# What *Dignitatis Humanae* Didn't Say

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The vehement, sometimes acrimonious debates that accompanied the drafting of the Vatican II declaration on religious freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae*, yielded an exceptionally precise and carefully worded document. Noteworthy in the 5,700-word declaration is the absence of even a single reference to religious "tolerance" or "toleration."

The choice of religious "freedom" or "liberty" as the proper category for discussion and the exclusion of "tolerance" flies in the face of the societal trend to deal with church-state issues in terms of religious tolerance.

As one notable example, along with the 40th anniversary of *Dignitatis humanae*, 2005 also marked the 10th anniversary of the United Nations "Year for Tolerance."[1] Back in early 1995 Federico Mayor, Director-General of UNESCO, made the following remarks in New York:

> Fighting intolerance takes both state action and individual responsibility. Governments must adhere to the international standards for human rights, must ban and punish hate crimes and discrimination against all vulnerable groups, must ensure equal access to justice and equal opportunity for all. Individuals must become tolerance teachers within their own families and communities. We must get to know our neighbors and the cultures and the religions that surround us in order to achieve an appreciation for diversity. Education for tolerance is the best investment we can make in our own future security.

[1] The General Assembly of the United Nations proclaimed 1995 the Year for Tolerance on December 20, 1993 (resolution 48/126).

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If the umbrella of tolerance necessarily covers hate crime legislation and "appreciation for diversity" with all that has come to signify, these remarks may well give pause. In modern discourse tolerance is never just tolerance, and even if it were, it would hardly present the best category for describing attitudes to religion. In the following paragraphs I will highlight five arguments that manifest the inadequacy of the notion of tolerance to convey the attitude that states should adopt in their relationship with religion and the wisdom of the Council Fathers in avoiding this problematic language.

## 1. Tolerance in itself is an inadequate, and indeed inappropriate, category for approaching religion

Religion is a good to be embraced and defended, not an evil to be put up with. No one speaks of tolerating chocolate pudding or a spring walk in the park.[2] By speaking of religious tolerance we make religion an unfortunate fact to be borne with, like noisy neighbors and crowded buses, not a blessing to be celebrated.

Here it is instructive to recall that modern ideas of religious tolerance sprang from the European Enlightenment project. A central tenet of this project was the notion of *progress*, understood as the overcoming of the ignorance of superstition and religion to usher in the age of reason and science.[3] In the words of Voltaire, "Philosophy, the sister of religion, has disarmed the hands that superstition had so long stained with blood; and the human mind, awakening from its intoxication, is amazed at the excesses into which fanaticism had led it."[4]

Since religion was the primary cause of conflict and war, only through a lessening of people's passion for religion and commitment to specific doctrines could peace be achieved. As Voltaire wrote in his *Treatise on Toleration*, "The less we have of dogma, the less dispute;

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[2] Archbishop Fulton Sheen remarks in his waggish style, "The good is never to be tolerated; rather it is to be approved; aye! it is to be loved. You never say, 'I'll tolerate a beefsteak dinner.' Do you tolerate patriotism? Do you tolerate science? . . . Can you imagine a love song in which one changes the word 'love' to tolerate? 'I tolerate you in June, under the moon.' How absurd it is!" (F. J. Sheen, *Life is Worth Living* [Image Books, Garden City, NY, 1954], 100).

[3] Voltaire did not formally lump superstition and religion together. In fact, he went so far as to state: "Superstition is to religion what astrology is to astronomy: the foolish daughter of a very wise mother" (Voltaire, *A Treatise on Toleration and Other Essays*, tr. Joseph McCabe (Amherst NY: Prometheus Books, 1994), 207). On the other hand, his understanding of superstition includes many aspects of religious faith.

[4] Ibid., 161.

the less we have of dispute, the less misery."[5] Toward this stated end many mechanisms were put into play, among them the selection of proper words to modify people's views toward religion.

The language of tolerance was first proposed to describe the attitude that confessional states, such as Anglican England and Catholic France, should adopt toward Christians of other persuasions.[6] The assumption was that the state had recognized a certain confession as "true" and put up with other practices and beliefs as a concession to those in error. This led, however, to the employment of tolerance language toward religion as such. The *Philosophes* would downplay or even ridicule religion in the firm belief that it would soon disappear altogether. Thus, separation of Church and State becomes separation of public life and religious belief. Religion should be excluded from public conversation and relegated to the intimacy of home and chapel. Religious tolerance is a myth, but a myth imposed by an anti-religious intellectual elite.

This "tolerant" mentality is especially problematic when applied in non-confessional states, such as the U.S., where an attitude of tolerance is not that of the state religion toward un-sanctioned creeds, but of a non-confessional secular state toward religion itself. Language of religious toleration of Christianity in Saudi Arabia would be a marked improvement over present conditions, and consistent with a confessional Muslim state's belief that Christianity is a false religion. In a non-confessional state such language is more pernicious.

*Dignitatis humanae*, on the contrary, taught that religion is a human good to be promoted, not an evil to be tolerated. While government should not presume to command religious acts, it should "take account of the religious life of the citizenry and show it favor" (no. 3). Religious practice forms part of the common good of society, and should be encouraged rather than marginalized.

## 2. The insurmountable dichotomy between "tolerance" and "toleration"

Along with the conceptual error of tolerating the good of religion,

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[5] Ibid., 209.

[6] John Locke, for instance, in his *Letter Concerning Toleration*, in no way advocates a universal tolerance, but specifically writes on "my Thoughts about the mutual Toleration of Christians in their different Professions of Religion" (John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration* [hereafter *Letter*], edited and introduced by James Tully, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983), 23). Concretely that meant, toleration on the part of a confessional Christian state—Anglican—toward other Christians (excepting Catholics).

the meaning of tolerance has evolved still further, and has now come to be taken as a virtue. The United Nations "Declaration of Principles on Tolerance" states outright that tolerance is a *virtue* and defines it as "respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world's cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human."[7]

This definition mirrors that of the *American Heritage College Dictionary*, which states that tolerance is "(1) a fair and permissive attitude toward those whose race, religion, nationality, etc., differ from one's own; freedom from bigotry. A fair and permissive attitude toward opinions and practices that differ from one's own."

If tolerance is a virtue, it is a decidedly modern virtue. It appears in none of the classical treatments of the virtues: not in Plato, not in Seneca, not even in Aristotle's extensive list of the virtues of the good citizen in his *Nichomachean Ethics*. Indulgence of evil, in the absence of an overriding reason for doing so, has never been considered virtuous. Even today, indiscriminate tolerance would not be countenanced. A public official tolerant of child abuse or tax evasion would not be a virtuous official.

The closer one examines tolerance and strives to apply it across the board, the more its insufficiency as a principle to govern society becomes apparent. Even if it were possible to achieve total tolerance (which it is not), it would be exceedingly undesirable and counterproductive to do so.[8]

Moreover, as a virtue, tolerance seems to have distanced itself so far from its etymological roots as to have become another word altogether. Thus the *virtue* of "tolerance" no longer implies the *act* of "toleration" but rather a general attitude of permissiveness and openness to diversity. Implicitly, this diversity is treated as something positive to be embraced, rather than as an evil to be suffered in regard for a greater good. Tolerance therefore now has two radically incompatible meanings that create space for serious misunderstandings and abuse.

In isolation from an objective referent, tolerance and intolerance can be applied arbitrarily. In fact, however, a tolerant person will not tolerate all things, but only those things considered tolerable by the

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[7] "Declaration of Principles on Tolerance," proclaimed and signed by the Member States of UNESCO on 16 November 1995, 1.1.

[8] Shaw wrote: "We must face the fact that society is founded on intolerance. There are glaring cases of the abuse of intolerance; but they are quite as characteristic of our own age as of the Middle Ages... we may prate of toleration as we will; but society must always draw a line somewhere between allowable conduct and insanity or crime" (G. B. Shaw, *Saint Joan*, in "Great Books of the Western World," Vol. 59, 56).

reigning cultural milieu. Thus the accusation of intolerance has become a weapon against those whose standards for tolerance differ from one's own, and our criteria for tolerance depend on our subjective convictions or prejudices. Voltaire was able to defend the actions of the Roman Empire in persecuting Christians and blamed the Christians themselves for their martyrdom, because they failed to keep their religion to themselves. He avers that the Christians' death was a consequence of *their own intolerance* towards Rome, and not the other way around.[9] Such sophistry is part and parcel of many of today's debates on tolerance as well, and flow from the ambivalence of the term.

The affair grows even muddier when the "acceptance of diversity," present in modern definitions of tolerance, is thrown into the mix. The UN *Declaration of Principles on Tolerance* incorporates a prior statement from the UN *Declaration on Race and Racial Prejudice*, which states: "All individuals and groups have the right to be different (Article 1.2)."[10] Taken at face value, that is a ridiculous claim. Suicide bombing is different, as are genocide and sadomasochism. To say that one person has a right to be bad, simply because another happens to be good, is the ludicrous logic of diversity entitlement.

The sloppiness of these definitions is unworthy of the lawyers who drafted them, and cannot but lead to the suspicion that such ambiguity is intentional. This vagueness allows tolerance to be applied selectively—to race, sexual orientation, or religious conviction—while other areas—such as smoking, recycling or animal experimentation—stand safely outside the purview of mandatory diversity.

This arbitrariness is not new. John Locke (1632-1704) himself, in the midst of his impassioned appeal for religious toleration, notes that of course toleration does not extend to Catholics, Muslims or atheists. "To worship one's God in a Catholic rite in a Protestant country," he writes, "amounts to constructive subversion."[11]

In the end, the question for everyone necessarily becomes not "Shall I be tolerant or intolerant?" but rather "What shall I tolerate and what shall I not tolerate?"

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[9] "We are obliged to recognize that they themselves were intolerant."(Voltaire, *A Treatise on Toleration*, tr. Joseph McCabe (Amherst NY: Prometheus Books, 1994), 177.

[10] "Declaration of Principles on Tolerance," proclaimed and signed by the Member States of UNESCO on 16 November 1995, 2.4.

[11] H. R. Fox Bourne, *Life of John Locke*, 2 vols., (London: 1876), I, p. 187. In this regard the political theorist John Dunn reflects that "almost any form of overt religious behavior could under some circumstances constitute a threat to public order." (John Dunn, *The Political Thought of John Locke*, [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press], 1990, 32).

### 3. The relativistic underpinnings in modern notions of tolerance

Voltaire, Locke, Lessing and other Enlightenment figures downplayed the importance of *doctrinal belief* in favor of *morals*. Unlike today, in eighteenth-century Europe a general agreement regarding fundamental moral principles could be counted on in contrast to the fierce debates surrounding doctrinal questions. In doing so, however, they couldn't avoid a creeping relativism and epistemological uncertainty regarding religious doctrine. Voltaire, for example, posits as the condition for the establishment of a true tolerance the disappearance of theological controversy, which he describes as a "plague" and "epidemic illness."[12]

Locke, on the other hand, dismissively notes that "everyone is orthodox to himself."[13] His own ecclesiology that lacked belief in the existence of any one true church led Locke to the conviction that all Christian churches (except the Catholic Church) should be tolerated. "Nor is there any difference," he confidently wrote, "between the national Church and other separated congregations."[14]

Locke further appeals to the "Business of True Religion." A true Christian, Locke asserts, will dedicate himself principally to a life of virtue and piety, which are the chief concerns of religion. He relegates to a lower tier "outward pomp of worship, reformed discipline, orthodox faith."[15] His own theological prejudices and political concerns led him to arbitrarily place morals above doctrine, since morals at the time garnered greater unanimity and generated fewer disputes. Their roles have been somewhat reversed today.

Locke's disdain for "orthodoxy" and Voltaire's diatribes against religious "fanaticism" find an echo in contemporary descriptions of tolerance. The 1995 UN *Declaration on Principles of Tolerance* states that tolerance "involves the rejection of dogmatism and absolutism."[16] Popular wisdom holds that true tolerance entails not only *respect* for others, but the acknowledgement that *we don't know* for certain who is right. Such skepticism flows as a necessary consequence of "the rejection of dogmatism and absolutism."

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[12] cf. Voltaire, *Traité sur la Tolérance, à l'occasion de la mort de Jean Calas*, in vol. II of "Nouveaux Mélanges philosophiques, historiques, critiques" (Paris, 1772), 64.

[13] *Letter*, 23.

[14] Fox Bourne, *John Locke*, I, 33.

[15] *Letter*, 23.

[16] "Declaration of Principles on Tolerance," proclaimed and signed by the Member States of UNESCO on 16 November 1995, 1.3.

In his 1995 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope John Paul II wrote that some today "consider such relativism an essential condition of democracy, inasmuch as it alone is held to guarantee tolerance, mutual respect between people and acceptance of the decisions of the majority, whereas moral norms considered to be objective and binding are held to lead to authoritarianism and intolerance."[17] Though the U.N. Declaration does not employ the language of "relativism," it is a necessary corollary to its assertions.

**4. The ambiguity surrounding the proper object of toleration**

A fourth argument against the language of tolerance is the widespread confusion regarding the proper *object* of tolerance. Nowadays tolerance for persons, ideas and behavior are generally lumped together under the general heading of "tolerance," but they are hardly the same thing.

Much as tolerance fails as a category for dealing with *goods*, which are embraced rather than tolerated, so too tolerance is an inappropriate category in regard to *persons*. From a Christian perspective, all persons deserve unconditional respect and love for the simple fact that they are persons. We may tolerate their irritating *behavior*—such as knuckle-cracking or gum-snapping—but it is insulting to suggest that we tolerate the persons themselves.

Nor are *ideas* the proper object of toleration. Ideas come in all shapes and sizes: true and false, ridiculous and compelling, brilliant and commonplace, diabolical and divine. Each is evaluated in relation to the truth, and accepted or rejected accordingly. Those ideas that convince by the strength of their inner consistency are embraced; those found to be untenable are rejected.

If goods, persons, and ideas fail as the proper object of tolerance, the only possibility remaining is annoying human behavior or situations of evil. Here, too, the criterion for discerning what is to be tolerated must be determined by the superior good that justifies it. In the case of *Dignitatis Humanae*, the Council Fathers avoid the claim that error has rights by appealing to the truth that people "cannot discharge these obligations [the pursuit of truth] in a manner in keeping with their own nature unless they enjoy immunity from external coercion as well as psychological freedom."[18] Thus even when they fail to live up

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[17] Pope John Paul II, encyclical letter *Evangelium Vitae* (March 25, 1995), no. 70.

[18] Second Vatican Council, declaration on religious freedom *Dignitatis Humanae* (December 7, 1965), no. 2.

to their duty to seek the truth, or fail in their attempts to discover it, the right to religious liberty persists.[19]

Just as the term "tolerance" does not appear in *Dignitatis Humanae*, it is likewise absent in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church.* In fact, of the scant five times that the verb "tolerate" appears in the *Catechism*, two refer to the moral legitimacy of accepting foreseen but undesirable evil consequences of human actions, if the evil is not intended either as an end or a means.[20] The other three concern the moral tolerableness of civil divorce in certain limited cases, and the intolerableness of trial marriages and a life of duplicity.[21] The precision of this language provides a refreshing contrast to much of the vague tolerance language of our day.

## 5. Tolerance slouching toward indifference

Though tolerance doesn't necessarily entail indifference, modern formulations of tolerance as acceptance of diversity would seem to imply at least a placid resignation and sometimes even an enthusiastic celebration of religious diversity. This has led to theologies of pluralism incompatible with the divine mandate to "go out to the whole world and make disciples of all the nations" (Mt. 28:19-20), as well as Peter's declaration that "There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

Voltaire took Thomas Aquinas to task as being intolerant for having dared to say that he wished all the world were Christian. But for Thomas that was the same as saying he wished all men to be happy. Few would consider it intolerant to wish all people to be healthy or well-educated (though this implies "intolerance" towards ignorance and illness), and for Thomas the Christian faith was a greater good than health and education.

Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who devoted her entire life to spreading the love of Christ, expressed her motivation with the utmost simplicity: "I want very much for people to come to know God, to love Him, to serve Him, for that is true happiness. And what I have I want everyone in the world to have. But it is their choice. If they have seen the light they can follow it. I cannot give them the light: I can only give them the means."[22]

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[19] See Ibid.

[20] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn. 1737, 2279.

[21] Ibid. nn. 2338, 2383, 2391.

[22] Doig, Desmond, *Mother Teresa: Her People and Her Work*, (Glasgow: William

The *fact* of a plurality of religions doesn't imply the *ideology* of religious pluralism. Saint Paul undauntedly preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ to King Agrippa, who declared: "A little more and you would make a Christian of me," to which Paul replied, "I wish that not only you, but all those that hear me might become as I am" (Acts 26: 28-29). Though other religions may contain elements of truth, it is to be hoped that all come to the fullness of truth.

Voltaire, building on Locke's arguments, arrived at relativism's logical end: indifference. Live and let live. Not only should we tolerate others' behavior and beliefs, it is wrong to try to change them. In this regard St. Pius X wrote: "Catholic doctrine teaches us that charity's first duty is not in the tolerance of erroneous opinions, sincere as they may be, nor in a theoretical or practical indifference toward the error or vice into which our brothers or sisters have fallen, but in zeal for their intellectual and moral improvement, no less than in zeal for their material well-being."[23]

This zeal, however, must express itself in ways consonant with the dignity of persons. In practice this means absolute respect for the freedom and inviolability of conscience, especially in matters of religious belief. In his letter on the missions, Pope John Paul II penned these memorable words: "On her part the Church addresses people with full respect for their freedom. Her mission does not restrict freedom but rather promotes it. *The Church proposes; she imposes nothing*. She respects individuals and cultures, and she honors the sanctuary of conscience. To those who for various reasons oppose missionary activity, the Church repeats: *Open the doors to Christ!*"[24] In other words, to be true to her mission the Church cannot refrain from proclaiming the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and those who hear are free to embrace this truth or reject it.

Similarly, in his 1994 book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, the Pope wrote, "The new evangelization has nothing in common with what various publications have insinuated when speaking of *restoration*, or when advancing the accusation of *proselytism*, or when unilaterally or tendentiously calling for *pluralism* and *tolerance*… *The mission of evangelization is an essential part of the Church*."[25]

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Collins Sons & Co. Ltd., 1976), 137.

[23] St. Pius X, Ep. *Notre charge apostolique*, August 25, 1910: AAS 2 (1910), 621-22.

[24] Pope John Paul II, encyclical letter *Redemptoris Missio* (December 7,1990), no. 39.

[25] Pope John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 115.

*Dignitatis Humanae* re-emphasized perennial convictions of Christianity, including the obligation to seek the truth and to bear witness to the truth we have received. In doing so, however, it underscored the deep respect that must be borne in every instance for the dignity and freedom of the person. "Truth," we read, "is to be sought after in a manner proper to the dignity of the human person and his social nature. The inquiry is to be free, carried on with the aid of teaching or instruction, communication and dialogue, in the course of which men explain to one another the truth they have discovered, or think they have discovered, in order thus to assist one another in the quest for truth."[26]

This respect for religious freedom stands head and shoulders above a supposed tolerance for religious belief, with the relativism, indifference and subtle disdain for religion it so often comprises.

**Summary**: *The Vatican II declaration on religious freedom,* Dignitatis Humanae, *framed the issue of Church-State relations in terms of religious liberty, carefully avoiding the language of religious tolerance. This articles shows the wisdom behind this choice by exposing five serious problems with the notion of religious tolerance. First, religion is a good to be embraced rather than an evil to be suffered, so "toleration" fails as a proper category as applied to religion. Second, the idea of tolerance has so evolved in contemporary language that it is used both in its original sense and in the fundamentally different connotation of openness and respect for diversity. The deep-seating ambiguity surrounding tolerance allows for a selected application of the term and for manipulation. Third, as a child of the Enlightenment, religious tolerance was born in an environment of religious relativism and a project of limiting the influence of religion in society. The association between relativism and tolerance has only increased over time, and now the notion of tolerance explicitly involves "the rejection of dogmatism and absolutism." Fourth, the modern understanding of tolerance as a virtue has lost its essential tie to an object to be tolerated, and thus one no longer understands what is to be tolerated and why, only that people are to "be" tolerant. Fifth, tolerance as a celebration of diversity undermines the Church's evangelizing mission and promotes religious indifference, through a "theology of pluralism" that holds that all religions are good and conversion not only unnecessary but indesirable.*

**Key words**: Tolerance, toleration, diversity, religious freedom, religious liberty, multiculturalism, Philosophe, Enlightenment, Locke, Voltaire, proselytism, evangelization, freedom of conscience, United Nations, Dignitatis Humanae, relativism, religious indifference, intolerance.

**Parole chiave**: Tolleranza, diversità, libertà religiosa, multiculturalismo, Philosophe, Illuminismo, Locke, Voltaire, proselitismo, evangelizzazione, libertà di coscienza, Nazioni Unite, Dignitatis Humanae, relativismo, indifferenza religiosa, intolleranza.

[26] *Dignitatis Humanae*, no. 3.