On Toleration

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These are trying times and they sometimes seem especially intolerant. We have only to reflect on the comments associated with virtually any news story posted on the Internet, or the tweets of the President of the United States. We hear and read stories of terrorism. Too many people are prepared to kill in an assertion of their religious convictions, and too many others are willing to blame all adherents of a single religion for the murderous misconduct of a few of its adherents. All too many of us seem all too willing to believe the worst of our neighbours.

A little dose of history, or even a long memory, offers a corrective. In this church, we count ourselves the heirs of religious dissenters who were the victims of religious intolerance turned to violence more than three hundred and fifty years ago. Michael Servetus was burned at the stake at the behest of John Calvin in Geneva. Francis David ended his days in a Transylvanian prison. We live in less violent times, in a society espousing a deep commitment to the freedom of thought, opinion, belief and expression (in the words of s. 2 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*). We have come a long, long way from the state sanctioned burnings and beheadings that were a feature of the Protestant Reformation and the wars that accompanied it. We have come some way from the open racism that made possible the Japanese internment of the 1940s, the residential school system that endured in this country into the 1960s, and the segregation and race riots endured by Americans in the 1960s. In truth, we live at a moment and in a society notable for its tolerance and acceptance of diversity. Some of you may disagree with this, but probably no one will dispute that a tolerant society is much to be desired.

Toleration is a civic virtue. It was not included among the virtues enumerated by classical writers and theologians, such as patience, honesty, and courage. Perhaps this is because toleration has the air of a fudge, of a lack of commitment to our beliefs. How can we tolerate the unacceptable? Why should we? Discussions of toleration very quickly becomes discussions of the limits of tolerance. Of course, people should be

tolerant, we say, but some behaviours (or some people) are clearly intolerable. And yet, this thought puts the entire project of toleration at risk. If we only tolerate that which does not trouble or offend us, we may be as narrow-minded, intransigent and partisan as we like, while claiming to be virtuous.

Why is toleration necessary? In a learned doorstop of a book, *Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst*,[1] Robert Sapolsky offers an answer. Sapolsky is a scientist, and his book is about the neurological, hormonal, psychological and social causes and correlates of good and bad behaviour. At the risk of grossly oversimplifying a nuanced and fascinating discussion, Sapolsky may be said to claim that humans are biologically predisposed to distinguish 'us' from 'them'. For example, there is a hormone, oxytocin, which promotes pro-social behavior among members of an in-group, while promoting increased aggression and anti-social behavior towards members of outsiders. The phenomenon can be seen in humans, laboratory rats, and other animals. In rats, we believe that in and out-groups are identified largely by smell. In humans, identification is much more complicated: it may involve, for example: skin colour; the folding of the skin around the eyes; a haircut; language or an accent; dress; a head covering or an item of jewellery. These characteristics may be viewed as intrinsic or serve as markers for beliefs, such as religious beliefs. To a large degree, in humans, in and out-groups are <u>culturally</u> defined. In short, we are predisposed to behave as though group belonging matters, while our background, upbringing and experiences suggest to us that certain group identifications are important, and others are irrelevant.

We evolved as social hunter-gatherers living in close proximity with tens of others, all of whom we knew on sight. Now we live in cities filled with millions of strangers whose backgrounds are unknown to us. We take in knowledge of the world vicariously, through books, radio, television, movies and, ever increasingly, the Internet; and through our dealings with others at the store, on the bus, at work, here at church, and elsewhere in the community. We have agency or freedom to decide who we will be or

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[1] 2017, Penguin Press.

what we will do to an extent that would have been envied by our ancestors, were they able to comprehend it.

We all have multiple identities. Male, female, or gender fluid; old, young, or middle-aged; student, working or retired; born in Canada, immigrant or visitor; indigenous or settlor; parent or child or both at once; union or management; Anglican, Catholic, Pagan or Unitarian; dog person or cat person; pro-life or pro-choice. Some of these identities carry more emotional weight than others. Each of them defines an in-group and an out-group, a group whom we are predisposed to some degree to trust and accept, and a group whom we are predisposed to some degree to view warily, as possible competitors or enemies.

Of course, one of the great benefits of living in a diverse, complicated society is that our multiple identities intersect, so that we are frequently dealing with others who are, looked at one way, members of our in-group and, looked at in another way, members of an out-group. Bob is straight and grew up in an evangelical Christian church. He likes his boss, Martha, who is lesbian. He plays on a soccer team with Arvid, who came to Canada as a refugee with his mother at 15. If Bob is at all thoughtful, he may be inclined to resist rote denunciations of gay people, immigrants and Christian fundamentalists respectively, even when they are offered by people he trusts, because he is able to identify with these people. Simplistically, this is a reason why essentialist labelling finds it harder to obtain a purchase in cosmopolitan societies. But it doesn't prevent members of these societies from conceptualizing themselves, collectively, as an 'us', and their rural neighbours as a 'them'. And it doesn't forestall the existence of pockets of people within the cosmopolis who adhere primarily to a singular group identity, who may dislike and distrust their neighbours, and be disliked and distrusted by them. Among many other things, the Internet fosters group identification by making it possible for people to find and sustain intense relationships with similarly minded folk. Internet anonymity (or apparent anonymity) also makes it often possible to communicate, dislike, disdain, or hatred without personal consequence. The resulting coarsening of public debate when it takes place over the Internet should not be surprising.

This brings us back to toleration, and our current predicament. Our tolerant society is currently under strain. If Sapolsky is right, its maintenance requires legal, social and cultural norms of toleration that may not be sustainable in the brave new world that technology has wrought.

The technological disruption of social structures and practices we are presently experiencing is not novel. It bears similarities to what occurred in Europe with Gutenberg's invention of the printing press with movable type. Living in a deeply religious society with a single public religion, Gutenberg's famous publication was a Bible. Among many other consequences, his invention led to:

- The distribution of Bibles in churches across Europe;
- For the first time, widespread literacy among the clergy;
- An efflorescence of theological debate, as clergy members read the Bible and compared it to the Church's doctrines;
- The Protestant Reformation;
- Translation and distribution of the Bible into modern languages, popularizing the theological debate; and
- The 30 years war, resulting 8 million deaths – 20% of the population in the area occupied by modern Germany, by some estimates – and ended by the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, establishing the modern nation-state.

Thus the socially and culturally disruptive effects of a new technology – the printing press – were being felt with ever-increasing intensity some 200 years after its first appearance. The Internet is a profoundly disruptive technology and the ripple effects of its introduction are unlikely to ebb away any time soon.

The Protestant Reformation was marked from the beginning by name-calling. Professor Teresa Bejan of Oxford University speaks of Martin Luther's 'singular vituperative virtuosity in the ongoing exchange of curse and countercurse'[2] and quotes his contemporary, Erasmus, who pursued unsuccessful attempts at religious concord:[3]

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[2] *Mere Civility: Disagreement and the Limits of Tolerance,* 2017, Harvard University Press, p. 24.

> *What would you say, [St] Paul, if you saw Christians now suffering at the hands of Christians, colleagues suffering from colleagues, theologians from theologians … in short the dead suffering from the living, all snarled at, savaged, and torn apart with the madness of a savage dog?*

Professor Bejan continues:[4]

> *By the late sixteenth century, the epidemic of incivility and sectarian splintering had spread to England, where observers regarded the emergence of many new sects – and the coining of many new and imaginative "denominations" to abuse them – with considerable consternation. As we have seen already, in addition to traditional labels like heretic and schismatic, many familiar names like Protestant and Papist, Baptist and Lutheran, as well as more obscure ones like Adamite and Familist, began in this period as pejoratives – and, indeed, as in the case of Puritans, Ranters and Quakers, often as implicit accusations of incivility against new groups. Indeed, the word* puritan *started as an insulting label for the "hotter sort of Protestant", those within the Church of England who complained forcefully that the work of Reformation had not gone far enough.*

In England, the fight between Protestants and Catholics and the continuing disputations among Protestants, drove political debate and change from the time of Henry VIII (who famously broke with Rome to obtain a divorce in the 1530s and thereby founded the Anglican Church) well into the 1800s.

It is hard to overestimate the importance of religious disputes in the public life of the early modern period and many scholars attribute the identification of toleration as a civic virtue to the struggle to cope with the public nastiness that was a feature of these

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[3] *Ibid.,* p. 26, quoting Erasmus, *The Tongue*, p. 367

[4] *Ibid.,* pp. 26-27.

disputes, when people were not actually rioting or going to war with one another. Toleration was plainly the civic virtue by which people could hope to live together in peace in the face of strenuous disagreement. But what did toleration require of the individual? This was itself contested, and the contest has implications for us today. This is the question addressed by Professor Bejan in her recent book, *Mere Civility: Disagreement and the Limits of Tolerance.*

One high conception of toleration was put forward by the 17th century English polymath, John Locke. He argued that tolerance requires civic charity towards others and their beliefs. As Locke put it in "Pacific Christians" in 1688:[5]

> *We hold it to be an indispensable duty for all Christians to maintain love and charity in the diversity of contrary opinions: by which charity we do not mean an empty sound, but <u>an effective forbearance and good-will, carrying men to communion, friendship and mutual assistance of one of another</u>, in outward as well as spiritual things; and by debarring all magistrates from making use of their authority, much less their sword, (which was put into their hands only against evil doers) in matters of faith or worship.*
> *(emphasis added)*

A much reduced conception of toleration was put forward by a hotter Protestant, Roger Williams, who founded the colony of Rhode Island. Williams argued that toleration requires 'meer civility'.[6]

In civil disputation, Williams was a brawler, and Locke was the gentler man, and easier to love. Williams is sometimes strikingly described as 'an intolerant tolerationist'.[7] Bejan describes him as 'a religious fanatic of exemplary intolerance, constantly alert to what he saw as others' irredeemable errors and motivated by an uncompromising determination to separate himself from them'; so that '… by the end of his life, he

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[5] Quoted in Bejan, *Ibid*, p. 112.

[6] The spelling is Williams'.

[7] Andrew Murphy, "Tolerance, Toleration, and the Liberal Tradition", quoted *Ibid*., p.54.

worshipped in a congregation of only two, him and his wife – and he may not have been entirely sure about her'.[8] Among many views unpopular at the time, he insisted that women wear veils in public, was opposed to the use of oaths in civil proceedings, and insisted that the colonial occupation of native lands was a sin against the natives. Yet Williams equally insisted on extending to others the freedoms he claimed for himself.

Despite the attractions of Locke's vision of civic charity, as is apparent from the title of her book, Professor Bejan favours Williams' view. She notes that, Williams extended tolerance to Catholics, 'Turks' (that is, Muslims), and atheists, and, unlike Locke, put his vision into practice in Rhode Island, where colonists were granted 'free exercise and enjoyment of all their civil and religious rights, regardless of religious affiliation.[9] She says:[10]

> *The radical and inclusive form of toleration that modern readers find*
> *most attractive in his works is inextricably linked with the feature that*
> *makes them most uncomfortable – namely, the evangelical aspect of*
> *mere civility as a conversational virtue consistent with believing others*
> *to be damned, as well as* telling *them so.*

To be clear, Locke's high conception of civic charity – that is, an appreciative understanding that the other's point of view makes sense in its own terms – requires some common ground, in the form of agreement on shared intellectual and emotional commitments. Within a religious community, the necessary agreement may found in a creed or, in this community, in the statement of principles and purposes found in the front of our hymnals. On that basis, within this community, we can aspire to tolerance, in the high sense of civic charity, in our dealings together. Indeed, we must.

Some contemporary scholars argue that we should strive to achieve something akin to civic charity in all our dealings with our fellow citizens. Professor Bejan criticizes this aspiration as exclusionary. She says that it:[11]

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[8] *Ibid.,* pp. 53, 54.

[9] *Ibid*, pp. 50-51.

[10] *Ibid*., p. 153.

… present[s] a demanding ethos of civility as a way to heal the wounds of a dismembered polity, but at the cost of a moralizing emphasis on sincerity and the contemptuous exclusion of anyone unwilling or unable to submit to its rigors. As agonistic critics of public reason and deliberative democracy have long argued, the exclusionary potential of these theories arises from the suggestion that truly civil disagreement can take place only between good faith partners committed to a just social order – that is, those who subscribe to the relevant moral principles already. Under the auspices of "civility", these theorists follow their early modern forbears in drawing up a list of fundamenta *(mutual respect, reciprocity, recognition) and then proposing to "civilize" disagreement by demanding others affirm it – and then complain about their lack of conformable complaisance when they do not.*

The problem seems to be that, like Locke, these theorists take an elite, and frankly elitist, standard of civil discourse appropriate to particular formalized and limited conversational contexts – a philosophy seminar, a legislative chamber, the Supreme Court, or an "ideal speech situation" – as paradigmatic for civility, and then apply it to others where the rules of civility are more nebulous. In this rarified and restricted view of civil conversation in a tolerant society, only sufficiently reasonable and gentlemanly evangelists (such as themselves) can take part. Rather than continuing the conversation, such a robust conception of civility often serves to banish the wide swath of one's co-citizens that one finds less than reasonable or morally respectable from the conversation.

It can be a sobering and helpful exercise for us to ask ourselves whether we are sometimes guilty of the elitist attitude Bejan is describing. Are there fellow citizens we dismiss as plainly unreasonable on their face, by reason of their opinions? Are there people whose views we think are simply beyond the pale?   Do there seem to be very

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[11] *Ibid.,* pp. 148-149.

many of them? What about people in other countries? The elements of Lockean civic charity -- 'communion, friendship and mutual assistance' – require more than most of us have to give.

Bejan argues:[12]

> *Civility emerges as an essential virtue in tolerant societies in response to a practical problem, not a theoretical one. In trying to make sense of others' different opinions, human beings conclude not that these differences are reasonable byproducts of the burdens of judgment but that their opponents are bigoted, ignorant, malicious, even insane. We might hope – and strive – to do otherwise. But rather than conflating this aspiration with civility, political theorists must recognize the latter as the virtue called upon to fill the breach when reality fails to meet our expectations.*

To paraphrase the Rolling Stones, while we can't always get what we want – high tolerance in the form of civic charity – if we settle for mere civility, we may find that we get what we need, in the form of a continuing conversation.

But the grudging toleration of mere civility is often very difficult. It requires us to participate in civic debates with people who do not share our values, and who do not show us respect. This is not an argument for unbridled freedom of speech, which is subject to limits in this country. We need not endure hate speech, or defamation, to name two of them.   The outer bounds of legality leave enormous room for disagreement, and disrespect. Toleration requires a thick skin and a willingness to suffer the discussion, even if we think we might be able to shut it down.

Consider the virtue of courage. Which is braver, the soldier who advances through a minefield, feeling no fear, or her companion who advances, mouth dry, shaking and scared almost out of her wits? I think that the greater courage is shown by the person who does what she must, though it terrifies her.   Might the same not be true of

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[12] *Ibid.*, p. 160.

toleration, that true tolerance is shown by the person who endures offensive conduct and does not stop it, though that lies within his power?

This brings me back to questions I posed at the beginning. How can we tolerate the unacceptable, and why should we? 'Should' is the easier question. I've suggested that toleration is one of the cardinal virtues of a civilized society. We must tolerate others because we need them to tolerate us; because we are imperfect, 'crooked timber'; because our various perspectives are limited and imperfect; and because the alternative is the failure of civil society, which would be much worse.

This leaves us with 'how', and there are no easy answers. One might as well ask, how can I be brave?

It leaves us, as well, with the question of limits. As I hope I've made clear, a commitment to civic toleration does not require of us that we tolerate everything. We need not tolerate violence, corruption, certain kinds of abusive speech, and other things as well. Recognizing the existence of limits is one thing, identifying them is quite another. The important thing is that we should not be quick to conflate those limits with our comfort level. I will give the final word to Professor Bejan:[13]

> *Recognizing the partiality of our judgments, as Williams well knew,*
> *does not free us from the responsibility or necessity of making them.*
> *Nevertheless, it does teach us that whatever we do, we must not make*
> *the mistake of imposing and enforcing our partial judgments of civility*
> *as impartial standards on others. … Williams knew from experience*
> *that one always runs up against the limits of what one finds acceptable*
> *or offensive long before one exhausts the diversity of peoples, practices*
> *and views. … A tolerant society cannot pick and choose its materials*
> *and remain tolerant for long.*

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[13] *Ibid*., p. 153.