

THE PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE

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The very title of this paper might raise eyebrows. Religious intolerance, it will be said, is not a matter of an intellectual stance but a matter of emotions. It is a blind psychological state, one that requires psychological rather than philosophical treatment. Still, I hope to show that there are certain tacit beliefs or assumptions underlying the typical form of religious intolerance. I shall make these assumptions explicit, and show these to be groundless. This Socratic treatment of intolerance leads to a positive way of viewing others with different religious convictions; a way that combines the possibility of regarding religious truths as objective and as objects of deep conviction, and yet allows us to treat with respect those with different convictions or without such convictions at all.

Religious intolerance by itself does not lead to genocide. But it has been from time to time an important concomitant cause. Those marking a certain group for extinction can rally wide support more easily if they can play on feelings of religious intolerance.

Underlying our problem we find two considerations, each of them unobjec-

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tionable, helping to set the framework for the intolerant. One of these is the assumption that religious statements are objectively true or false. For those who adopt a relativistic view of religious truth, according to which these statements are not simply true or false, but true for a person at a time, there is no ground for religious intolerance, since there is really no disagreement between the “true” and the other believers. I would like to show, however, that religious intolerance can be shown to be groundless even on the assumption that religious propositions are objectively true or false. The other consideration is that of monotheism, positing a God whose activities encompass all of reality. A polytheistic religion might admit that some people worship some gods, and others again pay homage to others. But if we assume that there is only one god, then others worshipping a deity different from ours must be wrong. I will try to show how acceptance and respect for those with differing religious views is compatible with both an objectivistic view of religious truth and with monotheism.

Let us sketch, then, the position of the intolerant person. This position rests, roughly, on the following beliefs.

1. I know the important religious truths.
2. I know that I am a devoted follower of these.
3. These truths concern what is most crucial in human life.
4. Others who disagree with me do not have the right religious beliefs.
5. Thus others are missing what is most crucial to human life.
6. These others are thus inferior; I need not respect them, and might, under certain circumstances, try to convert them by force.

One way of combatting this position is to insist that ethics is an autonomous set of principles that have overriding priority even with regard to religious principles. Adherents of this view will say, then, that even if everything in 1–5 is true, 6 is false, because we owe other humans respect on the basis of fundamental moral principles, regardless of religious differences. I would like to argue, however, that one can show religious intolerance to be groundless without invoking this allegedly supreme and autonomous place for morality. It is also worth noting that this line of argument will give us at most *tolerance*. It says that I have to tolerate those who disagree, because to do otherwise would violate some fundamental moral law. We should, however, aim at more than merely tolerating each other. A healthy state of interpersonal relationship involves mutual acceptance and care for each other. Thus we see acceptance as something positive: it is more than mere agreement not to cause harm to each other. Hence one should look for ground on which one can base mutual care. If people can see each other as the possessors of certain characteristics, then such conceptions can engender care. For example, seeing others as potential truth-seekers can help to elicit care for these persons.

I. The “Openness” of Religious Statements

By ‘religious statements’ we will mean statements that express what are taken to be truth about God and his relation to humans. In other words, all theological propositions are meant to be included. Here are some examples:

1. God is one.
2. We are not to worship idols.
3. We are linked to God through faith.

As was said at the outset, the discussion will proceed under the assumption that such statements are objectively true or false. We will, however, in this section examine what the meanings of these *statements* are like.

The discussion will avoid taking partisan stand on various issues that divide schools of semantics today. There is, however, a statement about meaning that most linguists and philosophers agree on. According to this view, one way of articulating the meaning of a statement is to look at its implications, or entailments. For example, if “John is a human” has as part of its meaning that John is a living being, this is because being a human entails being a living being.

If this is so, then a full understanding of a statement would involve seeing all of its implications. Given that statements have an infinite number of implications, one might argue that we never reach full understanding of any given statement. But infinity by itself is not the crucial issue. If we know that 2 is smaller than 3, then we also know that 2 is smaller than all of the other numbers that are larger than 3. The infinite number of implications can be surveyed by their being summarized in the rules that generate the successors of 3.

In the case of religious statements there is a certain kind of “openness”; i.e. their implications can not be surveyed all at once. Hence our understanding of these statements at any given time is incomplete. Let us examine this in more detail.

To begin our examination, let us concentrate on example 2 given above. There are many forms of idol worshipping.¹ When people are too much attached to their money, their car, the glory of their nation, etc. they are guilty of idol worshipping. As life unfolds one sees more and more aspects of idol worshipping, and one comes to detect one’s own shortcomings in ways that might not have been possible 5–10 years earlier. Thus statement 2 unfolds with more and more implications throughout our lives. Hence, our understanding of it at any given point in time is incomplete.

The same applies to statements 1 and 3. The implications of what faith is are unfolded in each person’s life over long periods of time. Each new circumstance,

1. I am indebted on this point to Asa Kasher.

each new difficulty requires one to see new implications of what it is to maintain faith. Hence in this case too, we can never attain complete understanding at any given time. Similar considerations apply to the understanding of the unity of God. In our lives, with our plurality of often ill-organized and ill-conceived aims, we conduct ourselves as if polytheism were true. We seem to “have many gods.” Life reveals over and over again new ways in which the unity of God needs to be seen by us. We need to see it with every change of scenery, of social context, or economic upheaval. Hence with regards to 1 too, our understanding at any given time is incomplete.

So far, then, we have established the “openness” of religious statements and the epistemic corollary that humans never have complete understanding of these statements. What follows from this with respect to intolerance?

Intolerance rests on a sharp division between those who have the truth and those who do not. This was expressed in our sketch by the conjunctions of statements 2 and 4. But our reflections on the nature of religious statements and our incomplete understanding of these shows that the division between the “insiders” and the “outsiders” is only one of degree. We do not possess the truth completely, and the “outsiders” presumably possess it to a lesser degree. Since we do not know how they will react to implications of religious statements that will unfold in the future, we cannot say that they do not possess the truth at all.

Intolerance manifests itself in drastic actions such as excluding others from the community, committing acts of violence, etc. It involves denying others the basic respect we would accord those whom we see as having the same nature as we have. These are harsh steps; mirroring to an extent steps that a court takes in criminal proceedings. In the courts, too, mere probability, or distinctions in terms of degree, will not count as sufficient for verdict and ensuing action. We demand “proof beyond reasonable doubt.” What our reflexions on the openness of religious statements show is that the division between the “insiders” and the “outsiders” does not rest on evidence “beyond reasonable doubt.” We learn to be tolerant towards ourselves, and accept our partial understanding; what would justify our not being tolerant towards others who have only partial understanding and disagree with us? The difference of degrees and probabilities falls far short of the kind of probability estimate that goes into “beyond reasonable doubt” kind of verdicts. If a scientific conjecture turns out to be wrong, we can revise the probabilities and formulate new hypotheses. But acts of intolerance, like acts of legal institutions, very often lead to irreversible or irreparable harm.

Someone might argue that in our daily lives we are often faced with situations in which we have to act on the basis of low probabilities and insufficient information. But in the case of the exercise of religious intolerance the situation is dif-

ferent. We are not forced to do something. When it comes to securing our livelihood or fight for our survival inactivity is not a live option. But in the case of our attitudes towards others, not being intolerant will not cause any harm.

Once we see all humans as having incomplete understanding of religious statements, we can see this as a characteristic that might help to elicit mutual care. The “openness” of religious statements puts us all “in the same boat.” Sharing this burden and challenge can create important bonds of care and recognition among humans.

II. Objectivity and Evidence

We have discussed the nature of religious statements, and some of their semantic properties as these relate to the problem of understanding. In the course of this discussion we talked about the empirical implications of these statements. Thus we have been assuming that there can be evidence for or against religious statements. In this section we will look at the nature of this evidence.

Today we often take the statements of mathematics or those of the natural sciences as our paradigms of things that are true or false objectively; i.e. not just true or false relative to time, place, or a group of individuals. This is hardly objectionable. The difficulty arises when we think that if something is objectively true or false, than it must be backed by the same type of evidence that we have for mathematics or the natural sciences. This does not follow. Considerations of whether something can be objectively true or false have to do with one’s conception of reality. The question of what kind of evidence is available for various types of claims affects the issues of how the human mind is constructed and what the limitations are on what we can be directly acquainted with.

The conclusion of the argument to be presented is that religious statements may share with statements of mathematics or the natural sciences that they are objective, even if the evidence which we have in the case of religion is very different. The basic types of evidence in mathematics and the natural sciences are logical deduction from axioms and observation by the senses. It is clear that neither of these forms of acquiring information are crucial to the verification of religious statements. Statements about what kind of deity we posit, and how this deity affects our lives, are not matters of proof from purely formal, contentless axioms of logic and mathematics, nor are these verified by sheer observations, repeated in experimental contexts or otherwise, by our main senses. Rather, the evidence for or against such statements comes from human experiences as the acceptance or rejection of these statements affect our actions, feelings, and attitudes. Let us take as our example the second of the three religious statements quoted above. Such a statement has a series of implications for our lives. The acceptance of such a statement does affect how we experience things and how we act. Thus the

development of human lives, as people accept or reject a statement such as this, will be the ultimate evidence for or against such statements. Since this type of experience is subjective, it cannot be reduced to what is observable. But the fact that religion does or does not work out in people's lives is an objective fact. Thus the lack of public observability of the evidence, be it about faith or about idol worshipping, does not provide grounds for denying that religious statements are objective and can be verified or disconfirmed.²

If this suggestion is sound, it then follows that gathering evidence about religious statements consists of comparing human lives and witnessing to what happens in our own life. Comparing lives is essentially a matter of dialogue. Thus we have dialogues between the believer and non-believer, and between believers of different persuasions.

This conception of the nature of evidence concerning religious statements fits well not only classic philosophic thought, but also the main strands in the sacred writings of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Both the prophets of the Hebrew Bible and the apostles of the Christian writings concentrate on testifying what has taken place in their lives and what can take place in the lives of those who listen to them. They do not concentrate on trying to find axioms for theology or on empirical observation and experiment. It is historically false to ascribe this fact to the alleged unavailability of what we call today scientific method. Both mathematics and various branches of the natural sciences, e.g. astronomy and physics, flourished in the historical periods under consideration here. The conception of backing religious statements with what is essentially testimony about how religion affects human life is one that is chosen self-consciously by the teachers in question as the only mode appropriate to the dissemination of this kind of knowledge and belief.

On the basis of these considerations, then, we can formulate the following argument. Religious truths admit of verification procedures very different from those in mathematics or the natural sciences. These verification procedures involve essentially testimonies about how this or that alleged religious truth can be seen as working in people's lives. Such testimony is based on experiences that cannot be inspected in some public way. Hence discussions involving religious disagreement, according to this conception, involve basically dialogues or comparisons about how this or that religious insight affects or has affected human lives.

As we saw above, the evidence in such discussions is not public, and it never amounts to certainty. Hence there is no ground for dogmatic self-assurance

2. On this point my view is similar in some ways to that expressed by William James in *Varieties of Religious Experience*.

claiming incorrigibility for one's own testimony or knowing with certainty the wrongness of the testimony of those who disagree. This leaves us with probability and likelihood. And though these are sufficient grounds for making commitments, they are not sufficient for the adoption of the attitudes of the intolerant. As we saw, these attitudes are like the verdicts of the courts, and would demand conviction beyond reasonable doubt.

Thus we can maintain the objectivity of religious claims and at the same time show the self-assurance about the nature of religious evidence to be illusory. I cannot strictly speaking see into another person's life, nor can that other person "see into" mine. Lacking such direct evidence we are left with reasonable conjectures and inferences. Though these guide our conduct, they do not suffice for the irreversible negative acts and attitudes of the intolerant.

On the positive side, since comparison of evidence among those who disagree should, by standards of reason, result in dialogue, and successful dialogue requires mutual respect and willingness to listen, this view of the evidence lays the foundation for mutual acceptance. Seeing the other as a participant in dialogues in which we compare lives is to view the other under a description that elicits care and interest. Within such a relation, evidence-seeking for religious truths, and thus testifying about one's life, like self knowledge, reveals itself as a life-long never fully complete challenge and activity.

III. Self-Knowledge and Evidence

The intolerant person, whether he is aware of this or not, makes very strong claims about himself and others. He thinks that he knows with certainty what his fundamental beliefs are and how strong his commitments are to live up to these. He thinks that he knows these things also about others. Typically, persons holding such strong views about self-knowledge construe what they know about their beliefs and commitments on the paradigm of how they know certain things about themselves directly, based on introspection.

Everyone agrees that we can know some things about ourselves via introspection. These things will include what we feel or sense; e.g. that we feel tired or that we see something red. In our unreflective moods we are tempted to think that we can know also our deepest commitments on the basis of introspection. Indeed, some contemporary practices, such as questionnaires about "what the public thinks" seem to give support to this view. We ask people what they believe about a certain topic, they introspect and answer, and we take their answers at face value. On this view the human mind is, at least to the thinking subject, like an open book.

In sharp contrast with this view we find the conception of self knowledge developed by Plato, maintained by Aristotle, and reviewed in some modern

studies on cognition and on psychiatric disorders. According to this view, much of our knowledge of ourself is always indirect. It involves drawing inferences about our inner states on the basis of introspective or behavioral evidence. The inner state of cognition or possession of attitudes is not itself open to direct contact; introspection gives us only indirect evidence about these matters. One way of coming to know these inner cognitive states indirectly is the kind of questioning and arguing that was initiated by Socrates and is still called the Socratic method. People feel sure that they hold certain beliefs or that they will live up to certain principles, only to discover that when there is pressure on them, they disown the commitments. Again, it might be that when they try to fit them in with their own beliefs they come to discard the ones under scrutiny. It also happens that we find out what our commitments really are only in a period of crisis, when we are forced to affirm or deny by our actions. Thus self knowledge in these matters is always incomplete. It does not yield certainty, and it is one of the perennial tasks of a reflective human life. Echoes of this Platonic view can be found also both in the Hebrew Bible and in the sacred writings of Christianity.

If we adopt the classical view, we will make more cautious, humble, and less self-assured statements both about ourselves and about others. For example, when asked about our belief in respect for all humans, we should reply by saying that we hope that we believe in this, that we try to believe in it, and that we try to live up to it. But certainty we cannot have.

Some people would object strongly when one applies this view to our knowledge of our own religious beliefs. Some people are very reluctant to answer a question like: "Do you believe in God?" with "I hope so" or "probably yes" or "I want to." But at least one source of this reluctance is a confusion of knowledge of external facts with self-knowledge. People think that the responses listed above would show weak convictions, or hesitations with regard to their religious beliefs. What was presented above, however, does not lead at all to weakening of religious, or other, convictions. What is at issue is not whether people know that God exists. Rather, the issue is whether they know that they know. From "I believe (know) that *p*," where '*p*' stands for some basic belief, it does not follow that "I believe that I believe (or know that I know) that *p*". We may have fervent convictions about religion or morality, but these convictions need not be — and on the classical view of self knowledge should not be — accompanied by claims of certainty about our basic beliefs and commitments. Socrates, for one, is a striking illustration of a human who was firm and adamant about certain truths about reality, but cautious and never claiming certainty concerning his knowledge of his self. Thus we can see that deep conviction and self-sacrifice do not require illusions of certainty about self-knowledge.

One cannot accept the classical view of self-knowledge completely or only in part.

Some people might claim that there is something unique about religious faith, and that they can know with certainty that they are in that state. Instead of arguing with this claim, we should focus on the fact that even if one adopted such a view towards knowing one's faith, this would not justify adopting this view towards one's commitments. Even if faith is a special kind of illumination that people know that they have, their ability to live up to the commitments that their faith prescribes would still remain a matter for probabilistic inference rather than one of certainty. But the intolerant person requires strong assurance that at any given time he belongs to the "right group" and certain others to the "wrong" one. Limitations on our knowledge of our faith or at least the strength of our commitments deprive us of this kind of certainty. Thus placing ourselves and others into "right" and "wrong" groups is a matter of likelihood, circumstantial evidence, etc. There is always room for humility towards one's own state and optimism towards that of others. We saw already in the previous sections that the kind of strong and often irreversible action that the intolerant person takes would require the "beyond reasonable doubt" state that is expected of juries in court. The considerations developed in this section, then, further undermine the claim that in one's intolerance one can have the right kind of epistemic backing. Once we see the assignment of one's self and others into right and wrong groups to be a matter of probability, one weakens the divisions between the "insiders" and the "outsiders". This does not mean that we cannot retain a strong sense of community. The positive things that add up to strong ties of loyalty towards others need not be accompanied by negative, exclusionist feelings and actions towards those one is less sure about.

So robbed of a false sense of security people are less likely to adopt or accept stances of intolerance. This is the negative effect of proper reflection on the limits of self knowledge and knowing others, but there is also a positive aspect to this situation. For if everyone is a potential member of the "inside" group and it is not a matter of certainty that we belong to where we think we do, then one can build on this kind of uncertainty a sense of comradeship and care for all those who are seeking truths of a certain kind. We can, and should have, humility towards claims of who is on the "inside" and optimism with regards to persons we place at any given time on the "outside". In other words, the sharp division of the inside and the outside and the corresponding intolerance that so often follows can be replaced by a sense of widening circles of communities and bonds of friendship. The most narrow circle will be those who think in the same way about religious matters. A wider circle will be the kinship of those who feel that religious questions are central to life and should be pursued even if we do not all do this in the same way. The widest circle of care and respect would be based on the insight that all of us are potential religious truth-seekers, or for that matter the insight that any one of us might cease to be that kind of an individual. Such an approach does not try to explain away the differences, but shows how an adequate view of

human knowledge can prevent us from seeing the differences as a foundation for intolerance and lack of respect for others.

It is important to lay stress on the conception of belief and knowledge that underlies this argument. It is the conception found in Plato and Aristotle. It construes different types of beliefs as being more or less close to the surface of behaviour and introspection. Beliefs about what we observe by the senses right here and now may be close enough to the surface so that introspection gives us almost complete warrant for certainty. Only the most obstinate sceptic challenges an assertion like: "I know that I am seeing something blue now". But as we move away from the immediate and sensory, we deal with beliefs and commitments that involve more complex cognitive processes including ones whose objects are not concrete and linked to us by the senses, and are hence less close to the surface of direct observability, externally or internally. Moral and religious beliefs are not the only types of illustration; the same thing holds for our mathematical beliefs. Whether or not a person accepts a certain rule of logic or mathematical truth cannot be judged solely on the basis of that person's introspective evidence and his immediate behaviour. Likewise, as we all know from classroom experience having to do with logic or mathematics, people's judgments as to whether they do or do not understand certain propositions or theorems are notoriously unreliable.

We see, then, that the openness of religious statements that leads to our having at any time only partial understanding, is accompanied by lack of certainty concerning either both our knowledge of our beliefs and of the strength of our convictions, or at least towards the latter. Our conclusion was that no sharp lines can be drawn between the insiders and the outsiders. This, together with the result of the second section, showing how comparing religious evidence is essentially comparing human lives and thus engaging in dialogue, leads to a conception of ever widening circles of communities; there is no room for intolerance within these circles, but rather for a recognition that closeness or differences in beliefs and commitments are matters of degree, with shifts in where any human stands always possible.

IV. Examples and Implications

Let us imagine a case in which two persons, *A* and *B*, disagree on what is for *A* a religious truth, say *p*. According to the theory proposed in this paper the first step should be for *A* to acknowledge the "openness" of *p*, and hence his only incomplete understanding of it. The second step would be for *A* to acknowledge either that he cannot be certain of his holding that *p* or at least his acknowledging that his living up to *p* is a commitment that he cannot back with certainty. As the discussion starts, *A would have to view B* as a person who may hold some proposition that is partly the same as *p*, and about whom one cannot be sure that he might not come to hold something close to *p*. The discussion would then proceed

by *A* bearing witness to how *p* affects his life, and how accepting *p* led to certain definite consequences in his life. *B* would then compare his life to that of *A* and show how what he accepts has worked out in his life. The dialogue could continue with *A* and *B* comparing their lives, and either converging on some agreement or coming away with a deeper appreciation of diversity, recognizing that any termination of such a discussion and dialogue can always be regarded as provisional. Dialogues of this sort can never reach logically perfect completions.

The distinctions introduced in this paper between “openness” vs. definiteness of statements, objectivity of truth vs. the public availability of evidence, and self knowledge vs. knowledge of subject matter, could have beneficial effects both on theological debates as well as on religious instruction. They could inject into theological debates a focus on comparing lives and the effects of religion on lives, and the recognition of the provisionality of debates and conclusions. They could also help us in teaching religion so as to evoke respect for content without hostile and negative attitudes towards those who disagree.³

Nothing argued for in this paper will make it impossible for someone to be intolerant towards others who are of different religious persuasion. But at least this account of the foundation of tolerance and acceptance shows that the intolerant cannot claim superior religious devotion compared to the tolerant persons. Indeed, given the openness of religious statements and the nature of evidence in discussions of such matters, mutual acceptance of those who disagree could indicate depth of devotion and understanding.

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3. It is instructive to compare in these ways religious loyalty and nationalism. It is part of one's religious loyalty that one should regard one's religion as closer to the truth than alternatives. But one need not view one's nation as superior to others in order to be a loyal citizen and fulfill one's obligations. Even if there is a link between some ideology and one's own nation, one should recognize the purely contingent nature of such link, and the possibility that others can be linked to such ideology as well, or that one's own nation can cease to maintain that link.