



Protection of Conscience Project

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The Illusion of Moral Neutrality - Part IV

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Introduction

Part IV of the original article is reproduced here because it discusses the false dichotomy of 'religious' and 'secular', directing attention to the fact that everyone, religious or not, abides by some "practice of ultimate concern that orders all other concerns, unconditioned loyalty that trumps all other loyalties." Understanding this concept is critical if one hopes to respond to the absolutist claims of those who would banish from public life all but what they call 'secular' ethics.

However, the first three parts of the essay should not be neglected. The first introduces the false god Neutrality, whose worshippers "cannot answer the question 'Why be neutral?' without committing themselves to particular goods--social peace, self-expression, self-esteem, ethnic pride, or what have you--thereby violating their own desideratum of Neutrality." Part II explores the nature of genuine tolerance, concluding that it is a moral virtue. A hard saying is proposed in Part III: that tolerance cannot be taught unless all of the virtues are taught as well. "We cannot compensate for the collapse of all our virtues," warns the author, "by teaching tolerance and letting the rest go by, as some educators and social critics seem to think; the only cure for moral collapse is moral renewal, on all fronts simultaneously."

Time now to turn to the question of religious tolerance, where even the rules are far from easy to discern.

What is religion anyway? Some people say that all religions depend on faith, while all secularisms depend on reason. But as Chesterton remarked in Orthodoxy, "It is idle to talk always of the alternative of reason and faith. Reason is itself a matter of faith. It is an act of faith to assert that our thoughts have any relation to reality at all." Other people say that all religions believe in God, while all secularisms do not. But though Buddhists do not believe in God, yet we call Buddhism a religion.

Still others, like Tillich and Niebuhr, hold the mark of religion to be the practice of ultimate concern that orders all other concerns, unconditioned loyalty that trumps all other loyalties. Here we finally hit the mark. For

Christians, the ultimate concern is the saving God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who has revealed himself in Messiah. Though Buddhists do not believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, much less in Messiah, they do have an ultimate concern-escape from suffering, inherent in desire, which, they hold, springs in turn from the illusion of existence.

But if religion is the practice of ultimate concern, then we have another problem. In the first place, even a secularism may be the practice of an ultimate concern. We acknowledge this, for instance, by calling Leninism a religion; similarly we say of a greedy man that “his god is money” and call misplaced devotion “idolatry.” In the second place, even among those secularisms that do not go so far as to identify ultimate concerns, none is without implications as to what could, or could not, count as an ultimate concern. John Stuart Mill could never decide which, if any, of the “permanent interests of man as a progressive being” was deserving of unconditioned loyalty. But one thing he was sure of, that Messiah was not among them.

What all this tells us is that “religious” and “secular” constitute a false dichotomy. We would do better with a trichotomy. An acknowledged religion like Christianity or Buddhism posits an ultimate concern and admits it. An unacknowledged religion like Leninism posits an ultimate concern but denies that so doing is religious. And an incomplete religion like Millianism has not finished ranking its concerns. Incomplete religion can live only in the dreamworld of thought. In the light of day it must become complete or die. For in every life or way of life-whether lived simply, lived with the guidance of an ethical theory, or even lived in defiance of an ethical theory-given enough time, some concern eventually emerges as paramount. Eventually there is something to which every knee bows. This is the person's god. As a matter of theory, one may deny that any concern deserves ultimacy. But as a matter of practice, no one escapes ceding ultimacy to something, whether it deserves ultimacy or not. Choices between incompatible urgencies are unavoidable. To prevent the rise of one or another of these urgencies to supremacy, a person would have to practice a truly Stoic discipline of contradiction-and in the end we would have to ask what urgency he served in so disordering himself. In short, one need not be conscious of his god, or even conscious that he has a god. One might think he has no god, or that he is “looking for” or “waiting for” a god. One may even be converted from one god to another. But one will have a god-or at least be on the road to having one.

With all of this ultimate concern floating about, how can there be religious tolerance at all? The answer is, there can't be-unless one's ultimate concern commands it, or at least allows it. For in this case and this case alone, tolerance toward other claimants to ultimacy is obedience to one's own.

Thus St. Hilary of Poitiers: “God does not want unwilling worship, nor does He require a forced repentance.” The idea is that although God demands and deserves our unconditioned loyalty, He is of such a nature that nothing exacted by threats could truly serve Him. For He desires sons and daughters, not slaves: His love is inexorable and consumes everything contrary to itself. This is not the Kantian idea that choice is lovable but rather the Christian idea that love is chosen. I do not say that His supposed followers have always practiced the loving tolerance He demands. I do say that intolerance stands under His judgment.

But notice: the same consuming fire that for its own sake demands tolerance, for its own sake sets the limits to what is tolerated. If Hilary was right that God does not want unwilling worship, then Hilary's tolerance must be absolute with respect to permitting belief in other gods. This does not

mean permitting every act of service to these gods. Hilary must claim the right to say that there are evil services which nothing deserving of unconditioned loyalty could demand, and the correlative right to try to stop anyone who attempts them. For instance, whatever claims of conscience Hilary may honor he cannot permit a person to plead them in justification of murder. "God told me to kill anyone who got in my way" cuts no ice with him; nor is the case different when other ultimate concerns, other gods, are pleaded in place of God. The Defense of the Revolution, The Greater God of the Whole, The Purity of the Race, the Hunger of Moloch, The Right to Control One's Body-neither these nor any other claimants to ultimacy are accepted as justifying the sacrifice of innocents. "Even conceding your God-given right to be left alone by me in your honor to another god," I imagine Hilary saying, "that right concerns your own soul only. I will not permit you, in its service, to inflict injuries which my own God abhors and forbids."

My example is Christian because I am a Christian. But the logic works just the same if you posit some other ultimate concern, some other god than mine. For instance, the god of the Benthamite utilitarian is "aggregate pleasure." Hence if the Benthamite could tolerate other creeds at all, such tolerance would be both ordained and limited by the requirements of such pleasure. Likewise, religious tolerance for the Millian utilitarian would be both ordained and limited by the nature of man's "permanent interests" as a "progressive being," and religious tolerance for the Leninist would be both ordained and limited by the needs of "proletarian dictatorship."

One might suppose that this logic works only for so-called teleological creeds, said to give priority to achieving the good over doing the right. This is not so. No recent writer has more sternly insisted on the priority of right over good than John Rawls. Yet even he has an ultimate concern. His concern is "autonomy," the conditions for the realization of which are supposedly determined by choices made behind a Veil of Ignorance that obliterates personal memory. But the conclusion is obvious: For the Rawlsian, religious tolerance is both ordained and limited by what people could want who no longer remembered the love of God.

Where does all this leave us? The bottom line is that Neutrality is no more coherent in the matter of religious tolerance than it is in tolerance of any other sort. What you can tolerate pivots on your ultimate concern. Because different ultimate concerns ordain different zones of tolerance, social consensus is possible only at the points where these zones overlap. Note well: The greater the resemblance of contending concerns, the greater the overlap of their zones of tolerance. The less the resemblance of contending concerns, the less the overlap of their zones of tolerance. Should contending concerns become sufficiently unlike, their zones of tolerance no longer intersect at all. Consensus vanishes.

This, I believe, is our current trajectory. The embattled term "culture war" is not inflammatory; it is merely exact. And we can expect the war to grow worse. The reason for this is that our various gods ordain not only different zones of tolerance, but different norms to regulate the dispute among themselves. True tolerance is not well tolerated. For although the God of some of the disputants ordains that they love and persuade their opponents, the gods of some of the others ordain no such thing.