments might have on further arguments against intolerance. The second part subjects to critical analysis an argument by Bayle; the third does the same to an argument of Kant.

1. Alston and others on religious diversity

William P. Alston acknowledges that religious diversity gives rise to an epistemological problem for his view that experience of God confers prima facie justification or beliefs about how God is manifested to the experiencer. He defends this view from within the perspective of a doxastic practice approach to epistemology.\textsuperscript{15} A doxastic practice is a practice of forming beliefs together with a series of possible overrides for the prima facie justification a belief derives from having been generated by the practice. Doxastic practices are to be evaluated, from an epistemic point of view, in terms of their likelihood of producing true beliefs, that is, in terms of their reliability. Basic doxastic practices, for example, sense perception, are socially established practices whose reliability cannot be established in a noncircular manner. Alston thinks it rational to grant prima facie acceptance to all basic doxastic practices that are not demonstrably unreliable or otherwise disqualified from rational acceptance. In other words, basic practices are innocent until proven guilty. He also observes that a practice’s claim to rational acceptance is strengthened if it enjoys self-support. When he turns his attention to the religious realm, he supposes that each of the major traditions has within it a practice of forming beliefs about how Ultimate Reality, whatever it may be, manifests itself in or through religious experience. As he divides up the pie, different religions have different experiential practices because the systems of possible overrides vary so much from one religion to another. Among
them is the Christian practice (CP). For Alston, CP is a basic practice that is not demonstrably unreliable and derives self-support from, for instance, the way in which its promises of spiritual development can be seen, from within the practice, to be fulfilled in the lives of some of its practitioners. However, he allows that other religious doxastic practices are basic too, are also not demonstrably unreliable, and enjoy as much self-support as CP does. In short, CP has rivals that are on an epistemic par with it, and this is why religious diversity creates an epistemological problem for it. And, needless to say, each of these rivals is in the same situation; CP’s problem is also a problem for Buddhist practice (BP), Hindu practice (HP) and so forth. Does this disqualify CP and its rivals from rational acceptance?

Alston thinks not. He does admit that religious diversity decreases the justification its practitioners have for engaging in CP, but he denies that it does so to such a degree that it is irrational for them to engage in it. His main argument for this denial deploys an analogy with a counterfactual scenario involving rival sense-perceptual doxastic practices. Imagine that there were, in certain cultures, a socially established ‘Cartesian’ practice of construing what is visually perceived as an indefinitely extended medium more or less concentrated at various points, rather than, as in our ‘Aristotelian’ practice, as made up of more or less discrete objects scattered about in space. Further imagine that there were, in yet other cultures, an established ‘Whiteheadian’ practice in which the visual field is taken to be made up of momentary events growing out of one another in a continuous process. Suppose that each of these three practices served its practitioners equally well in their dealings with the environment and had associated with it a well-developed physical science. Suppose also that we were as firmly wedded to our ‘Aristotelian’ practice as we in fact are but were unable to come up with any non-question-begging reason for regarding it as more accurate than either of the others. Alston concludes that, absent any non-question-begging reason for thinking that one of the other two practices is more accurate than my own, ‘the only rational course for me is to sit tight with the practice of which I am a master and which serves me so well in guiding my activity in the world’.16 But the sheerly hypothetical sense-perceptual scenario is precisely parallel to our actual situation with regard to CP and its religious rivals. Hence, by parity of reasoning, the rational thing for a practitioner of CP to do is to sit tight with it and continue to form beliefs making use of it. And, again by parity of reasoning, the same goes for practitioners of BP, HP and other uneliminated rivals of CP.

Alston’s critics have argued that he has not established his conclusion. Though he concedes that it is pragmatically rational for its practitioners to sit tight with CP, William J. Wainwright contends that Alston has not shown
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