The Pits and Folds of Religious Tolerance

With growing world population and globalization, religions are finding themselves in closer and closer contact, forced to face issues of integration and differentiation like never before. Conflicts seem to occur most often when one religion does not allow the presence of its neighbor religion and so seeks to alter their presence or activities, even the religion itself. The precursors to intolerant stances toward interaction with other religions cause difficulty for working toward a society of peaceful coexistence. Thus, several philosophers have attempted to provide arguments which encourage the religious and nonreligious alike to engage with their society in a tolerant manner regarding religion. These proposals range from appealing to human fallibility to epistemic certainty, from truth to trust to autonomous individuality. Ultimately, these arguments seem to fall short when they reach religious groups or individuals which claim to know absolute truths and cannot be convinced otherwise.

T.M. Scanlon first discusses the difficulties of the mere mechanics of being tolerant by asking about the clash which occurs between the tolerant and the intolerant. Certainly in advocating tolerance, one would like to spread its adoption throughout all strata of society. Yet how does one spread the adoption of tolerance to the intolerant ones? If the tolerant ones allow intolerance because the intolerant ones are entitled to their beliefs and actions also, then it seems the tolerant ones are not dedicated to their ideal. However, if the tolerant ones *dis*allow intolerance because it is contrary to the ideal of tolerance, then it seems

the tolerant ones betray their ideal through their methods. Here arises a sort of paradox. Scanlon himself addresses precisely this issue, asking whether it is "intolerant to enforce tolerance in behavior and prevent the intolerant from acting on their beliefs."[1] He asserts that it is surely not intolerant to enforce tolerance. He clearly reinforces his position by also asserting that it is allowable both "to espouse tolerance as an official doctrine" and "to deny the intolerant the opportunities that others have to state their views."[2] This stance may seem slightly contradictory to the aims of tolerance, but other advocates of tolerance (such as Karl Popper) agree with Scanlon, and so it may be reasonable to accept it for now.[3]

To begin this discussion, Scanlon addresses the difficulty with even considering a basic question of tolerance. He first asks "why should I want to interfere with other people's religious practice, provided that they are not able to impose that practice on me?"[4] This question frames a principal starting point for the discussion, the sources of intolerance, and sets the stage for introducing the problems with a basis for tolerance. Scanlon opens his essay with the powerful assertion that "tolerance requires us to accept people and permit their practices even when we strongly disagree with them."[5] Although this may seem to follow naturally from the definition of 'tolerance,' its gravity derives from its implication that tolerance requires at the very least a disagreement with others, but also allows any negative disposition up to open and violent hostility. Even those of us

[1] David Heyd, ed. Toleration: An Elusive Virtue. (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1996), p. 234
[2] Ibidem, p. 235
[3] Susan Mendus and David Edwards, eds. On Toleration. (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1987), p. 20
[4] David Heyd, ed. Toleration: An Elusive Virtue. (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1996), p. 227
[5] Ibidem, p. 226

who hold no resolute convictions or no intolerance whatsoever are in danger of being subject to another's disapproval or disdain. Thus, Scanlon's question becomes subject to deeper examination, and he compliments the question by noting that "tolerance involves costs and dangers for all of us."[6] Here, he means that by allowing other religions to coexist in one's own society means to allow a profoundly disagreeable or even malignant influence to continue to thrive. To many or most, allowing such a thing is counterintuitive to advocating a better society.

Scanlon poses this problem, for those who find fault with the beliefs or practices of others and the others' influence on their common society must be persuaded that there is an ideal more valuable than the one being violated. Yet the negative judgment among religious groups stems from a conviction that one's own beliefs and practices are the most correct or most important. In a sense, then, convincing such resolved religious groups or individuals requires altering either their self assessment of their beliefs or their actual beliefs themselves. Many philosophers have adopted varied strategies for approaching this problem, and Scanlon himself proposes an argument.

Scanlon advocates tolerance in spite of the drawbacks of allowing doctrines and practices which one may abhor. He notes that "tolerance involves a more attractive and appealing relation between opposing groups within a society."[7] This quotation seems to exemplify an assumption that peace is better than truth, that ethical gain overrides epistemological gain. Scanlon confirms this

[6] David Heyd, ed. Toleration: An Elusive Virtue. (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1996), p. 227
[7] David Heyd, ed. Toleration: An Elusive Virtue. (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1996), p. 231

assertion by stating that "rejecting [toleration] involves a form of alienation from one's fellow citizens."[8] However, he further develops this worry by appealing to the unity of society not despite its diversity, but in honor of it. "When we deny others, who are just as much members of our society as we are, the right to their part in defining and shaping it," Scanlon suggests that we are then denying the religious alien, so to speak, their rightful place within a common society.[9] Here we find Scanlon proposing not only that tolerance provides a peaceful coexistence between religious groups, but that it upholds an implicit value which should be guaranteed to all members of a society. Richard Dees supports the principle of trust in order to secure peaceful coexistence between groups, and the value of one's own individual autonomy is further supported by Bernard Williams and Christopher Megone.

Dees proposes a new criterion upon which he feels both proponents and opponents of tolerance can agree in order to resolve the dispute. He considers rationality the ideal target for such a common ground, but then asserts that toleration finally "requires a minimal level of trust."[10] To coexist in a common society, as Scanlon first suggests, Dees argues that toleration "requires that 'we' trust 'them' not to harm us in our own pursuits," and of course vice versa. But he notes that if this agreement can be attained, the negative consequences of living in distrust of one another can be avoided, thus averting social unrest, hate-crimes, and even war as in his example of the Catholics and Huguenots. The benefit of avoiding these horrors, he argues, proves worth the dangers of

[8] Ibidem, p. 232
[9] Ibidem, p. 233
[10] Richard H. Dees. Trust and Toleration. (Routledge: London, 2004), p. 33

adopting a principle of trust. After all, trust itself poses its own difficulties; we can only possibly gain from mutual trust "if we can reasonably expect something we value – not necessarily something that benefits ourselves – can be gained from it."[11] While it is obvious that a peaceful coexistence between disparate groups constitutes a good for society as a whole, it may not outweigh the conviction with which the religious judge each other. Thus the advocate for religious tolerance may find Dees' proposal an interesting perspective on the difficulty of peaceful coexistence but not a final solution to securing tolerance among groups.

Building on Scanlon's implicit suggestion, Williams supports the ideal of tolerance upon the basis of what he calls 'liberal pluralism.' He describes this as "a supposedly impartial state, which affirms the rights of all citizens to equal consideration, including an equal right to form and express their convictions."[12] It may seem somewhat unclear whether 'state' here refers to the federal body or to the circumstance of the common society with respect to religion. The former then attributes this statement to Williams as a political ideal, one in which active legislation might support his ideal of tolerance. The latter interpretation attributes this statement to Williams as an inwardly transformative prescription, seeking to bring individuals and individual religious groups into a more tolerant attitude toward each others' convictions. In either case, Williams ultimately advocates the value of one's ability to express their self-chosen convictions. He attributes the 'most impressive version' of this principle to Immanuel Kant, who "identifies the

[11] Richard H. Dees. Trust and Toleration. (Routledge: London, 2004), p. 34
[12] David Heyd, ed. Toleration: An Elusive Virtue. (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1996), p. 22

dignity of the human being with autonomy."[13] Here Williams picks up where Scanlon left off; to preserve the 'dignity of the human being,' so to speak, one must place the focus "perhaps not so much in the value of toleration itself as in a certain more fundamental value, that of autonomy."[14] But he also admits that the success of tolerance then remains only as impervious as the broad acceptance of the value of individual autonomy.[15]

Megone fortifies the appeal to individual autonomy by first clarifying two essential terms. First, he uses Peter Nicholson's definition of *toleration*: an individual or group exhibits this trait if an opposing individual or group "acts or expresses a thought which he, or it, takes to be not merely incorrect but harmfully wrong; he or it had the power to try to suppress or prevent that act or thought; but the tolerator allows the act to be performed or the thought to be expressed."[16] Referring back to Scanlon's view of tolerance, Megone contests that the acts or thoughts to be tolerated are not simply disagreed with but furthermore judged to be fundamentally harmful to society. This imposes the necessity to find a higher principle which not only seems more valuable than one's deep religious doctrines, but also one which provides a practical counter-weight to the harm of the incorrect acts or beliefs of others.

Megone then appeals to the idea of *individualism*, a position which states that "the justification for the existence of a social condition or a social institution is to be given in terms of the value derived from the individuals involved in that

[13] David Heyd, ed. Toleration: An Elusive Virtue. (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1996), p. 22
[14] Ibidem, p. 23
[15] Ibidem, p. 24-25
[16] John Horton and Peter Nicholson, eds. Toleration: Philosophy and Practice. (Avebury: Brookfield Vermont, 1992), p. 127

condition or institution."[17] He distinguishes between two kinds of individualism; the first of these conceives of each individual "pursuing his own self interest, or satisfying his own desires," whereas the second conceives of the each individual acting "on choices in line with his rational will."[18] Megone attributes the former to John Stuart Mill and the latter to Immanuel Kant. He then proposes a third kind of individualism, where the individual "is one who properly develops his potentialities, and crucial to such proper development is the agent's exercise of choice."[19] So Megone's proposal of individualism suggests that the progress of society is based upon the progress of the individual, and the individual is valued most when allowed the free exercise of choice. This seems to form the basis for his proposal of tolerance.

To better explicate Megone's implications here, it might help to add that he considers the ability to form and act upon one's own decisions as an essential trait of a 'good human being.' Furthermore, the development of the individual depends both on Aristotle's definition of the human being as a 'rational animal' and also thus on his deliberate inner decision.[20] According to Megone, to be good one must choose according to one's own rational deliberation. This goes beyond what he considers Mill's position of individualism and adds to Kant's individualist requirement of rational will by including the actual ability to enact one's own decision. Also, it is clear from Megone's premises that he supposes

[17] John Horton and Peter Nicholson, eds. Toleration: Philosophy and Practice. (Avebury: Brookfield Vermont, 1992), p. 127
[18] Ibidem, p. 128
[19] Ibidem, p. 128
[20] Ibidem, p. 131

the only way to a 'good society' can only be through allowing its individuals to engage in rational and autonomous decision making.

Megone finally argues that "the possibility of agents fully developing their potential for choice requires toleration of at least some (believed) harmful ways of life."[21] He supports this claim by noting that every individual will have reason to value tolerance under this principle of individualism, for they will always value their own freedom to deliberate and choose the most rational choice, regardless of whether that choice ever changes throughout their entire life.

Megone supplements this consideration for individual autonomy with the value of truth, as the philosophers thus far have neglected to do. It is important not only for individuals to have the privilege of coming to their own beliefs, but it is also important for individuals to form true beliefs. It seems highly likely that all prospective believers, regardless of their beliefs, aim to have true ones, and Megone asserts that everyone "has the potential both to know true facts and to understand those facts."[22] He ties the two criteria together by stating that human potential is "then realized to the extent that the subject forms true belief."[23] Not only is Megone an advocate of autonomous individuality (coming from a basis of individualism) but also of forming true belief. Thus tolerance for him should be instilled and instituted within society so as to allow individuals the opportunity to both choose and choose correctly, and we must allow for their mistakes if we are to hope for their successes.

---

[21] John Horton and Peter Nicholson, eds. Toleration: Philosophy and Practice. (Avebury: Brookfield Vermont, 1992), p. 136
[22] Ibidem, p. 138
[23] Ibidem, p. 139

Karl Popper continues to examine this new issue of truth by discussing the pressures of intellectual responsibility, the possibility of fallibilism, and the issue of tolerance according to potential intolerant individuals. He quotes Voltaire in the beginning of his essay "Toleration and Intellectual Responsibility," introducing his own subject of interest:

> What is toleration? It is a necessary consequence of our being human. We are all products of frailty: fallible, and prone to error. So let us mutually pardon each other's follies. This is the first principle of the law of nature, the first principle of all human rights.[24]

Although Popper agrees with Scanlon that tolerance is not hypocritical when it attempts to repress intolerance and does not attempt to defend his position on those grounds, he does however present a positive case for tolerance, along the lines of Voltaire's quote. Popper steps further than Megone with his appeal to fallibility by warning against the equivocation of fallibilism with relativism. He recognizes that not all assertions are equal, that we should not behave as though "there is something [valuable] in totalitarianism…and in teaching children to be cruel."[25] This alleviates the pressure on Megone and Williams' criteria of autonomy, the possibility that individuals may use their autonomy for harmful ends, even the possible relativism in what Megone and Aristotle may consider 'rational deliberation.'

Popper continues his argument by offering three principles by which we should always conduct ourselves in relation to the 'religious alien,' so to speak. His first principle generally conforms to the worry of fallibility as previously

[24] Susan Mendus and David Edwards, eds. On Toleration. (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1987), p. 18
[25] Ibidem, p. 25

mentioned, stating that "*I may be wrong and you may be right*."[26] He explicitly denies that this is open to be support for relativism, rather he notes that "it implies that there may be a right and a wrong view of whatever the issues is; and that, indeed, we may both be wrong."[27]

He quickly moves on to the next of three principles, which states that "*by talking things over rationally we may be able to correct some of our mistakes*."[28] Here Popper has left much implicit in his principle. First, he adopts the same notion of rational consideration and deliberation which Megone borrows from Aristotle and Kant. In order to enact Popper's second principle of tolerance, the parties involved must agree to what is rational and must abide by that guideline, and yet he does not question the possibility that disparate religious groups or individuals may have entirely disparate conceptions of rationality. Second, this principle relies on the actuality of the first of Popper's principles; in order for the mutual discussion to benefit both parties, they both must assume that they have something to learn, that they do indeed have mistakes to correct. The first principle introduces the possibility of fallibility, while the second principle assumes the actuality of fallibility, for at least one of the two parties involved. One of the two must be wary enough about their convictions to consider the possibility of learning from the other.

However, assuming Popper is right about fallibilism, he offers a third principle which states "*if we talk thing over rationally, we may both get nearer to*

[26] Susan Mendus and David Edwards, eds. On Toleration. (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1987), p. 26
[27] Ibidem, p. 26
[28] Ibidem, p. 26

the truth."[29] As Megone suggests, truth is indeed an aim we all have in the formation of new beliefs and the review of old ones. Thus, if Popper can give sufficient reason for believing one has mistaken beliefs, his principles offer a progressive look at the benefit of tolerant and peaceful religious interaction.

Yet the issues of truth and epistemic certainty remain, for if the religious insider considers their beliefs epistemically sound or plainly true then there seems to be inadequate basis for attempting to tolerate on the basis that they have anything to gain by it. Unlike the scientific arts, religious truth and epistemic certainty remain much more elusive and evade the scrutiny of fallibility. To help address these issues, Paul Griffiths examines truth and epistemic certainty in "Problems of Religious Diversity."

Griffiths begins the exploration of religious truth by noting that "it is precisely religious claims that are potentially possessors of the interesting property of *being true*."[30] That is to say, he claims that religious beliefs are especially concerned with truth, and especially preoccupied with attaining it. He asserts this paramount importance by asking first "are there…forms of religious life that make no claims, explicitly or implicitly?" and then answering with conviction that "it is fairly clear that there are not and cannot be."[31] To assert that there *cannot* be forms of religious life which make no claims whatsoever is to tie truth to religious claims *necessarily*. Griffiths contrasts this assertion by also admitting that "not all religious claims are (or can be) true," for there will inevitably come contradiction, contrariety, and noncompossibility between competing

[29] Susan Mendus and David Edwards, eds. On Toleration. (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1987), p. 28
[30] Paul J. Griffiths. Problems of Religious Diversity. (Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, 2001), p. 21
[31] Ibidem, p. 23

claims.[32] This not only eliminates the possibility of relativism, in Griffiths' view, but also poses the difficulty that some religious groups or individuals will, at some point, end up being incorrect when they believe themselves correct. This seems to be the fundamental problem with religious interaction and the initial point in needing to advocate tolerance.

Griffiths attempts to reconcile this inevitability with the various convictions by presenting two styles of parity with respect to religious truth: a Kantian view and a Wittgensteinean view. According to Griffiths, Kant asserts that the "fundamental religious claim is…discoverable and justifiable by reason alone, unaided by revelation, scripture, authoritative church teachings, or any other extraordinary means available only to a few."[33] This means that the particulars of a religion, its specific deific figures or sacred objects and practices, are secondary to the core doctrines, which generally conform among the world's seemingly disparate religions. Thus, "the ideal Kantian religion, then, is one that exhibits an understanding of the insufficiency of its own particulars and recommends this understanding to its inhabitants."[34] However, although Kant's parity may cure the problem of contrary, contradictory, and noncompossible religious claims, Griffiths contests that it will inevitably amount "to telling religious people that they misunderstand their religion," a move which he is unwilling to make.

[32] Paul J. Griffiths. Problems of Religious Diversity. (Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, 2001), p. 36
[33] Ibidem, p. 38
[34] Ibidem, p. 39

Wittgenstein, on the other hand, treats religious claims as epistemically different from any other claim to truth. Griffiths provides an example of Wittgenstein's gist:

> Suppose someone were a believer and said: "I believe in a Last Judgment," and I said: "Well, I'm not so sure. Possibly." You would say that there is an enormous gulf between us. If he said "There is a German aeroplane overhead," and I said "Possibly[.] I'm not so sure," you'd say we were fairly near.[35]

The difference between the two examples of beliefs in Wittgenstein's quote shows the difference in the believers' attitudes. Religious claims, according to Wittgenstein, have a special status with respect to epistemic certainty and the realm of truth. Griffiths says of Wittgenstein's view of parity that:

> most religious communities appear to treat their doctrines and teachings not only as claims to be assented to in a non-hypothetical, non-negotiable fashion, but also as claims that are true in the sense that they accurately…describe the way things are, or commend what ought to be commended.[36]

This offer suggests that religious claims cannot be examined in the same way that other truth claims can be, and thus evidence provided for and against such claims becomes seemingly worthless. However, Griffiths contests Wittgenstein by denying that all religious groups and individuals actually treat their claims in this way. With these two views, Griffiths seems to present a fully rational approach and a fully non-rational approach to religious truth, and finds both lacking.

Griffiths finally contests the psychological core of religious claims to truth, as he questions epistemic confidence. He states that "clearly, the fact that you

[35] Paul J. Griffiths. Problems of Religious Diversity. (Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, 2001), p. 45
[36] Ibidem, p. 48

think some claim is true won't usually be enough by itself to give you epistemic confidence in your assent to it."[37] However, epistemic confidence comes in degrees, from relative doubt to epistemic confidence to epistemic certainty to the sort of truth claim that Wittgenstein proposed, the kind which is non-negotiable. Griffiths asserts that in one's home religion one primarily holds beliefs of high epistemic confidence, and he grapples with what sorts of condition might cause that confidence to weaken or disintegrate, if any at all. "Since it is perfectly obvious to you that you are right about these things, it will follow fairly directly that anyone who believes something incompatible with what you believe about them must, ipso facto, be mistaken."[38] This poses terrible difficulties for Popper's principles regarding fallibility, and undermines nearly every attempt thus far to work toward a meaningful dialogue between opposing religious groups. If Griffiths is accurate about religious epistemology and the way it operates in groups and individuals, then a closer look at the insiders' views seems necessary before attempting to provide a comprehensive and universally agreeable model for tolerance.

Thus, the various philosophers' proposals seem to offer great insight into the issue of tolerance. Scanlon's peaceful coexistence, Dees' appeal to trust, Williams' liberal pluralism and autonomous individuality, Megone's individualism and autonomous individuality, and Popper's appeals to fallibility all provide convincing arguments for some individuals, but Griffiths' worries about religious truth and epistemic certainty can still ultimately undermine all current attempts. A

[37] Paul J. Griffiths. Problems of Religious Diversity. (Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, 2001), p. 66
[38] Ibidem, p. 76

closer look at the religious insiders' views may better elucidate how to provide a universally convincing argument favoring religious tolerance, for the religious and non-religious alike.