CHAPTER 1

Religious Toleration: The Historical Problem

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Of all the great world religions past and present, Christianity has been by far the most intolerant. This statement may come as a shock, but it is nevertheless true. In spite of the fact that Jesus Christ, the Jewish founder of the Christian religion, is shown in the New Testament as a prophet and savior who preached mutual love and nonviolence to his followers, the Christian church was for a great part of its history an extremely intolerant institution. From its inception it was intolerant of other, non-Christian religions, first Greco-Roman polytheism, then Judaism, from which it had to separate itself, and later on Islam. Early in its history, from the time of the apostles, it also became increasingly intolerant of heresy and heretics, those persons who, although worshipers of Christ, dissented from orthodox doctrine by maintaining and disseminating beliefs—about the nature of Christ, the Trinity, the priesthood, the church, and other matters—that ecclesiastical authority condemned as false, and incurring the penalty of damnation. During the fourth century C.E., following the grant by the first Christian emperor Constantine and his colleague Licinius of legal toleration to Christianity, and their imperial successors' decision to make it the sole legal religion of the Roman Empire, the Christian

or Catholic Church, as we may now call it, approved both the
Roman government's suppression of paganism as idolatry and its
use of punitive laws and coercion against Christian heretics who
denied Catholic teaching and formed schismatic churches. This
initiated a development that led during the Middle Ages to the
forcible conversion of pagan Germans and Slavs, Jews, and Muslims
at the hands of Christian rulers, and to the long Christian enmity
toward the religion of Islam, which gave rise to the crusading move-
ment of holy war in medieval Europe. It likewise led, because of
the prevailing hatred of Jews as enemies of Christ, to frequent
charges of ritual murder against Jews and to the instigation by Cath-
olic religious preachers of repeated massacres of Jews in Europe.
And it led also to the medieval church's legitimation of religious
persecution, the creation of the papal Inquisition and its machin-
ery of heresy hunting and prosecution, the Albigensian Crusade
in the thirteenth century against the Catharist heresy in southern
France, and the killing of innumerable fellow Christians whom the
church denounced as heretics.[1]

The sixteenth century, which witnessed the Reformation and
the beginning and spread of Protestantism, was probably the most
intolerant period in Christian history, marked not only by violent
conflict between contending Christian denominations but by an
upsurge of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism in western Europe.
When Martin Luther, John Calvin, and other outstanding reli-
gious reformers undertook their successful revolt against the Cath-
olic Church and established their own Protestant churches, the
latter showed themselves to be no less intolerant of heretics and
dissenting Christians than was the Catholic Church. In the at-
tempt by Catholic and Protestant governments in Europe to stop
the spread of heresy, and in the civil and external wars of religion
waged between Catholicism and Protestantism in the sixteenth
and seventeenth centuries, countless thousands of people on both
sides perished or were forced to go into exile as the victims of
religious persecution. It was the long and terrible history of the
inhumanity of Christianity in its dealing with differences of reli-
gious belief, a history not yet ended even in his own time, that

caused the famous eighteenth-century French thinker Voltaire to declare that "of all religions the Christian is undoubtedly that which should instill the greatest toleration, although so far Christians have been the most intolerant of men."[2]

It is at this point that we confront the problem mentioned in this chapter's title. If Christian Europe and the Western world were so intolerant in religion for so many hundreds of years, and indeed in some places down to the later nineteenth century and even beyond,[3] how did it happen that their leaders and members came eventually to change their opinion and to endorse the principle of religious toleration? Anyone today who looks at the values and practices associated with Western liberal democracies in Europe and America can hardly fail to observe that most of their citizens prize none of them more highly than they do religious toleration and freedom of religion. To be sure, they regard political freedom as equally precious and indispensable; but they also commonly recognize that in our own time this freedom with its related political rights is so closely tied to the existence of religious toleration and liberty that the two have become essentially inseparable.[4]

Between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries, therefore, a huge and enormously significant shift of attitudes and values regarding differences in religion gradually occurred in Western societies. Instead of the age-old assumption that it is right and justifiable to maintain religious unity by force and to kill heretics and dissenters if necessary, the opposite assumption came to prevail that it is wrong and unjustifiable to use force and to kill in the cause of religion, and, moreover, that religious toleration and freedom are morally and politically desirable and should be given effect in laws and institutions. This is the very momentous, far-reaching change in Western civilization that needs to be explained, and with whose origins and earlier development this book is concerned.

It will help us grasp the magnitude of this change if we keep in mind that it is in some ways even more novel than the emergence in the West of liberal and democratic societies during the past several hundred years in the aftermath and principally as the result of the English, American, and French revolutions of the seven-

teenth and eighteenth centuries. I stress this point because some of the conceptions and practices underlying liberal and democratic polities were of very old origin, having been a part of the Western tradition since classical antiquity and familiar in both Greek and Roman political thought and experience. Ancient Athens in one of the greatest periods of its history was, despite the existence of slavery, a democracy of free (male) citizens, and there were other Greek city-states, although we know much less about them, that were also democracies. Similarly, republican Rome, the feudal regime in medieval Europe, and numerous cities of medieval and Renaissance Italy, the Netherlands, and Germany, were all well acquainted with certain ideas, institutions, and principles of civic and political liberty, ruler limitation, and self-government. In comparison with these, the fundamental principles and values that sustain religious toleration and freedom of religion are innovations and late arrivals in world history and did not become a part of the Western tradition until recent times. Imperial Rome, it is true, was tolerant in practice in permitting the existence of many diverse religious cults, provided their votaries also complied with the worship of the divine emperor as part of the state religion. Unlike Christianity and Judaism, Roman religion had no sacred scriptures and did not depend on any creed, dogmas, or ethical principles. It consisted very largely of participation in cult acts connected with the worship of various deities and spirits that protected the Roman state and were associated with public, family, and domestic life. At nearly all stages of their history the Romans were willing to accept foreign cults and practices; this de facto religious pluralism is entirely attributable to the polytheistic character of Roman religion and had nothing to do with principles or values sanctioning religious toleration, a concept unknown to Roman society or law and never debated by Roman philosophers or political writers.[5]

Rome's religious pluralism, however, although officially tolerant of Judaism, did not extend to Christianity. Christians were intermittently persecuted and put to death by the Roman government from the first century C.E. to the beginning of the fourth

century, a history culminating in the great persecution under Emperor Diocletian between 303 and 305. The main reason for this treatment was the refusal of Christians to worship any god but their own or take part in the imperial cult by offering sacrifices to the gods on the emperor's behalf. Christians proclaimed that the pagan gods did not exist or were malevolent demons, an attitude deeply offensive to Romans, who believed that it endangered the relationship between gods and men and alienated the goodwill of the gods. On the other hand, the Roman regime tolerated Judaism despite its exclusive monotheism. The Jews were widely regarded as devotees of an ancient and venerable faith; unlike Christians, they did not attack Roman paganism as a religion of demons, and while they would not participate in the imperial cult, their priests could offer prayers for the emperor in the Temple at Jerusalem.[6]

Thus far in my discussion, I have been speaking of religious toleration and religious freedom as though they are closely related or synonymous. Before going further, however, I feel it essential to offer a few clarifications concerning the use of these two concepts.

The English word "tolerance," which is virtually identical in other Western languages (French *tolérance*, German *Toleranz*, Italian *tolleranza*, etc.), stems from the Latin verb *tolerare*, which is defined as "to bear or endure" and carries the further meaning "to nourish, sustain, or preserve." Some philosophers and historians, taking the first of these meanings as their point of departure, regard toleration and religious freedom as quite distinct things and emphasize the differences between the two. They understand toleration to signify no more than forbearance and the permission given by the adherents of a dominant religion for other religions to exist, even though the latter are looked upon with disapproval as inferior, mistaken, or harmful. In contrast, these thinkers see religious liberty as the recognition of equal freedom for all religions and denominations without any kind of discrimination

among them. In the case of toleration, it is also pointed out that those in authority who have the power to tolerate a religion have likewise the power to refuse or withdraw toleration, whereas in the case of religious liberty, no one is rightfully possessed of the power not to tolerate or to cancel this liberty. A typical formulation of this view of the subject is the statement by D. D. Raphael that "toleration is the practice of deliberately allowing or permitting a thing of which one disapproves. One can meaningfully speak of tolerating, i.e. of allowing or permitting, only if one is in a position to disallow."[7]

I do not deny that this distinction is a valid one, or that it can be very useful at times in its application to certain historical circumstances. It is also feasible, nevertheless, to think of religious toleration in its broadest terms as equivalent to the condition of religious freedom, and this, I believe, is not only how it is widely understood today, but also how some of the best-known historians of toleration, such as W. K. Jordan and Joseph Lecler, have often regarded it in tracing its evolution.[8] The British historian Henry Kamen states in his *Rise of Toleration* that in its widest sense toleration means "the concession of liberty to those who dissent in religion" and "can be seen as part of the process in history which has led to a gradual development of the principle of human freedom."[9] Johannes Kuhn, a German scholar of the subject, speaks of the historical sense of toleration as encompassing both forbearance toward another and treating another with respect.[10] In the latter formulation, we can perceive the germ of an approximation to the condition of religious freedom. The Swiss historian Hans R. Guggisberg, one of the foremost recent students of the history of toleration, noted that among the latter's synonyms in European tongues were such terms as *souffrance*, "indulgence," *caritas* (love or charity), and *mansuetudo* (gentleness or mildness), and also pointed out its close relationship to phrases like "religious freedom," "liberty of conscience and belief," and "freedom of worship."[11] In the 1560s in France, we find the words *liberté de conscience* beginning to be used to oppose the forcing of consciences as a form of oppression.[12] As we shall see later, moreover, the most

noted early fighters for toleration, such as Sebastian Castellio, Roger Williams, and John Locke, also tended to conceive of religious toleration as related to religious freedom. Unless I indicate otherwise, therefore, I shall treat the concept of religious toleration as also implying religious freedom in some measure. In this sense, the belief in and the practice of toleration, as they have evolved and become established in the United States and other countries of the Western world, depend on a very simple and basic principle. This principle is that society and the state should, as a matter of right, extend complete freedom of religious belief and expression to all their members and citizens and should refrain from imposing any religious tests, doctrines, or form of worship or religious association upon them. I take this to be the proper understanding of religious toleration, in its fullest meaning, as it would be conceived today. The struggle to achieve such toleration has the further significance, moreover, that its effects extend beyond the domain of religion and are closely connected with the broader goals of freedom from censorship and intellectual freedom. For the centuries in which intolerance reigned also witnessed the attempt by religious authorities and governments to censor and control the expression of philosophical, political, and other ideas in speech and writing in the interests of a dominant religious orthodoxy. Hence the advance of toleration, by helping to weaken such efforts, played a major role over time in widening the scope of freedom of thought and expression in areas other than religion.

Toleration entails at a minimum the willingness to recognize and accept a degree of religious coexistence and pluralism. In Europe it has pertained historically to the acceptance of coexistence both with members of non-Christian minorities, like Jews and Muslims, and with people who were defined as heretics or belonged to other Christian churches. Those in the former category, not having been baptized into the Christian faith, were regarded by the Catholic Church or Christian governments not as religious traitors or schismatics, but as infidels and external religious enemies, and were therefore often officially tolerated under

various disabilities and despite intermittent outbursts of persecution. Such was the case, for example, of the Muslim and Jewish communities that lived in Spain amid Christian populations and under Christian rulers in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and also of the Jewish communities that could be found in various parts of Europe since Roman times. As regards the Hispanic Jews, their relatively peaceful *convivencia* with Spanish Christians until the late fourteenth century is well known. Thereafter, however, the intensification of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism fueled by a variety of motives led to increasing persecution, massacres and forced conversions, and finally to the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492.[13] In the course of the sixteenth century the Muslim Moriscos in Spain were subjected to growing persecution and forced conversion, which drove them to revolt, and in 1609 were also expelled from Spain.[14]

Beyond non-Christians the problem of coexistence and pluralism was one that concerned the relationship of the Catholic Church to Christian heretics during the Middle Ages and, after the coming of the Reformation, the relationships among Catholics, the new Protestant churches—chiefly Lutheran, Calvinist, and Anglican—and the new religious communities and sects, such as Anabaptists, Spiritualists, and Antitrinitarians, who dissented from both Catholicism and the major Protestant denominations. To the medieval church and papacy, coexistence with heretics was unthinkable, and its possibility was never considered. Thus it was only with the appearance and steady expansion of Protestantism in the sixteenth century that ecclesiastical authorities, secular rulers, and European intellectuals were forced for the first time to confront the issue of reconciling themselves to some degree of toleration and coexistence.

To the question of why the willingness to tolerate and accept coexistence between rival religious confessions emerged in Christian Europe, several answers have been given. Perhaps the two most common reasons cited for this development are the growth of religious indifference and unbelief, and political expediency.[15] With regard to the first, it is impossible to deny that these two

factors, indifference and unbelief, made an important contribution over the long run to the creation of a climate of opinion averse to religious fanaticism and zealotry and therefore conducive to a willingness to tolerate. This is obvious when we consider the widening presence between the years 1600 and 1700 of a number of interrelated trends, such as skepticism, libertinism, latitudinarianism, rationalism, the movement of scientific ideas, biblical criticism, deism, and natural religion, all precursors of the Enlightenment in Europe, which had the effect of modifying and liberalizing religious beliefs, weakening clerical authority, and undermining theological orthodoxy.[16]

It should be borne in mind, however, that the impact of these various trends was largely limited to intellectual elites and the educated. Moreover, indifference, incredulity, and the dominance of a secular mentality do not necessarily make for toleration; in some people, on the contrary, they may give rise to a lack of concern about toleration and whether it exists or not. There were quite a few skeptical thinkers in early modern Europe who supported persecution in the interests of political stability and were convinced that maintaining religious faith and conformity among the masses of common people was an essential safeguard of social and political order and subordination.[17] In any case, though, the intellectual changes mentioned above, since they occurred only gradually, cannot possibly account for the theories and defenses of toleration that appeared in the second half of the sixteenth century. The latter were the work of profoundly Christian if also unorthodox thinkers, not of minds inclined to religious indifference or unbelief; and the same is also true of nearly all the major theorists of toleration in the seventeenth century. We must therefore dismiss these factors as an explanation of the emergence of a willingness to accept religious coexistence.

The second reason cited for the appearance of the latter is political expediency, of which a good account has been given by Herbert Butterfield, an eminent English historian of early modern Europe, who emphasized the overwhelming importance of the political factor. Butterfield maintained that the emergence of tolera-

tion was entirely due to the mutual exhaustion resulting from the religious conflicts of the Reformation era. As then understood, he argued, toleration was not an ideal or positive end but simply the lesser evil and last resort "for those who often still hated one another but found it impossible to go on fighting any more." Moreover, it was hardly even an idea but something that appeared when no other choice or hope of further struggle remained. It did not stem from any belief in freedom of religion and assuredly not from the belief that religion doesn't matter. Rather, he considered, it "came in the end through *exhaustion*, spiritual as well as material," which made room for reason-of-state and hence the possibility of political solutions and compromises. He also noted that wherever religious toleration was established in the sixteenth century, it was always subject to serious limitations and regarded as no more than a temporary measure.[18]

There is undoubtedly a fair amount of truth in Butterfield's explanation. Although he doesn't expressly say so, he seems to have had in mind chiefly the effects of the religious divisions of the sixteenth century in the Holy Roman Empire, which included all of the German principalities, and in France. In the former, years of conflict and religious war between Catholic and Lutheran princes brought about their agreement in 1555 to the Peace of Augsburg, which provided for the coexistence in the empire of both Catholic and Lutheran states and princes, together with the right of each territorial ruler to determine the religion of his subjects. It also envisaged the parity of Catholics and Protestants in the imperial cities. Calvinists were excluded from this compromise, and the alternative of emigration to another territory was accorded to persons unwilling to conform to the religion of the ruler and state under which they lived.[19]

In France, the religious settlement known as the Edict of Nantes was promulgated in 1598 by the Catholic monarch Henry IV in order to put an end to the bloody and anarchic civil war between French Catholics and Calvinist Protestants, or Huguenots, of the Reformed Church, which had continued for more than thirty years.[20] A religious compromise that sprang from the urgent need

to restore peace, order, and the political authority of the French monarchy, the edict reflected the realization by the Catholics that they could not extirpate Protestantism in France, and by the Protestants that they had no hope of making France into a Protestant country. It granted legal toleration to the Protestant minority, who were allowed to have their own churches and freedom of worship in a number of designated places, and were also given certain political and military privileges as securities for their religious liberties.[21]

These two attempts at religious coexistence between antagonistic Christian denominations, though quite limited, are certainly landmarks in the early history of toleration, and they fit Butterfield's argument, since they were very largely due to political expediency, which accepted them as lesser evils in preference to unending religious war. But what we cannot overlook is that both of these settlements were unstable, and neither lasted for very long. To recall some well-known facts, during the later sixteenth century and the first years of the seventeenth, frequent violations and local conflicts, as well as the exclusion in its provisions of toleration for Calvinism, undermined the Peace of Augsburg. Confessional enmity in Germany increased and was aggravated by the growing successes of the Catholic Counter Reformation in its battle to reverse the spread of Protestantism. In 1618, as the result of a Protestant rebellion in Bohemia, one of the states of the Holy Roman Empire, a new religious struggle began, the Thirty Years War, which by stages engulfed most of Germany and also drew in other powers to become a major European war.[22] As several recent historians of toleration in early modern Germany have pointed out, pragmatism was a fragile support for the meager degree of religious pluralism among the German states and cities, and sixteenth-century Germans lacked the intellectual means to conceptualize the amicable coexistence of religious communities divided by fundamental doctrinal differences.[23]

In France, as elsewhere, neither Catholics nor Protestants believed in religious toleration, which they had reluctantly accepted as a political necessity. Most Catholics and their spiritual guides remained unreconciled to the existence of Protestantism in their

midst and considered the concessions granted to the Protestant minority as merely temporary. In the earlier seventeenth century, the Protestants themselves launched several revolts, as a result of which they lost the political and military privileges given them by the Edict of Nantes. During the second half of the century, Louis XIV's government, after subjecting the Protestants to increasing persecution to compel them to become Catholics, finally revoked the edict in 1685 and decreed the abolition of Protestantism in France. This action forced many thousands of Protestants to leave their homes and seek refuge in other countries willing to receive them.[24]

Thus the legal regime of coexistence between Catholics and Protestants in sixteenth-century Germany and seventeenth-century France, each the product of political expediency, failed to survive or to create an enduring foundation for toleration. We could cite other historical instances of such failures of what might be called pragmatic coexistence. Among them would be the breakdown of the previously mentioned Christian-Jewish *convivencia* in medieval Spain, and, in our own time, the calamitous collapse of peace and tolerance between Serbian Christians and Bosnian Muslims in the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia as a consequence of abiding religious and ethnic division and animosities.

These cases suffice to show that, contrary to Butterfield's view, while political expediency may have been a reinforcing factor, it alone, unaccompanied by a genuine belief in and commitment to toleration as something inherently good and valuable, was not enough to bring about a permanent peaceful coexistence between hostile religious confessions in Reformation Europe. What this distinguished scholar's discussion strangely ignored is the very great contribution made to the achievement of toleration and denominational coexistence by the formation of religious, philosophical, moral, and humanitarian arguments that can support and justify them. For in a certain sense ideas rule the world, and the attitudes and actions of human beings are greatly affected by reasons and justifications. In the absence of convincing reasons showing why toleration is right and desirable, the institutional ac-

commodation and the change in individual and social values
needed to establish it could hardly occur.

Moreover, Butterfield was mistaken in claiming that toleration
had scarcely become even an idea in the sixteenth century, when
expediency and the exhaustion from religious strife supervened
to try to free Germany and France from that strife. For by the latter
part of the sixteenth century, a conception and theory of religious
toleration had definitely come into being. Generally speaking,
moreover, and in spite of the previously mentioned examples of
pragmatic toleration in antiquity and the Middle Ages, the ap-
pearance and development of the idea of toleration largely pre-
ceded its realization. This development required a long and ardu-
ous intellectual effort down through the seventeenth century
and was the work of a number of thinkers. Without an underlying
theoretical rationale that was both philosophical and religious—
one that reflected a complex mixture of scriptural, theological,
ecclesiological, epistemological, ethical, political, and pragmatic
arguments—and without the gradual acceptance by political
and intellectual elites and others of principles and values en-
abling them to subordinate and set aside religious differences
and strive for concord through mutual understanding, religious
toleration and the freedom it implied could not have been at-
tained as one of the predominant and most cherished attributes
of modern and contemporary Western societies. That proposition
is the main thesis of this book, and it explains why I have chosen
to discuss the notable writers and the religious and intellectual
controversies concerning toleration that are the subject of the fol-
lowing chapters.