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# **The limits of tolerance**

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Throughout the Western world, the political ‘Left’ is in disarray. It is fragmented, rudderless and lacks a coherent plan to stem the tide of ‘populism’, nationalism and xenophobia. Identity politics and questions of religion have done much to fuel both the Right’s xenophobic tendencies, and the Left’s fragmentation. The ‘Old Left’ embraced a simple Manichean worldview of good versus evil: the enemy was easily identified (the rich and powerful, who oppressed the poor and the weak), and its agenda was simple and clear (redistribution of wealth and greater economic equality).

In contrast, the ‘New Left’ has introduced multiple new agendas – and enemies. The ‘Old Left’, it is said, was insensitive about issues affecting a range of marginalised groups, who identify themselves along lines of race, gender and sexual orientation. The three-legged stool of the Old Left – ‘liberty, equality and fraternity’ – was never very secure, but when fraternity was replaced by the demands of group identity, little stability remained.

Among other things, the core Old-Left liberal value of religious tolerance has now come into confrontation with the identity politics of the New Left. Indeed, one central strand of New Left thinking regards all talk of (liberal) ‘religious tolerance’ as mere camouflage concealing deep and systematic disrespect and unequal treatment of religious minorities. From this perspective, what needs priority is not so much the right of individuals to choose their religion as they see fit and without interference, but the rights of religious groups to secure and preserve their standing and identity in a society that would otherwise marginalise them.

How should the Left understand and practise religious tolerance in the face of the emphasis that various groups now place on the value of their religious identities? This is a question that has, of course, become tangled up with overlapping issues, such as racism, anti-immigrant sentiment, and various forms of nationalist xenophobia. But we should keep these issues separate and focus on the difficult enough question of the relationship between religious toleration and identity politics. Much of the (New) Left analysis, which concentrates on the language and agendas of identity politics, has paid too little attention to a very significant distinction that falls *within* the various identities that have been proposed as a basis for rectifying various forms of social injustice and unequal treatment: the distinction between ideological and non-ideological identity commitments. A lack of clarity about this basic divide within identity politics has led to a serious failure to provide credible understanding of what tolerance requires when we are confronted with questions about the rights of different religious groups to be treated equally and with respect.

Some claim there is an analogy between the identity politics of religion and the issues that arise with other excluded groups based on race, gender, sexual orientation, disability and the like. What is supposed to hold these divergent identities together is that the groups in question have been treated unequally, or do not receive adequate recognition in the existing social and legal system. Religious groups require protection to secure their rights and recognition of their particular interests in practising their religion. Yet, however plausible these claims might be, there is a key distinction that needs to be made between identities that are based on what can be broadly described as *ideological* or *value-laden* commitments, and those that do not carry any such baggage. This distinction is essential to understanding the role of (religious) toleration in a liberal, democratic society.

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Race, gender and, more recently, sexual orientation are forms of identity that have been especially prominent in politics during the past century. What is striking about these forms of identity is not only that they are generally unchosen, but that they are not based on any ideological or value-laden set of commitments of a political or ethical nature. Of course, the significance and interpretation of non-ideological identities, the ways in which they can be viewed as threatened or disrespected, is itself an ideological matter; but the identities themselves are not constituted by any ideological content (systems of belief, value, practices, etc), and the groups concerned could vary greatly in the particular ideologies that they endorse or reject.

For this reason, there is no basis for criticising a group (or individual member of it) on the basis of race, gender or sexual orientation. It would, for example, be absurd to praise or blame Martin Luther King Jr for being black, or Margaret Thatcher for being a woman. There is no ideological *content* to their identity to assess or debate – the relevant identity is an inappropriate target for praise or blame, since there are no relevant assessable beliefs, values, practices or institutions to serve as the grounds of such responses. The identity of the group turns on natural qualities and features that cannot be discarded in light of critical scrutiny or reflection of any kind.

With ideological or value-laden identities the situation is different. The most obvious of these identities are political, constituted by doctrines, beliefs and values that have implications for our social and ethical practices and institutions. The crucial question for tolerance, is: where does *religion*stand in relation to this divide? Religious identities are, I contend, heavily ideological and value-laden and, in this respect, more akin to political identities than to those based on race, gender or sexual orientation.

Religious identities, like political identities, can still be amended: they are not natural features

This difference is not just a matter of religion being subject to choice, as the roots and sources of religious identity are generally more complicated and complex than this. A person’s identity as Christian, Muslim, atheist and so on might, to a great extent, be a product of culture, education, socialisation and even indoctrination of various, overlapping kinds. What really matters is not so much that the person’s particular religious identity is chosen but that it has *some* relevant ideological content and is, to that extent, sensitive to criticism, reflection, discussion and debate. Religious identities, like political identities, however they might be *acquired*, can still be discarded or radically amended: they are not natural features that a person is incapable of revising. You might be born into a Catholic family, brought up a Catholic, have spent most of your days among Catholics, but that doesn’t mean you can’t at some point discard this religious identity.

Two examples highlight the wider significance of this core distinction for identity politics. Consider, first, the way in which there are efforts to present those who identify as gay as making a ‘choice’ and affirming certain values and practices that they are capable of shedding. The pressure here is to present a non-ideological identity as having an ideological character and, in consequence, being a legitimate target of criticism. These efforts to portray gay identity as ideological are rightly resisted, since they falsely assimilate being gay to choosing and endorsing a set of values in the manner of adopting a political/ethical ideology, rather than its being part of a person’s inborn nature and lacking any inherent ideological content.

A second example of the importance of the ideological/non-ideological identity distinction concerns criticisms of Zionism. While critics of Zionism are usually quick to dismiss any charge of anti-Semitism because their concerns are not motivated by racism, there are many within the Jewish community who interpret the rhetorical and critical excesses of critics of Zionism as rooted in anti-Semitic motivations. The fear is that legitimate debate and criticism at the ideological level is simply a *mask* that conceals (illegitimate) hostility and hatred at the non-ideological level. Whatever justice there might be in these concerns – and there is, at least, some – they serve to make clear that the core distinction between ideological and non-ideological identities is of fundamental importance in relation to such matters.

What, then, is the relevance of this distinction for religious tolerance itself? In the case of ideological identities, tolerance is primarily a matter of ensuring that there is no interference with those who hold doctrines or values that are in conflict with those of the majority, or who hold state power and authority. In conditions of tolerance, citizens agree to respect the right of others to hold and express views that they might regard as mistaken, foolish or objectionable and perhaps even pernicious. The bounds of tolerance are, however, subject to the constraint that the basic rights of others – including their rights to express and openly advocate their views – are respected and protected. Crucially, tolerance does not involve suspending all judgment and criticism concerning the ideological commitments of other groups and parties. Much less does tolerance presuppose that all groups hold equally ‘valid’ or worthwhile views or outlooks. Apart from anything else, if this were true then liberals could not consistently present their own values and institutions as preferable to opposing illiberal doctrines and practices.

All of this is more or less universally recognised in the case of political views, where groups are routinely criticised and condemned *within the bounds of tolerance*. The same general principles apply in the case of religious groups and their various doctrines and ideologies. There should be no effort to confuse criticism, condemnation and even ridicule with *intolerance*. On the contrary, as with the political case, tolerance is not just a matter of recognising ‘diversity’ and ‘difference’, it is, crucially, a matter of acknowledging and accepting *disagreement* and ideological *conflict*. Religious tolerance does not, therefore, involve a commitment to affirming the equal worth and value of all doctrines and practices that fall within the scope and bounds of tolerance itself. With respect to religion, tolerance involves allowing and preserving a space for criticism as well as affirmation.

To *impose* a doctrine of the equal worth or validity of religions that some might find absurd would itself constitute a blow *against* religious tolerance

The crucial point here is that tolerance of ideological identities must operate in the middle ground between intolerance, on one side, and the mere recognition of ‘difference and diversity’ on the other. Within this middle ground there will be a wide range of responses – some of which will be well-informed and well-judged, and others which will not. Clearly tolerance does not demand that all criticism or disagreement must be well-judged and well-informed. Suffice it to say that within this middle ground there will be much that might be judged both ill-informed and ‘over-the-top’ – but this is not, in itself, evidence of intolerance. There is, for example, a significant difference between a Sunday preacher condemning atheists as ‘Godless, wicked fools’, and a fanatic threatening to murder ‘blasphemers’. The former is a form of (objectionable) ignorance and dogmatism; but the latter is a plain case of intolerance. It is a basic confusion to assume that everyone who expresses objectionable views, in an objectionable manner, is *ipso facto* intolerant. Tolerance allows people to express *objectionable* views, even in an objectionable manner, as long as they do not resort to coercive measures that violate the rights of others.

When we turn to the situation with non-ideological identities, the issues are very different. Non-ideological identities, as explained, do not contain any ideological content or baggage – there is nothing about these features or qualities of a person (eg, with respect to race, gender, disability etc) to question, disagree with, or criticise. What ‘tolerance’ requires in this context is recognising and acknowledging *differences* and *diversities* with respect to significant (natural) features that shape the experience, interests and needs of various groups within society. Any suggestion that these groups are open to criticism or condemnation because of these non-ideological identities is entirely misplaced. The force of tolerance in these contexts – in contrast with ideological identities – is to insist on *the equal worth and value* of these various identities and to ensure that they are properly and effectively recognised and represented in our public policies and institutions. A just society, with respect to these non-ideological identities, rejects all forms of criticism of these groups as unacceptable forms of bigotry, prejudice and hate. It is essential, therefore, that regarding tolerance, the difference between ideological and non-ideological identities be properly understood and put into practice.

With non-ideological identities, the divergent groups are required to recognise the significance of the ways in which they differ, and to accept the distinct worth of others’ given identities. This reciprocal respect and recognition does not hold with ideological identities (including religious identities) and is not required or presupposed for conditions of tolerance to be satisfied. On the contrary, to *impose* a doctrine of the equal worth or validity of religions that some might find absurd would itself constitute a blow *against* religious tolerance – compelling individuals and groups to disguise their sincere doubts with respect to the opposing views of others. What is required for tolerance is that, consistent with open and frank criticism, all parties concerned respect the rights of others to express and practise their views (subject to respecting the reciprocal rights of others in relation to these matters). It is, from this perspective, misleading to portray those who exercise their legitimate right to criticise, condemn or ridicule the doctrines and views of others as *intolerant* or *bigoted* simply on this basis.

Does this distinction between ideological and non-ideological identities play into the hands of racists, bigots and xenophobes? I believe not. What does play into their hands is a *failure* to draw this distinction. When all criticism and objections raised against a given religion are casually assimilated to forms of bigotry and prejudice directed against non-ideological identities, and dismissed as racist or xenophobic, then those who continue to harbour these concerns will find themselves forced into the company of others who might well be motivated by non-ideological prejudices and hatred.

It is only by insisting on the relevance and importance of this core distinction that we can effectively position ourselves to recognise, on one side, that criticism of ideological views (religious or otherwise) is not the same as criticism and hostility directed at non-ideological identities; and, on the other side, to insist that all such criticism must be formed and presented in a manner that pays due respect to the most important and essential identity that others in our community and society have – the identity of being rational beings with equal ethical standing and worth.

The distinction between ideological and non-ideological identities is crucial to understanding religious tolerance in a liberal society. It is especially important if we are to avoid confusing cases of legitimate criticism and disagreement with illegitimate bigotry and prejudice. Confusing these issues can lead to an *inversion* of tolerance, in which society ceases to tolerate criticism and negative evaluations of the beliefs and practices of some religions on the grounds that all such criticism and disagreement is necessarily an expression of non-ideological bigotry and prejudice. What, though, does this theoretical distinction mean in practice? I have a few brief observations to make about this.

First, I do not claim that the ideological/non-ideological identity distinction provides a simple algorithm for addressing the many difficult and problematic cases of ‘accommodation’ of religion and religious minorities. Clearly these issues cannot always be readily or immediately settled by simply recognising that religion is primarily a matter of ideological identity. However, it is essential, when considering and assessing such issues in practice, to recognise that a religious identity is more like political identity than it is like non-ideological identities such as race or gender.

Second, the ideological/non-ideological distinction is not always easy or obvious to draw in particular cases. Some, and perhaps many, identities are a complex fusion of these elements. This is evident in the case of national identities: being ‘German’, ‘English’ or ‘American’ may be largely a non-ideological matter, based on roots in geographical location, a certain shared history with others and, perhaps, a shared language. For some, however, these national identities might not be entirely ideologically neutral or non-committal, and might carry attachments to institutions, practices, values and so on (consider, for example, being ‘Israeli’).

These general considerations concerning *fused* identities are obviously relevant to the issue of religious tolerance. Among other things, they make clear why labels such as ‘Islamophobia’ – however well-motivated – are problematic and confuse issues that should be carefully distinguished. Terminology of this kind leaves the nature and content of the identity in question unsettled and indeterminate in crucial respects. It encourages the view that criticism of the Muslim religion, as such, should be assimilated to forms of racism and sexism. Until the ‘Muslim’ identity in question is carefully unpacked, the case for grouping any and all such criticism under the heading ‘Islamophobia’ is itself dangerous and intolerant, as it encourages the suppression of reasonable and legitimate debate and discussion about the merits and demerits of Islam.

We do not demean or degrade the worth of fellow citizens when we reject or ridicule their political or religious views and doctrines

A third issue that arises in relation to the ideological/non-ideological identity divide is the question of which identities one may or may not attach weight or significance to – something that can be a matter of degree. With ideological identities, the weight we attach to a given identity will be sensitive to the *content* of the identity. To this extent, we can criticise or repudiate the worth of identity within the bounds of tolerance. A proposed identity of this kind (eg, being a Scientologist, a fascist, etc) could be regarded as foolish and/or pernicious – however significant and important it might be for the person or group concerned. Liberal tolerance leaves plenty of room for individuals and groups to embrace and promote identities that other (reasonable and tolerant) people might condemn or regard with contempt. To curtail the rights of individuals and groups to criticise these identities is itself a clear violation of liberal principles and values.

What, then, about the value of non-ideological identities, such as race, gender and so on? Can these be repudiated and criticised within the bounds of liberal tolerance? With non-ideological identities, the issues become more complex and, in some respects, paradoxical. Since any proposed non-ideological identity will lack ideological content, it cannot serve as a basis for legitimate criticism or evaluation of any kind. This is true even if the proposed non-ideological identity is wholly frivolous and trivial (eg, being right-footed, having freckles, etc). More importantly, using any non-ideological identity as a basis for unequal treatment of those who embrace or satisfy some feature of ‘difference’ is unacceptable bigotry.

It does not follow from this, however, that we must endorse the value that the person or group concerned attaches to this feature or point of ‘difference’. On the contrary, I do not treat an individual with, say, freckles, with disrespect or in an intolerant manner because I regard an identity based around such a feature or point of ‘difference’ as trivial and frivolous. The weight and significance attached to non-ideological identities is itself an ideological matter and can be challenged and contested *within the bounds of liberal tolerance*. The case for the weight or significance of a given non-ideological identity must be made with reference to the needs, interests and history of the individual or group concerned. To treat the claim that ‘black lives matter’ as if it is like claiming that the lives of people with freckles matter would indeed involve insensitivity, and might well be evidence of bigotry and prejudice. But this contrast only serves to show that we need not *always* endorse the value that the person or group concerned attaches to this feature or point of ‘difference’. This is especially important since the value or significance of the identity in question can be a matter of degree.

Criticism and hostility directed against a person because of her skin-colour or sexual features is wholly unacceptable and misplaced, and a form of prejudice and bigotry. It treats people with these natural features as less deserving of respect. This remains true, even if there is no effort to interfere with them or violate their rights – the condemnation and hostility is in itself derogatory and demeaning, be it in public or in private. Plainly this is not true of criticism of religious identities – any more than it would be true of criticism of political identities or the communities constructed around them. We do not demean or degrade the standing or worth of fellow citizens when we reject or even ridicule their political or religious views and doctrines (although how and when we do this is always a matter of ethical judgment and good taste). This remains so, even if it is also true that criticism and ridicule of the views of others is often little better than a mask or cover for genuinely objectionable forms of prejudice and bigotry based on non-ideological identities (eg, as based on race, etc).

Ihave argued that religious identities are primarily, if not wholly, ideological in character, and to that extent are fair and legitimate targets for criticism and, in some cases, condemnation. Does this mean there are no ethical constraints on the manner of criticism and comment? Not at all.

There are, of course, those who would *demonise* their opponents in ideological debates – but this is far from unique to religious controversy and criticism, much less to any particular religious group or minority (be they Muslims, atheists, Jews, Catholics or whatever). Even when criticism is properly based in ideological objections – and not a form of concealed non-ideological bigotry or prejudice – it can still lack proper moderation and civility in its manner of expression. This problem is a problem for political controversy just as much as it is with controversy about religion.

The real bigots and racists are happy to use the language of religious tolerance to conceal their hate-fuelled agendas

No sensible person concludes that because ‘demonisation’ is all too common in political life we should condemn and refrain from all strong, sharp and severe criticism and comment relating to such matters. In a free society, some debate over ideological matters such as religion will inevitably be highly charged, as is true of any pressing and serious topic. Such debate might involve intense and frank exchanges. This is part of what a tolerant society is committed to and must embrace and accept. Although civility and moderation should be encouraged, and non-ideological bigotry should not be masked by ideological objections, there is no reason to suppose that religious identity is entitled to some whole-scale *immunity* here, any more than political identities are.

It is essential that the Left – Old or New, along with whatever particular identities it might want to draw on – carefully distinguish these issues of tolerance and religious identity. As long as the Left continues to conflate and confuse these issues and presents (legitimate) forms of criticism and condemnation of religion as unacceptable forms of bigotry and racism, it will be the *enemy* of genuine religious tolerance and effectively play into the hands of the real bigots and racists, who are happy to use the language of religious tolerance to conceal their hate-fuelled agendas.

It is only by drawing the ideological/non-ideological identity distinction that we can effectively distinguish non-ideological bigotry from genuine ideological disagreement, and protect the rights of diverse and opposing ideological groups to openly express their views. It is, moreover, only on this basis that we can secure the religious freedoms of *everyone* – including critics of religion.

*Paul Russell’s*[*The Limits of Free Will*](https://global.oup.com/academic/product/the-limits-of-free-will-9780190627607?cc=ca&lang=en)*is out now through OUP.*