**Toleration, Pluralism and Coexistence: The Ambivalent Legacies of the Reformation**

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One of the enduring myths of the origins of modern Western liberalism to which we still cling, albeit unconsciously, is the tradition of linking the Reformation with the rise of toleration. The notion that Protestantism helped to sow the seeds for advanced ideas of freedom of conscience and laid the foundations for practical arrangements that facilitated the acceptance of religious diversity is part of another resilient paradigm: the story of the Reformation’s role as an agent of progress and as a stepping stone towards the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Integral to the teleological tale of how the values we believe to be central to our civilisation came into being, it is also deeply entwined with the patriotic narratives that underpin Anglo-American senses of national identity. It entails an element of self-satisfaction and self-congratulation that is profoundly at odds with the rampant and pervasive intolerance that lurks under the surface of twenty-first-century society and increasingly erupts into public view. Ironically, especially in Britain, this whiggish myth also embodies and perpetuates a related prejudice: the latent anti-Catholicism enshrined in the black legend of the intolerant medieval Inquisition and of the scheming Jesuits, in the lingering memory of the Protestant martyrs burnt during the reign of Queen Mary I, and in accounts of the constitutional coup that excluded a Catholic monarch from the throne which we continue to christen the ‘Glorious Revolution’.

Rooted in polemical discourses forged by contemporaries to promote and defend the Reformation, over the centuries the story of the rise of toleration has proved a flexible and adaptable tool. During the nineteenth century, it was harnessed by Lord Macaulay, W. E. H. Lecky, Samuel Rawlinson Gardiner and others to reinforce the evolving Victorian creed of individualism and liberalism.[[1]](#footnote-1) In the twentieth century, against the backdrop of the rise of fascism and the crisis of World War II, its key elements were revived and rearticulated by scholars on both sides of the Atlantic, including William Haller, A.S.P. Woodhouse, and W. K. Jordan.[[2]](#footnote-2) In the wake of 9/11 and the ongoing threat perceived to be presented by religious fundamentalism and terrorism, the tale of ‘how the idea of religious toleration came to the West’ has acquired fresh resonance and found new forms of scholarly expression.[[3]](#footnote-3) The triumphalist rhetoric of tolerance and inclusion continues to be invoked and trumpeted in political circles too, even as the evidence of recent events in Britain, Europe and the United States underlines the fragility and inner contradictions of this ideal, together with the frightening frequency with which it is breached in practice.[[4]](#footnote-4) The lip service we give to the virtues of pluralism belies the much uglier reality in which we are all implicit. Believing – and deceiving ourselves – that our own society is fundamentally a tolerant one may itself be one of the tangled legacies of the Reformation.

This short essay reflects on some recent tendencies in the historiography of toleration and their significance. One of its themes is the degree to which investigation of early modern discourses and practices of religious coexistence has functioned as a vehicle and cipher for present-day anxieties, preoccupations and imperatives: the prism through which we view this aspect of the past, as of others, is ineluctably a presentist one, coloured and distorted by the societies and cultures of which we are products and heirs. Nevertheless, it will be suggested in the conclusion that their study does indeed have continuing resonance and contemporary relevance.

Over the last thirty years, a transformation has taken place in the study of religious toleration in post-Reformation Europe. Against an older view that celebrated the achievements of pioneering thinkers, lauded legislative landmarks, and traced the sea change in public attitudes that steadily entrenched the accommodation if not acceptance of diversity in everyday life, revisionist historians have underlined the contingency and limits of such developments in the early modern period. Vigorously reacting against linear models, they have highlighted the ways in which the Reformation intensified the impulse to punish and discipline and the violence towards rival confessions, as well as Judaism and Islam, which it served to foster and catalyse. They have stressed the extent to which the majority conceded toleration grudgingly and reluctantly, remaining committed to the concept of a cohesive Christian community glued together by a singular and exclusive notion of truth. They have likewise cut alleged statutory advances down to size as precarious less than perfect compromises and revealed their discriminatory bases and their real vulnerability to reversal.

Always involving an asymmetrical relation of power between the tolerated and the tolerator, toleration was not a positive outcome of the Reformation, but the unforeseen by-product and side-effect of incapacity and exhaustion, a second-best solution to the phenomenon of unwanted religious pluralism.[[5]](#footnote-5) It needs to be envisaged less as the polar opposite of persecution than as a species and subset of it.[[6]](#footnote-6) Complex and paradoxical, it simultaneously pulled people, communities, and nations in different directions – towards both charity and hatred, benevolence and aggression, compassion and coercion. In treating the topic thematically rather than chronologically and in emphasising continuity over change, revisionist historians (including myself) have run the risk of eclipsing the shifts in attitude that did in fact occur. Postmodern disillusionment with the reigning myths by which we live has perhaps induced us to pay insufficient attention to the process by which and the reasons why subtle alterations in mentality and policy occurred over time.[[7]](#footnote-7)

An associated aspect of the recent challenge to traditional accounts of the rise of toleration is the surge of interest in its social history. Turning away from the educated elites, rulers and legislators responsible for the formal initiatives that have entered our history books, much recent work has been concerned with the pragmatic local experiments in coexistence that emerged at the grass roots. Led by Benjamin Kaplan, a host of historians has excavated from the archives a substantial body of evidence attesting to the capacity of ordinary people to contain conflict, absorb difference and tolerate heterodoxy within their midst.[[8]](#footnote-8) Coining phrases such as ‘interconfessional conviviality’, ‘everyday ecumenicism’ and the ‘tolerance of practical rationality’ to describe this state of affairs, these studies have shown how an instinct for preserving peace, harmony, concord and good neighbourly relations – for ‘getting on and getting along’ – often overrode the impulse to antagonise and persecute.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Our analyses implicitly applaud the triumph of ‘common sense’ over the bigotry unleased by the Reformation. Consciously or unconsciously, they are often predicated on the idea that human relationships transcended confessional enmities, and that secular considerations prevailed over and trumped theological ones. They continue to assume the existence of a set of polarities and antitheses that may themselves be misleading and anachronistic: polarities between behaviour and belief, thought and action, pragmatism and principle, faith and practical rationality that were only slowly and gradually evolving. It was persecution and pluralism themselves that crystallised and intensified a sense of disjuncture between inner conscience and external conduct, and between language and truth.[[10]](#footnote-10) In the longer term, this led some to regard dissimulation as more of a danger to civil society than overt dissent and to adopt the view that sincerity in error deserved more respect that dishonest and enforced profession of the truth. At the same time, there is a sense in which we need to conceptualise early modern toleration as a form of dissimulation itself. We need to acknowledge that it involved the discomfort of suspending one’s conviction that a religion or creed was wrong and wicked in the context of circumstances that dictated the necessity of accommodating the presence of those who adhered to it. Sometimes it involved living a contradiction between what one believed and how at a particular moment in time and space it seemed prudent or best to behave for a range of reasons. It involved enduring and permitting something of which one disapproved. Ambivalence was arguably its most defining feature.

Where earlier writers praised a band of enlightened thinkers, social historians of toleration are sometimes guilty of making ordinary people into the heroes of an alternative, bottom up version of the myth of the origins of modern liberalism into which the Reformation has conventionally been integrated. Even Ben Kaplan, whose book has done so much to alert us to the messy complexities and contradictions of religious coexistence in early modern Europe, is not immune to the seductive search for its roots. He acknowledges that the very forms of toleration were ‘tainted by its basic illegitimacy’ and ‘shaped by the embarrassment and denial of those who practised it’, but his conclusion drifts back in the direction of celebrating ‘the unique qualities of the toleration we practice today’.[[11]](#footnote-11)

We may see this tendency as evidence of our innate tendency to tune our ears to hear voices that anticipate the values that we hold dear. None of us can elude the magnetic pull of the empowering narratives that are so central to our sense of who we are as individuals and as nations and peoples. Perhaps this is also why we have also been so slow to recognise that the language of ‘liberty’ and ‘freedom’ deployed by contemporaries rests on different premises to those of our own. Correcting the secularist tenor and bias of the history of political thought as practised by Quentin Skinner and the Cambridge school, it is only relatively recently that theological and biblical convictions have been restored to their rightful place at the centre of early modern European tolerationist discourse.[[12]](#footnote-12) The freedom and liberty of conscience of which contemporary writers spoke was a freedom to obey the will of God and a liberty to resist the influence of Satan and embrace the true faith.[[13]](#footnote-13) It was, moreover, ‘an aggressive language of exclusion’ that challenges our attempts to trace a clear trajectory from the past to the present.[[14]](#footnote-14) Despite a developing awareness of the Christian foundations of early modern thinking about toleration, we still find it hard not to judge it by the yardstick of the secular paradigms that we have inherited from the Enlightenment.

This is also true of one of the most provocative recent attempts to reconcile the divide between historians of ideas and those who have explored the social dynamics of interactions between the members of different confessions and faiths on the ground: Stuart Schwartz’s *All Can be Saved*. Describing itself as a ‘cultural history of thought’ and a ‘social history of attitudes’, Schwartz’s study of the records of the Spanish and Portuguese inquisition draws our attention to a deep seam of relativism in the Iberian Atlantic world, which found expression in the ostensibly widespread opinion that each person can find salvation within their own religion. Taking issue with a historiography that assumes the ‘detachment of learned discourse from the cosmology of the majority of the population’, his book relocates the seeds of religious tolerance and liberty of conscience within ‘the contested realm of popular culture’ and within a context that is commonly regarded as the epitome of a persecuting society. It suggests that toleration arose not just from philosophical breakthroughs made by learned thinkers and from the politique strategies pursued by statesmen but also from the experiences of ordinary people living in an environment with a long history of the coexistence of different creeds. Articulated in the unlikely setting of inquisitorial tribunals, this tradition of universalism and scepticism constituted a soil within which Enlightenment ideas of tolerance were subsequently able to grow and flourish. Schwartz’s brave experiment has not convinced all, not least because the ostensibly tolerant sentiments he uncovers from judicial records were mediated and distorted by the notaries who recorded them. Moreover, in heralding the ordinary people who held this heterodox view as ‘precursors of our world’ and ‘the unwitting godparents of the secular future’, in his own way Schwartz too seems to be engaged in pursuit of the roots of our modern world view. His admiration for the subaltern folk culture of articulate tolerance he discovers perpetuates a version of the very teleology he sets out to reject, even as he turns the conventional wisdom that accords Protestantism a starring part in this process firmly on its head.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Schwartz’s work has had a second salutary effect: it refocuses our attention on the vexed issue of doubt, qualifying and complicating Jonathan Israel’s powerful vision of the role of articulate radical scepticism and secularisation in the making of discourses of toleration.[[16]](#footnote-16) Although Lucien Febvre’s celebrated *The Problem of Unbelief* has cast a deep shadow, entrenching the view that ‘atheism’ was not merely marginal but ontologically impossible in this society,[[17]](#footnote-17) there are signs that this prevailing interpretation is under renewed critical scrutiny, together with the issue of how far the Reformations catalysed bewilderment and indifference by unsettling inherited certainties and destabilising the boundaries between truth and falsehood. But the doubt that most urgently demands further investigation is of a different kind. It is the doubt that is an intrinsic part of faith and that operates in dialogue and symbiosis with it, rather than as its antithesis and opposite. It is the ‘Christian atheism’ of those plagued by soteriological fears and anxieties and driven to despair by existential pessimism about the possibility of their eternal redemption.[[18]](#footnote-18) How far did the sixteenth-century schism of Christendom serve to exacerbate this and to what extent did it contribute to a willingness to bear with and turn a blind eye to religious difference? These are questions to which there are no easy answers. One of the perennial problems that faces the historian of toleration is the difficulty of distinguishing it from inertia and apathy: both entail acts of omission and both necessitate the interpretation of glaring silences.

The nexus between faith and doubt is also vital to our understanding of contemporary attitudes towards religious diversity and pluralism because, as we have already seen, to tolerate is to believe. ‘Toleration’ does not emerge in the vacuum created by an absence of belief. Rather it is result of a conscious decision to refrain from putting heartfelt belief into practice. If, by contrast, uncertainty and scepticism were ingredients of the cultures of coexistence that emerged in the wake of the European Reformations then accordingly we may need to revisit the terminology we deploy to describe the texture of interconfessional and social relations in this period. Some historians have set aside the word ‘toleration’ in favour of alternative vocabularies, including the languages of neighbourliness, Christian charity, courtesy, and civility. Yet these concepts were shot through with ambiguity themselves. As Teresa Bejan has shown in her penetrating work on the famous tolerationist writer Roger Williams, the ‘mere civility’ he endorsed as a necessary and sufficient condition for toleration constituted a very low bar of respectful behaviour that was perfectly consistent not just with tacit disapproval, disgust and even abhorrence of particular individuals and their religious convictions but also with unapologetic expression of it.[[19]](#footnote-19) Such research suggests that we need to pay more attention to the changing connotations of the term tolerance itself - notably to the process by which shed its predominant early modern meaning as a form of begrudging allowance, indulgence and forbearance and acquired the more positive inflections as a benign quality and a moral virtue that it currently carries. It lost its pejorative overtones and became a label that people were willingly and eager to apply themselves rather than a stick with which to slur and stigmatise others. We also need to ask when ‘toleration’ ceased to be a ‘loser’s creed’[[20]](#footnote-20) and became the opinion of the majority of people and reflect more extensively on how and why the aim of achieving ‘toleration’ came to be displaced by the ideal of upholding ‘equality’.

Inflected by the irresistible instinct to search for the origins of our own world view, such questions are of course genealogical and teleological in character themselves. But perhaps the real significance of the long Reformation in the realm of toleration and pluralism lies less in its capacity to provide an intellectual pedigree and a body of legal and social precedents for coexistence than in the light it sheds on the precariousness of peace and tranquillity in communities fractured by deep ideological differences. What the split within Christendom precipitated by the advent of Protestantism and its immediate and long term repercussions may help us to comprehend is the dialectical relationship between tolerance and intolerance that characterises all human societies. They offer insight into the perennial and paradoxical process by which efforts to create conditions in which people of conflicting religious and political creeds can coexist so often serve to lay the foundations for renewed outbreaks of conflict and violence. They illuminate the way in in which in order to live together people so often find it necessary, both literally and metaphorically, to live apart. The ritual, cultural and physical boundaries that early modern people built to facilitate this in turn created psychological barriers that fostered renewed distrust and suspicion of the very diversity they were designed to preserve in the first place.[[21]](#footnote-21) They set up the conditions in which prejudice and intolerance can once again burgeon and spread, fuelling an ongoing and unending cycle from which it is impossible to break out.

Wary of the besetting sins of anachronism and presentism, the current generation of historians is temperamentally averse to drawing parallels with contemporary affairs and to suggesting that the past can provide lessons for the present. But our reluctance to explore topical comparisons and contrasts has had some regrettable effects: it has allowed us to ignore the dark underside of our own multicultural and pluralistic society and to overlook signs of the dissolution and demise of the very liberal ideals which the Reformation has been credited with helping to bring into being. Studying the history of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries may not enable us to take a step towards ameliorating the religious and sectarian tensions of our own age.[[22]](#footnote-22) It may, however, enhance our awareness of the intrinsic ambivalence and internal contradictions of the ‘toleration’ that we have naively come to regard as the hallmark of modern Western civilisation. Perhaps the most telling manifestation of this is our incomprehension of the outlook of those who do not subscribe to these lofty but illusory ideals: our hypocritical intolerance of the intolerant themselves.

1. Lord Macaulay, *The History of England from the Accession of James II*, 4 vols (London, 1967 edn; first publ. 1864); W. E. H. Lecky, *History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism in Europe*, 2 vols (London, 1865); Samuel Rawlinson Gardiner, *The First Two Stuarts and the Puritan Revolution* (New York, 1970 edn; first publ.1876). See also A. A. Seaton, *The Theory of Toleration under the Later Stuarts* (Cambridge, 1911). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. William Haller (ed.), *Tracts on Liberty in the Puritan Revolution, 1638-1647* (New York, 1933-34); William Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism* (New York, 1938); William Haller, *Liberty and Reformation in the Puritan Revolution* (New York, 1955); A. S. P. Woodhouse (ed.) *Puritanism and Liberty* (London, 1938); W. K. Jordan, *The Development of Religious Toleration in England*, 4 vols (London, 1932-40), iii. 9-10; iv. 9-10, 468-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Perez Zagorin, *How the Idea of Religious Toleration Came to the West* (Princeton-Oxford, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See the comments of Eliane Glaser, ‘Introduction’, in Eliane Glaser (ed.), *Religious Tolerance in the Atlantic World: Early Modern and Contemporary Perspectives* (Basingstoke, 2014), pp. 2-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Some important contributions include Ole Peter Grell, Jonathan I. Israel and Nicholas Tyacke (eds), *From Persecution to Toleration: The Glorious Revolution and Religion in England* (Oxford, 1991); Ole Grell and Bob Scribner (eds), *Tolerance and Intolerance in the European Reformation* (Cambridge, 1996); Ole Peter Grell and Roy Porter (eds), *Toleration in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge, 2000); R. Po-chia Hsia and Henk van Nierop (eds), [*Calvinism and Religious Toleration in the Dutch Golden Age* (](http://search.lib.cam.ac.uk/?itemid=|cambrdgedb|3248653)Cambridge, 2002). For an early anticipation of some of these trends, see Herbert Butterfield, ‘Toleration in early modern times’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 38 (1977), 573-84. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Alexandra Walsham, *Charitable Hatred: Tolerance and Intolerance in England, 1500-1700* (Manchester, 2006); Jesse Spohnholz, *The Tactics of Toleration: A Refugee Community in the Age of the Religious Wars* (Newark, 2011) and Spohnholz, ‘Confessional Coexistence in the Early Modern Low Countries’, in Thomas Max Safley (ed.), *A Companion to Multiconfessionalism in the Early Modern World* (Leiden, 2011), pp. 47-73. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. As commented by Tony Claydon in his review of Walsham, *Charitable Hatred,* in *Reviews in History*

   (https: //www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/568). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Benjamin J. Kaplan, *Divided by Faith: Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Willem Frijhoff, ‘The Threshold of Toleration: Interconfessional Conviviality in Holland during the Early modern period’, in his *Embodied Belief: Ten Essays on Religious Culture in Dutch History* (Hilversum, 2002), pp. 39-65, at p. 44; Bob Scribner, ‘Preconditions of tolerance and intolerance in sixteenth-century Germany’, in Grell and Scribner (eds), *Tolerance and Intolerance*, p. 38. See also Bill Sheils, ‘“Getting on” and “Getting Along” in Parish and Town: Catholics and their Neighbours in England’, in Benjamin Kaplan, Bob Moore, Henk van Nierop and Judith Pollmann (eds), *Catholic Communities in Protestant States: Britain and the Netherlands, c. 1570-1720* (Manchester, 2009), pp. 67-83; Nadine Lewycky and Adam Morton (eds), *Getting Along? Religious Identities and Confessional Relations in Early Modern England: Essays in Honour of Professor W.J. Sheils* (Aldershot, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See, among other contributions, Perez Zagorin, *Ways of Lying: Dissimulation, Persecution and Conformity in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA, 1990); Stefania Tutino, *Shadows of Doubt: Language and Truth in Post-Reformation Catholic Culture* (Oxford, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Kaplan, *Divided by Faith,* pp. 143, [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See among others John Coffey, *Persecution and Toleration in Protestant England, 1558-1689* (Harlow, 2000), esp. ch. 3; idem, ‘Scripture and Toleration between Reformation and Enlightenment’, in Glaser (ed.), *Religious Tolerance,* pp. 14-40; Andrew R. Murphy, *Conscience and Community: Revisiting Toleration and Religious Dissent in Early Modern Europe and America* (University Park, PA, 2001); and esp. Alister Chapman, John Coffey and Brad Gregory (eds), *Seeing things their Way: Intellectual History and the Return of Religion* (Notre Dame, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See J. C. Davis, ‘Religion and the struggle for freedom in the English Revolution’, *HJ*, 35 (1992), 507-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ethan H. Shagan, *The Rule of Moderation: Violence, Religion and the Politics of Restraint in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2011), ch. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Stuart B. Schwartz, *All Can be Saved: Religious Tolerance and Salvation in the Iberian Atlantic World* (New Haven and London, 2008), pp. 6, 5, 11, 12, 243-55. See the critical reviews by Lu Ann Homza in the *William and Mary Quarterly,* 3rd ser., 66 (2009), 409-11, and Giuseppe Marocci in the *E-journal of Portuguese History,* 8 (2010), 1-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment* (Oxford, 2001); *Enlightenment Contested* (Oxford, 2006); *Democratic Enlightenment* (Oxford, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Lucien Febvre, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: The Religion of Rabelais,* trans. Beatrice Gottlieb(Cambridge, MA, 1982). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Leif Dixon, ‘William Perkins, “Atheisme,” and the Crises of England’s Long Reformation’, *Journal of British Studies,* 50 (2011), 790-812; George Hoffmann, ‘Atheism as a Devotional Category’, *Republics of Letters*, 1 (2010), 44-5; Alec Ryrie, 'Atheism and Faith in Early Modern Britain' (unpublished paper). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Teresa M. Bejan, ‘“The Bond of Civility”: Roger Williams on Toleration and its Limits’, *History of European Ideas,* 37 (2011), 409-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Andrew Pettegree, ‘The Politics of Toleration in the Free Netherlands, 1572-1620’, in Grell and Scribner (eds), *Tolerance and Intolerance*, p. 198. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. On boundary-building as a key aspect of early modern toleration, see esp. Keith Luria, *Sacred Boundaries: Religious Coexistence and Conflict in Early Modern France* (Washington, DC, 2005); Spohnholz, *Tactics of Toleration,* pp. 218-20; Sponhholz, ‘Confessional Coexistence’, pp. 62-73. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. This is one of the aims of Glaser (ed.), *Religious Tolerance*, p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)