



Religious privilege, tolerance and discrimination (part 2) – The paradox of tolerance

KEY QUESTIONS ??

- What are religious privilege, tolerance and discrimination?
- Why do people support or oppose secularism?

EXERCISES

Q1. Should religious tolerance be limited?

STIMULUS

The paradox of tolerance

The so-called “paradox of tolerance”, was first described by a philosopher called Karl Popper in his 1945 book: *The Open Society and Its Enemies Vol. 1*:

“Less well known is the paradox of tolerance: Unlimited tolerance must lead to the disappearance of tolerance. If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them. — In this formulation, I do not imply, for instance, that we should always suppress the utterance of intolerant philosophies; as long as we can counter them by rational argument and keep them in check by public opinion, suppression would certainly be unwise. But we should claim the right to suppress them if necessary even by force; for it may easily turn out that they are not prepared to meet us on the level of rational argument, but begin by denouncing all argument; they may forbid their followers to listen to rational argument, because it is deceptive, and teach them to answer arguments by the use of their fists or pistols. We should therefore claim, in the name of tolerance, the right not to tolerate the intolerant.”

Popper is not saying that we should abandon tolerance or have no tolerance for intolerance. But that in the interest of preserving overall tolerance we might have to limit tolerance in specific instances.

The philosopher John Rawls (see resource 1.06) agrees with Popper that society should tolerate intolerant behaviour in order to avoid the greater intolerance of oppression, but society has a reasonable right of “self-preservation” that can supersede the principle of tolerance. He said:

“While an intolerant sect does not itself have title to complain of intolerance, its freedom should be restricted only when the tolerant sincerely and with reason believe that their own security and that of the institutions of liberty are in danger.”

In this case we can replace “tolerance/greater tolerance” with “liberalism/greater liberalism” or “fairness/greater fairness”.

STIMULUS

The paradox of religious tolerance

So, how does this apply to secularism and religious tolerance?

Secularists recognise that people with different worldviews can have very different ideas about how to live a good life, that these might occasionally be in conflict, and that they might include intolerant views and practices.

Secularists recognise that religion can have positive and negative manifestations, and believe that preventing religious privilege or discrimination can prevent most of these negative manifestations. But to do this can require limits on religious tolerance, in order to protect greater tolerance.

This limit on religious tolerance is reflected in Article 9 of the Human Rights Act having two separate clauses, which state:

1. Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance.

2. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.

If religious tolerance or freedom were unlimited there would only be the need for the first clause. You will notice that neither clause creates a duty on the state to encourage religion.

EXERCISES

Q2. Why does a tolerant society require (or not require) limits on religious tolerance?

Q3. How does secularism address the paradox of tolerance?

Q4. How do critics of secularism address the paradox of tolerance?

Q5. Why should a concern for religious tolerance lead us to support or oppose secularism?

STIMULUS

Examples

In the following example we consider three reasonably common negative manifestations of religion. That is not to suggest that all religions, or all of any one religion manifests itself in such ways, or to that extent, or that irreligious beliefs can't manifest in similarly negative ways.

Example a. Homophobia

Some religious groups have homophobic beliefs, i.e. they believe that natural human sexualities (other than heterosexual) and gender identities (other than male or female) are immoral and should be prevented.

In the interest of religious tolerance, we might tolerate the following intolerant behaviours:

- Publishing books or delivering lectures on why being LGBT is wrong.
- Not being friends with LGBT people.
- Not having LGBT clergy (priests, imams, rabbis etc.).

In the interest of religious tolerance, we might not tolerate the following intolerant behaviours:

- Publishing books or delivering lectures advocating violence against LGBT people.
- Refusing to provide goods or services to LGBT customers.
- Refusing to hire LGBT candidates for a job.

Example b. Restrictions on blasphemy

Some religious groups believe that it is wrong to say or think certain things that go against their religious beliefs or criticise or disrespect figures in their religion.

In the interest of religious tolerance, we might tolerate the following intolerant behaviours:

- Preaching that people who commit blasphemy will go to Hell.
- Banning people who commit blasphemy from being a member of the religion.
- Not being friends with people whose religions they consider blasphemous.

In the interest of religious tolerance, we might not tolerate the following intolerant behaviours:

- Preaching that people who commit blasphemy should be violently attacked.
- Passing laws banning blasphemy.
- Refusing to provide goods or services to customers whose religions they consider blasphemous.

Example c. Unscientific beliefs

Some religious groups subscribe to beliefs that they might view as theologically true or even believe are scientifically accurate, but are from a scientific perspective factually wrong, e.g. the world being 6,000 years old.

In the interest of religious tolerance, we might tolerate the following intolerant behaviours:

- Preaching that unscientific beliefs are in fact true or scientific.
- Persuading followers to make ethical decisions in accordance with those unscientific beliefs.
- Refusing to be friends with followers of religions (or non-religious worldviews) that do not share these unscientific beliefs.

In the interest of religious tolerance, we might not tolerate the following intolerant behaviours:

- Teaching that unscientific beliefs are in fact true or scientific in schools.
- Making those unscientific beliefs the basis of laws or policy.
- Refusing to provide goods or services to customers who follow religions (or nonreligious worldviews) that do not share these unscientific beliefs.

EXERCISES

Q6. In the examples (a–c), what intolerance would be caused if the intolerant behaviours were outlawed?

TAKE IT FURTHER 

- Create a poster describing the paradox of tolerance.
- Write a short story or roleplay which illustrates the paradox of tolerance.
- Write a short essay entitled: "In the interest of religious tolerance, religious intolerance should be tolerated."