

Religion in the Open Society

Tim Crane, CEU

Introduction

My aim in this essay is to make some remarks about a tradition which lies at the heart of the idea of an open society: the tradition of religious tolerance. The idea of religious tolerance that open or liberal societies have endorsed is a massively important part of the history of liberalism, and it was arguably one of the things which gave rise to the modern liberal state. But the question of religious tolerance is also very important for us today. To what extent should secular, liberal societies tolerate those who do not share all of their secular liberal assumptions? To answer this question requires us to say something about what tolerance is, what it means to be tolerant, and about what we should tolerate and why.

In the first part of this essay I look at religious tolerance, and how tolerance in general should be understood. In the second part I look at the object of tolerance: in other words, what is it that should or should not be tolerated (in this context religious belief and believers). Then I will widen the angle of the lens, so to speak, and say something more general and speculative about the nature of religious belief. Many of the things I argue here are summaries of arguments from my book, *The Meaning of Belief*.¹

Religious tolerance

There is a widely agreed narrative about the emergence in the West of religious tolerance as an ideal, and the correlative idea of religious freedom as a human right. This story has it

¹ Tim Crane, *The Meaning of Belief: Religion from an Atheist's Point of View* (Harvard University Press, 2017).

that these things emerged in Europe (and later in America) as a result of the failure to impose religious conformity after the “wars of religion” of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. That failure evolved into a success: the development of the liberal doctrines of religious tolerance as a positive value, and of religious freedom as a human right.

In the first edition of the dictionary of the Académie française, tolerance is defined as “sufferance, forbearance that one has for what one cannot prevent”. Tolerance in this sense is a way to come to terms with the admission of defeat. Why is such a defeat inevitable in the case of religious belief? Part of the answer was given by John Locke in his *Letter Concerning Toleration*, published in 1689.² Locke argued that the state must tolerate different religious faiths because the state is unable itself to constrain or compel belief. The state can constrain your action, it can control your behavior, but the state cannot control what you believe. This is taken to be a psychological or social fact about human beings and their societies — but it is not difficult to see how this fact fits into a conception of individual freedom and its value, something which came to lie at the heart of the liberal political tradition, of which Locke of course is one of the founding fathers.

So it was that a hundred years after Locke’s letter, Article 10 of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* of the French Revolution read: “No one shall be disturbed on account of his opinions, including his religious views, provided their manifestation does not disturb the public order established by law”. So what had originally been an admission of defeat — the acknowledgement that you could not get everyone to believe the same thing — is now elevated into one of the rights of man. In the very same year the Bill of Rights of the United States contains the claim that Congress “shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof”. This

² John Locke, “Letter Concerning Toleration” in *Locke on Toleration*, edited by Richard Vernon (Cambridge University Press 2010).

became incorporated into the First Amendment of the US Constitution. The historical situation is summed up nicely by Lynn Hunt when she says that the Enlightenment of the XVIII century played a major role in “turning religious toleration, a grudging government policy, into freedom of religion, a human right”.³

The question for liberal societies today is this: given that religious freedom is perceived to be a value of open or liberal societies, to what extent should religions be tolerated? It is one thing to say that freedom of religion is a value; but in saying that, you do not impose exact limits on what behavior and what practices should be tolerated. (There is also a question for religious societies, which I cannot address here, about the extent to which these societies themselves can tolerate secular views and other religions.)

We need to start thinking about this question with the right conception of tolerance in mind. Tolerance is something which is frequently misunderstood in some public debates — in particular, in those debates about whether to allow a variety of different kinds of speech in public. I think this misunderstanding of tolerance is very easy to correct, but nonetheless very important. The misunderstanding is that tolerance has something to do with respect for all opinions: tolerating an opinion is *ipso facto* respecting it, or giving it some credibility. So, on this understanding, to defend a doctrine of religious tolerance is to regard all religious views as worthy of respect or invulnerable to a certain kind of criticism. This view is related to clichés like “everyone is entitled to their opinion”, and to a crude form of moral relativism which holds that you are not entitled to criticize someone else because their values come from one (psychological, cultural, historical) source and your values come from another source; no-one can occupy a neutral standpoint without any particular source, but this would be needed for criticism. Another part of this collection of

³ Lynn Hunt, *The Enlightenment and the Origins of Religious Toleration* (Felix Meritis, 2011) p.10.

ideas is that it is in some way arrogant or conceited (or perhaps even “imperialist”) to criticize other views and other cultures, and that therefore a true doctrine of tolerance ought to be opposed to the critique of religion. This comes out most strongly in contemporary discussions of the phenomenon of Islamophobia and the place of Islam in predominantly non-Islamic societies. Often these discussions include the view that a truly tolerant society would welcome all views and should not judge among views. That is what tolerance is sometimes said to be.

I think this involves a mistake about the very idea of tolerance. Tolerance does not imply respect for all views. Consider a view that you hold and think is very important: for example, you are in favor of gay marriage or you support the abolition of torture. These are not views that you tolerate: if you are in favor of gay marriage you do not tolerate gay marriage. On the contrary, toleration of something presupposes that you disapprove of it. The very act of tolerating something, as the definition from the Académie française implies, presupposes that you object to it in some way. I might tolerate my neighbors’ loud music on New Year's Eve because I like my neighbors, I want to get on with them, even though I really object to this music, and maybe I think this music should never have been created. But I tolerate it until 5 o’clock in the morning because I want to live in peace with my neighbors. I might tolerate the smelly food that they cook, because they are my neighbors, they tolerate me, and maybe they tolerate my music and my smelly food too.

The point that toleration implies disapproval was made many years ago by Bernard Williams.⁴ Though simple and obvious once recognised, it is an important point, and a profound one in its application to religious tolerance. One reason for its importance is because it implies that a sensible doctrine of religious tolerance does not exclude critique.

⁴ Bernard Williams, “Toleration: an Impossible Virtue?” in David Heyd (ed.), *Toleration: An Elusive Virtue* (Princeton University Press 1998) pp. 18-27.

It does not exclude disapproval, objection or some other kind of negative attitude to aspects of the religions that you are tolerating. Another reason for the importance of this idea is that it shows explicitly why the attitude of toleration is not based on any kind of relativism about values; it is consistent with a wide variety of views about the nature of value. It does not imply relativism; it implies only that some views or practices are objectionable.

At a deeper level, tolerance is less an attitude towards the truth of opinions, but an attitude towards the people who hold those opinions. In other words, it is a *practical* rather than a *theoretical* attitude. Tolerance is not aiming to arrive at a true overall conception of all the things that you tolerate, as if you could incorporate all views in one happy synthesis. Rather, the aim of tolerance is to live in peace with the people whom you tolerate. There is a connection here with the concept of respect. It is not true that toleration implies respect for all other views, or even that you must respect any other views. Some views are not worthy of respect. There are some opinions people are not entitled to. The idea that you must respect all opinions is not something that follows from any sensible principle of tolerance.

But again, what we should respect are not views, but the people who hold them. I mean this, though, in a rather abstract sense. Why should you respect someone who holds a view which is objectionable, a view which no-one should hold? If you are not obliged to take their view seriously, why are you obliged to take them seriously? The answer — the sense in which you must respect those who have such views — is that you acknowledge their autonomy as a human being, you treat them as a person like yourself, someone to whom a certain kind of attention is due. If you respect them in this sense, you

do not have to like them, or acknowledge that their views have any merit. But you must acknowledge that they are human beings with the capacity for freedom of thought.

So, in so far as tolerance involves respect, it is only respect for people and not respect for opinions, and it is respect for people in this very abstract sense. It is the same idea, I believe, that underlies the conviction that everyone, even those who have committed the most vile crimes, are entitled to a fair trial, or that everyone is equal before the law. It is that kind of abstract sense of “respect” for someone.

These claims about toleration raise the question of what exactly we should tolerate. If tolerating something implies that we object to it, then it does not follow that we should tolerate everything we object to. All I am saying here is that the things that we should tolerate are, as a matter of fact, things that we object to. I am not saying that everything that is objectionable should be tolerated. Obviously not. In this essay I will avoid the substantive and difficult question of what should be tolerated and why, by appealing first to the rule of law. If a state has a rule of law which has its own integrity, then all toleration must be constrained by that. So we do not have to tolerate people who break the law, who do things that are against a proper legal code or system.

When I say toleration is constrained by the rule of law, this is not meant to be a surprising fact, or something that somehow deflates the idea of toleration. The subjection of tolerance to the rule of law is no more a deflation than is the idea that free speech should be subject to the rule of law. A sensible doctrine of freedom of speech should not allow people to broadcast obscenities in public, or — extending the meaning of “speech” a little — to put up obscene pictures in public. These things should not necessarily be permitted by a belief in freedom of speech. If somebody thinks that freedom of speech should ideally imply the right to say anything, anywhere at any time, then this would not a

workable, or plausible, or even a desirable doctrine of freedom of speech. Whether free speech should extend as far as these things is not a real, practical question. Of course it should not. Actually, the same is true of democracy in a broad sense: we should not think that a sensible doctrine of democracy entails that every decision of a democratically elected government should be validated by a vote of its citizens.

Tolerance implies objecting to something. But it does not imply that everything that you object to is something you should tolerate. What and which things you should tolerate, how toleration should be constrained, are matters for serious philosophical, political and legal debate. But future debate must begin with the correct understanding of the concept of toleration and its purpose.

Religious Tolerance and the New-Atheists

What is the role of the intellectual in discussing these matters, in an open society? Just because toleration should allow critique of religion, and because it should be possible within a liberal, tolerant open society to criticise religion without this being in some way inappropriate or offensive, that does not mean that any critique of religion is acceptable within an open society. From the point of view of an open society there can be no objection to an atheist critique of religion — that is a fairly obvious point. And critique as such is not incompatible with tolerance — this may be slightly less obvious. In the rest of this essay I would like to make some remarks about some recent critiques of religion by intellectuals in public life in Britain and the United States (and I know that these views have spread elsewhere, too).

I said above that what we really tolerate are people, but we can generalise from that to saying that we are tolerating religion. So what is it that we tolerating when we tolerate

religion? One popular image of religion has been offered by the so-called New Atheists; those like the biologist Richard Dawkins, the philosophers Daniel Dennett and AC Grayling, and the journalists Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris, who have written a number of polemical works attacking religion from a moral and intellectual point of view.

Their general outlook can be summed up in terms of two ideas. The first is about the content of religion: a religion is a combination of cosmology and morality. By cosmology, I mean a theory of the universe, and by morality I mean a code of how to behave towards others. The second idea is about the value of religion: religion is in general a bad thing that should be eliminated by rational argument and scientific evidence.

It is not difficult to find examples of the first idea — about the content of religion — among New Atheist writers. In his book *Breaking the Spell* Daniel Dennett writes that “religions are social systems whose participants avow belief in a supernatural agent or agents whose approval is to be sought”.⁵ Seeking of approval is the role of morality in this picture: participants seek approval from the supernatural agent by how they behave towards others (amongst other things). But we also find this view expressed by some who do not belong to the New Atheist grouping. The late Ronald Dworkin, for example, was a philosopher quite sympathetic to religious belief. In his book *Religion Without God* he describes the essence of religious belief as follows: “the conventional theistic religions with which most of us are most familiar, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, have two parts: a science part and a value part. The science part is a theory of the explanation of the world, the value part is the theory of how to live”.⁶

The second main component of the New Atheist view is that religion is a bad thing. Here is the characteristically splenetic Christopher Hitchens: "Religion poisons everything.

⁵ Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell* (Allen Lane 2006) p.9.

⁶ Ronald Dworkin, *Religion Without God* (Harvard University Press 2013) p.23.

As well as being a menace to civilization, it has become a threat to human survival. It is violent, irrational, intolerant, allied to racism, tribalism and bigotry, invested in ignorance and hostile to free inquiry, contemptuous of women and coercive towards children. It ought to have a great deal on its conscience”.⁷ And you can find similar tirades in the writings of Dawkins, Grayling and Harris.

One very striking fact about this recent public discussion is that neither side recognizes itself in the other's description of them. The New Atheists accuse believers of mindless irrationality and their religious critics say that the New Atheists just miss the point. Why is this?

While many religious participants in these debates are perfectly capable of missing the point, here I want to concentrate on what seems to be lacking from the New Atheist picture of religious belief. The first thing that is so obviously inadequate is what Dworkin calls the “science plus value” picture. The picture does not give a satisfactory answer to the question of why people go church, mosque, temple or synagogue. What is this all about? The short answer to this question was nicely expressed by Durkheim over a hundred years ago in his *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* when he pointed out that a religion is not something you believe, it is also something you belong to. That is what is left out of the cosmology plus morality (or “science plus value”) picture. Cosmology is a theoretical explanation of how the world came into existence, and morality tells you how to behave towards others. But religion also involves belonging to a group, going to church, going to the synagogue, going to the mosque. That these things are at the heart of religion is revealed in typical capsule summaries of religion — for example, the five pillars of Islam. Of the five pillars — the declaration that there is no god but Allah and Mohammed is his

⁷ Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (Twelve, 2007) p.25.

prophet, the injunctions to fast, to make the pilgrimage, to pray and to give alms — only one of them is a cosmological claim. The others are claims about what you should do. And although giving alms is moral matter, as usually understood, prayer, fasting, pilgrimage are neither morality nor cosmology.

In *The Meaning of Belief*, I draw a different, rather abstract picture of the essence of religion. My claim is that religion involves two elements: what I call the religious impulse and identification. What I call the religious impulse is captured in William James's remark (in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*) that the heart of religion is the belief that "there is an unseen order and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto".⁸ The unseen order he speaks of is not the invisible order or structure discovered by science. It is rather the supposed reality that transcends the world of experience. This commitment to the transcendent — to something that transcends everything we see around us and everything science finds out — is what is expressed in the very familiar assertions that there "must be more to it than all this" or "surely, this cannot be all there is!". This is what people attempt to articulate in great detail and sophistication in the doctrines of religious belief. It is a good question, which has no single general answer, how these more sophisticated doctrines relate to the convictions of ordinary believers. But the belief in the transcendent — no matter how precisely or imprecisely you think of it, or how metaphorically you think of it or how literally you think of it — is an essential component to the vast majority of the things that have deserved the name of religion.

I am not attempting to define religion, in any strict sense of the word definition. I agree with Nietzsche when he said that nothing that has a history can ever be defined.⁹

⁸ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Longmans, Green 1902) p.53.

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, (1887; edited by Keith Ansell-Pearson, translated by Carol Diethe, Cambridge University Press, 2007) p. 53.

Sometimes philosophers who spend their time thinking about the subject-matter of logic and mathematics — subject matters which themselves have no history — have that paradigm of definition in mind. But that paradigm is very hard to apply to reality. What I am trying to characterise are general features of most of those things that have counted as religion in human society, even if there are also things that people call religion which do not have those features.

The religious impulse is not anything like a scientific hypothesis. It is a claim about the world; but it is not a scientific theory. Not all claims about the world, about reality, are scientific hypotheses. Recognising that this is not a scientific hypothesis and it is not strictly speaking incompatible with any scientific theory — no scientific theory says that what it describes is all that there is to reality — then we can begin to see how there ought to be potential for much apparent conflict to disappear from the debate. Whether this potential can be realised depends on all sorts of contingent conditions, including the psychological traits of the influential personalities involved, and on all participants' interest in genuinely trying to understand one another rather than in winning the argument or showing how clever they are. I am not saying that it will be easy to create such conditions.

Identification is the second element of my characterisation of religion; it is what is captured by the slogan that religion is not just something that you believe but also something you belong to. Durkheim writes that “religious beliefs proper are always held by a defined collectivity that professes them and practices the rites that go with them”.¹⁰ Identification necessarily involves rites and rituals. To identify with others in a religious group makes you part of a tradition that in many cases goes back hundreds or even thousands of years. Being a member of that tradition can involve saying words that people

¹⁰ Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912; edited by Mark S. Cladis, translated by Carol Cosman, Oxford University Press, 2001), p.42.

have uttered for centuries — words that perhaps they do not fully understand or that they do not conceive of as making “literal” claims about reality. But this lack of understanding — and this figurative component in religious language — are not supposed to be shortcomings of religious practice, but are rather a part its essence. This is because at the heart of religion is the commitment to the mystery of the world.

Identification also means that for most religious believers, the world divides into two: there are people of your kind, and there are people who are not of your kind. This can be one of the most difficult aspects of religion to incorporate within an open society. The division can give rise to hostility, intolerance, discrimination and violence. How then can an open society — which in its very nature aims to eliminate such things — allow religious divisions to flourish? I will not say anything further about this difficult question here. At the moment, I am simply claiming identification to be a part of the essence of religion.

I am saying all this as an atheist. I was brought up a Catholic, but now retain nothing of my youthful belief. I myself do not have a religious impulse, but what I am trying to describe — from the outside, as it were — is something that is, in one way or another, the commitment of about 80% of the human race. You might say, “How can you generalize about 80% of the human race, about six billion people?”. I agree — it can seem like an absurd thing to attempt. But what I say in my defence is that when anyone starts talking about “religion” in these general terms, then they cannot escape doing just this. The only way to escape it is to not talk about religion *as such* at all and just say something much more specific and much more detailed. But then it will not be possible to engage effectively with others who talk about religion as such. That is my excuse for operating at this stratospheric level of generality.

So this is my claim: religion involves two elements. One is the religious impulse, the other is identification. Of course, it is possible that these can come apart, and they do actually come apart in some things that are called religions. Maybe there are religions that are not committed (or are less committed) to the transcendent, and it is entirely conceivable, I think, that you could have someone who is some kind of a solitary mystic who had a religious impulse but participated in no identification with others whatsoever. So, of course these things can come apart both factually, empirically and conceptually. But the question I want to ask is: when there are these two things, is the connection between them purely accidental or contingent? Or, is there any explanation that we can give of the connection between these things, at this level of abstraction? I think there is, and this will be my final point.

The religious impulse and identification

The explanation of how the religious impulse is connected with identification is based around the idea of the sacred. Here again I appeal to Durkheim, who defined religion as a “unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things”.¹¹ The idea of the sacred was central to Durkheim’s conception of religion. The sacred is not the magical: although some religious traditions hold that miracles — supernatural interventions in the course of nature — can be performed with the help of sacred things, it is not essential to sacred things in general that they have such supernatural or magical powers. Believers who think that the Bible is a sacred text do not normally think that the Bible has to the power to (for example) turn lead into gold or water into wine. It is in terms of the idea of the sacred that

¹¹ Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, p.46.

we should understand religion, and not the idea of the supernatural — that idea which features prominently in the writings of Dawkins and Dennett and others.

The division of the world into sacred things and profane things marks a distinction in what sorts of things can be done to these objects. An object of any sort can be a sacred thing: a text, a book, words, the actual words spoken which can be repeated again and again; an animal can be a sacred being, a place can be a sacred place. What is important is that when something is sacred, then it is not profane, and something profane is not sacred. The distinction is exclusive and exhaustive. Sacred things carry with them prohibitions about how they can be treated and respected. When a sacred thing is treated without the required respect or reverence, this is what is known as profanation or desecration. Certain objects have to be treated with this kind of reverence by believers because of what they mean to them. This is not a difficult idea to understand in general — even an atheist can appreciate the meaning of a grave or burial place, and the significance of violating it or defiling it.

Now I want to link the element of identification with the religious impulse through the idea of the sacred. (This is the central claim of my book, *The Meaning of Belief*.) These two things are linked because sacred things — the objects and the books and the texts — the buildings, the places, have two important features for believers. One is that they point outwards towards the transcendent: they indicate something other than this world, that they are a sign or a symbol of something beyond. The second is that these sacred objects bind people together at a time, and across time with others who have shared their history. For example, it is because a group of people has been saying the same words together in church, synagogue, mosque or temple — the same words that people have been saying together for hundreds or thousands of years in one form or another — that they belong to

that group rather than another group. Groups are bound together by the things that they regard as sacred. This unites the two elements of anything that counts as religious belief. The sacred is both a manifestation of the transcendent in our world and the unifying factor in religious identification. In that sense, Durkheim was right.

It is not that Dennett and others are completely wrong in what they say about the content of religious belief. It is rather that to understand a worldview, a vision of the world or a philosophy, it is not enough just to list some of the propositions that the worldview contains. You also have to understand what is central and what is peripheral to it, what is at the core of the worldview — what are its moving parts, so to speak — and what is just extra material around the periphery. What I tried to do in my book is to describe what I think of as the core of religious belief. I appeal to the idea of the sacred to show how believers are unified around the same objects which are involved in their rituals and their practices, and how objects themselves “point” beyond the empirical world towards a transcendent reality. That is a very different picture from the one you get in Dawkins and Dennett, and I hope that it is a picture that might be recognizable to religious believers.

Conclusion

A secular, liberal, open society should tolerate religion; but this is not because all views have equal value. On the contrary, toleration itself presupposes that some views are objectionable. It follows that, as a corollary of tolerance, an open society should also permit the critique of religion — religion in all its forms. Such a critique is consistent with the doctrine of respect for those people with whom you disagree, respect in the abstract sense I described above.

These rather theoretical points are compatible with a wide range of practical proposals about which practices should be tolerated, and to what extent. And these practical — mostly legal and political — questions are where things become very difficult. I have offered no suggestions here about how to go about answering these questions. Rather, I have described some elements of a big picture of the phenomenon of religion. The next stage would be to enter the practical, political and legal debates. But it is crucial, when we begin to address properly these questions, to start in the right place. Any critique of religion should be based on an adequate conception of it, and this is one reason why the critique contained in some recent New Atheist writings are so inadequate. By failing to make sense of religious belief itself, they also fail to make sense of the failure of their own debate with the religious.