

# **Tolerance, Pluralism and the Framework for Utopia**

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## Introduction

Canadians today live in one of the freest and most prosperous countries in the world. However, this does not mean that Canadian freedom faces no threats. In Canada there has been a subtle, yet steady erosion of liberty on the behalf of an increasingly aggressive form of egalitarianism. This new egalitarianism seeks to challenge perceived threats to the equal treatment of all people by legally and politically coercing those groups and individuals that disagree. This is detrimental to the fundamental freedoms that Canadians have historically enjoyed. Free societies like Canada should allow private and voluntary organizations to decide on their own what values and beliefs its members must adhere to, and should not force these organizations to be universally inclusive. It will be argued here that tolerance of a diversity of voluntary organizations, including ones that are restrictive, is a preferable approach to inclusivity.

There is a difference between tolerance and acceptance. Tolerance is a vital component of liberty and freedom in a pluralistic society. Efforts to force "inclusivity" upon voluntary associations should be rejected as a threat to the *Charter* rights and freedoms guaranteed to Canadians. Tolerance is more important than acceptance in a free society because tolerance is compatible with diversity and pluralism, while acceptance requires a degree of conformity. Defending tolerance as a fundamental value protects the basic rights of all individuals. By guaranteeing tolerance of various norms and values, tolerance ensures that individuals in a pluralistic society are free to live according to the values and beliefs they voluntarily choose.

## Tolerance versus Acceptance

In order to clarify what this debate is ultimately about, it will be helpful to discuss the often confused ideas of tolerance and acceptance. Tolerance can be defined as the "willingness to allow beliefs and behaviours that are different from your own, even if you disagree or disapprove of them."<sup>1</sup> Tolerance is often misunderstood as meaning the legal acceptance, but moral dislike of an action or belief. This is not the case. Tolerance does not necessarily mean that individuals who tolerate something dislike it. Tolerance must be understood as simply respecting the right of individuals to act and think as they choose, regardless, and not in spite of how other individuals feel about it. For example, you might tolerate my decision to support the Toronto Maple Leafs even though you disapprove of the decision. Or, I might tolerate your decision to support the New York Yankees despite having no interest in baseball. Tolerance simply means there should be legal and political neutrality towards the voluntary and private decisions of adults, provided they do not involve the violation of anyone else's rights.

This can be contrasted with the concept of acceptance. Acceptance can be defined as "general agreement that something is satisfactory or right."<sup>2</sup> A better word to understand what acceptance in the context of voluntary associations might be inclusivity, which means "the quality of trying

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<sup>1</sup> *Cambridge Online Dictionary*, s.v., "Tolerance," accessed June 4 2016 <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/tolerance>

<sup>2</sup> *Cambridge Online Dictionary*, s.v., "Acceptance," accessed June 4 2016 <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/acceptance>

to include many different types of people and treating them all fairly and equally."<sup>3</sup> An example of this would be forcing a Catholic Church to marry and give communion to a gay couple, or insisting that a female book club accept male members. Acceptance leaves no room for either neutrality or disagreement in the way that tolerance does. If acceptance is voluntary and private, individuals are not forced to agree. However, when acceptance becomes a legal or political goal, then acceptance becomes a form of coercion.

Tolerance allows a degree of passivity or diversity in beliefs, and respects the right to disagree and disapprove of other beliefs. Acceptance and inclusivity requires a degree of affirmation, which limits the possibility of dissent and thus potential diversity. In the context of voluntary associations, this distinction is crucial. A fundamental requirement of freedom is the ability to choose what values and organizations you associate with. When people make the choice to associate with a voluntary association, they do so on the basis of something specific about the association that makes them want to join. This gives all associations boundaries, making them all in some way exclusive. While this might be something ethically neutral like a soccer club, it might be something built around a basic set of beliefs and values, like a church or political party. Provided these organizations are voluntary, their existence and self-determination is a logical extension of individual rights. Tolerance protects individual rights by allowing a diverse range of organizations and associations to exist.

### **The Benefits of Tolerance**

Tolerance is a concept that has been defended by a wide variety of thinkers, including; Baruch Spinoza, John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville. These three thinkers not only defend the idea of tolerance, but implicitly reveal why it is preferable to contemporary notions of inclusivity.

The most obvious reason why tolerance is preferable to the coerced uniformity of belief required by acceptance is that only tolerance can provide social harmony in the face of normative diversity. In the *Theologico-Political Treatise* the Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza says "it is imperative that freedom of judgment should be granted, so that men may live together in harmony, however diverse, or even openly contradictory their opinions may be."<sup>4</sup> Diversity in opinions and values is an inescapable fact of modern life. Given how deeply held most of these beliefs are, uniformity could not be achieved without massive social costs, including the potential for violence. As a Jew living in the Netherlands in the 17th century, Spinoza saw firsthand the benefits of tolerance. While much of Europe was still engaged in horrific religious conflict, the Netherlands became one of the most prosperous places in the world as people could peacefully coexist and work alongside one another while still having freedom of religion and conscience. As long as people are free to associate and not associate with whatever community they prefer, the existence of unpopular organizations promotes, and does not undermine the individual rights and freedoms of all Canadians.

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<sup>3</sup>Cambridge Online Dictionary, s.v., "Inclusivity," accessed June 4 2016 <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/inclusivity>

<sup>4</sup>Baruch Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise* (Massachusetts: Focus Publishing, 2004), XX, 58.

Not only does tolerance help increase social harmony, tolerance allows for intellectual diversity. This diversity leads to competition between competing values and beliefs, and creates what is often called a 'marketplace of ideas.' British philosopher John Stuart Mill argued that free expression should be welcomed because it makes rational decision making necessary in order to evaluate different beliefs, enhancing the search for truth. In *On Liberty* Mill wrote that "wrong opinions and practices gradually yield to fact and argument: but facts and arguments, to produce any effect on the mind, must be brought before it...The steady habit of correcting and completing his own opinion by collating it with those of others, so far from causing doubt and hesitation in carrying it into practice, is the only stable foundation for a just reliance on it."<sup>5</sup> Competition leads to better results. When the state subsidizes and protects certain products, the results are ultimately inferior to what could be produced by a competitive system. This is because competition provides a feedback mechanism to producers that gives them information about what consumers want. If we really want the truth and better ideas, allowing a flourishing and diverse marketplace of ideas is the best way to accomplish this. This can only be achieved if all ideas are tolerated, and not censored because of their lack of inclusivity.

An example of this would be in religion. In a well-known study published in *The Review of Religious Research* sociologist Rodney Stark found that in the United States the areas that produced the most Roman Catholic priests and conversions in proportion to the population size were also areas where Catholics were a small minority. Stark suggested that this was a result of competition, which resulted in more innovation within the local diocese. The opposite was true in areas where the Catholic population was a majority or large plurality.<sup>6</sup> This marketplace can only exist if a genuine authentic diversity of voluntary associations is tolerated. This diversity has to include groups that are genuinely different, regardless of how unpopular their beliefs and principles are. Proponents of universal inclusivity have nothing to fear from this. If these ideas are as strong as it is claimed then they will flourish because of their superiority. Tolerating views that do not meet the criteria of universal inclusivity protects minority and individual rights and helps facilitate the search for truth.

Perhaps most importantly, tolerance serves as a conceptual buttress against what Alexis de Tocqueville called the "soft despotism" of the tyranny of the majority. The displacement of tolerance in favour of the idea of acceptance opens the door to a dangerous form of democratic tyranny. In *Democracy in America* Tocqueville argued that the democratic worldview includes a deep egalitarian impulse, one that leads to a levelling of all people.<sup>7</sup> The levelled men of democratic society eventually start thinking in the same way. This might also be understood as a kind of tyranny of the majority. Tocqueville discusses this at length: "as long as the majority is doubtful, one speaks; but when it has irrevocably pronounced, everyone becomes silent...the writer is free, but unhappiness awaits him if he dares to leave them...he yields, he finally bends under the effort of each day and returns to silence as if he felt remorse for having spoken the

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<sup>5</sup> John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (London: Oxford Paperbacks, 2008), Ch. II, 7.

<sup>6</sup> Rodney Stark, "Catholic Contexts: Competition, Commitment and Innovation," *Review of Religious Research*. Vol. 39, No. 3 (March 1998): 197-208.

[https://www.jstor.org/stable/3512588?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/3512588?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents)

<sup>7</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, edited and translated by Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 495.

truth."<sup>8</sup> The danger of this form of majoritarianism is that minority groups in societies face social and eventually political persecution and marginalization.

Historically, sexual minorities have faced heavy discrimination and persecution. Homosexuality was a criminal act in Canada until 1969, and homosexuals have historically been forced to keep their sexuality secret for fear of social and legal reprisals. Laws criminalizing homosexuality historically represented the beliefs and values of the majority of Canadians.<sup>9</sup> Today, over 80 per cent of Canadians have no problem or issue with homosexuality.<sup>10</sup> Conversely, individuals and organizations who still hold to traditional understandings of sexuality now sometimes face legal and social persecution. The refusal by three legal societies to recognize the law school at Trinity Western University (TWU), a private Christian school, is a good example of this. While a majority of Canadians may still identify as Christians, church attendance and the large scale social rejection of traditional sexual values restricting sexual activity to married men and women such as those found in TWU's Community Covenant suggests that conservative Christians are now a minority in Canada. Regardless of personal beliefs on sexual behaviour, both these minority groups should be allowed to live in accordance with their own values. What tolerance does is protect all people and values from the fashion of the day. While the popularity of coerced inclusivity might seem like a good idea today, half a century ago democratic opinion would have favoured something very different. Unlike acceptance, tolerance ensures values and beliefs are not dependent on popular support.

### **The Framework for Utopia**

Tolerance is compatible with the moral and cultural pluralism that characterizes Canada today, whereas coerced inclusivity is not. Canadians practice different religions, have different understandings of the fundamental nature of reality, have different political views, speak different languages, eat different foods, wear different clothes, love different people, pursue different things in their leisure time and so on. This pluralism is undeniable and inescapable, and any viable political or legal theory must be able to account for it.

This diversity is something that should be welcomed. Human beings are all different. We have different values, goals and desires that shape the way we think and behave. When people think about diversity, they usually think about food, clothing or language. However, diversity means much more than this. Diversity allows for fundamental disagreements in beliefs and values. Within political theory this is often referred to as differing "conceptions of the good." These differing conceptions are often fundamentally irreconcilable. A conservative Christian who believes sex is only moral if it takes place within marriage between a man and a woman is never going to be able to have the same personal code of conduct as a polyamorous person who believes in free love. The only way these beliefs can be reconciled is if someone changes their mind, either willingly or through coercion. Yet, while these beliefs cannot be reconciled, they

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<sup>8</sup> Tocqueville, 243-244.

<sup>9</sup> Patrick Corriveau, *Judging Homosexuals: A History of Gay Persecution in Quebec and France* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011), 82.

<sup>10</sup> Pew Global Attitudes Project, "The Global Divide on Homosexuality" *Pew Research Center*, June 2013, accessed June 7 2016. <http://www.pewglobal.org/files/2014/05/Pew-Global-Attitudes-Homosexuality-Report-REVISED-MAY-27-2014.pdf>

can coexist, provided each individual respects the rights of other individuals to live their lives as they see fit. Respecting people's autonomy means respecting their right to make decisions that you find distasteful or wrong.

This diversity manifests itself in more than personal beliefs, it becomes part of civil society by helping to create a wide range of robust associations. These voluntary associations might be based on religion, political belief, culture, or common interests. But, this will lead to an array of associations with sometimes conflicting values. For these voluntary associations to be truly representative of their members they must have the right to establish the identity that make them what they are. For people to be truly free to make the choice to join these organizations, they must be able to do so without having to fear political or legal reprisals. Forcing organizations to be universally welcoming and inclusive restricts their ability to form the boundaries that give them their identity. This renders free and voluntary association meaningless, as it means individuals are not truly free to express and act in accordance with their beliefs. Even if these organizations are restrictive, their voluntary nature means that individuals who disapprove of them do not have their rights impinged, as they are not compelled to join. The only way for freedom to truly exist is for the government to remain entirely neutral on such matters. By tolerating all private beliefs and associations, the government can respect and protect the freedom of all individuals, not just the majority or those with easy access to political power.

Attempts to produce heaven on earth invariably produces hell. This is because we all have different ideas of what heaven would look like. In a pluralistic society, the possibility of achieving consensus on what the perfect society would look like is probably impossible. The solution is to instead establish a framework in which liberty and tolerance are the basic governing principles. In this society people are free to live in and build communities that reflect their understanding of the good life. This would include respecting the right of people to choose to live in communities that require them to live in particular, even restrictive ways. Establishing such a society allows everyone to pursue happiness and the good life as they see fit, without requiring agreement on anything more than respecting the rights of others to do the same. Political systems can achieve this when their laws are essentially negative, protecting the basic rights of individuals and acting only to ensure that no one else can violate these rights. If we are to build such a society, we must demand only tolerance, and not acceptance from individuals. This creates not one universal utopia, but establishes the framework in which everyone can build their own little utopia.