



Politics & Culture

The Limits of Tolerance

By Jude P. Dougherty

I

When Oswald Spengler published his multivolume study *The Decline of the West*, few outside of professional academic circles understood his thesis or took the epitaph seriously.¹ Today, a century later, no attentive historian can ignore the cultural shift that took place in the West in the last half of the twentieth century, one that seriously eclipsed the spiritual resources which formerly animated it.

As a philosopher of history, Spengler's study of the past and his cyclical view of history led him to the pessimistic conclusion that, just as other cultures before it have decayed, Western culture has not only peaked but faces a period of irreversible decline. For more than 200 years the Western intellectual tradition has been subjected to the nihilistic criticism of forces launched by the Enlightenment. The result: we are now experiencing in the social order the eighteenth-century repudiation of the classical and Christian sources of Western culture.

There is little doubt that Europe is living off a dying past, perhaps nearing the end of a great culture, not unlike that experienced before the fall of Rome when internal corruption made possible the barbarian invasion. The decline of morals apart, the birthrate of the native European population

alone would attest to decline. The ruling elites of Brussels and the European capitals seem confident that the constitutive elements of what was once called "Christendom" can be maintained without reference to their source.

Absent Christianity, Europe has little to defend but its material culture as it faces a tide of immigrants that threaten its very character. The newcomers, largely from Africa and the Middle East, who are attracted by the material culture of Europe, nevertheless remain attached to their old ways and in refusing to assimilate extract privileges and exceptions to the common law that further contribute to their isolation within the larger society. The question arises: how tolerant can Europe be in the face of a largely Muslim influx whose Islamic leaders are convinced that they will one day rule the continent?

Are we driven to Spengler's pessimistic conclusion, albeit for different reasons? Perhaps not. In any event, intellectual honesty demands that we acknowledge the many formidable obstacles confronting not only the defense of Europe but of Western culture itself as it faces an alien and self-confident Islam convinced that it will one day govern.

Those bold enough to predict that the future portends an "Islamic Republic of France" or the inevitability of what Bat Ye'or has called "Eurabia" are given little credence, are largely ignored

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by major media, and can expect their books to be banned or removed from the shelves of major booksellers. Absent the moral and intellectual resources which prevailed, for example, in the decades preceding the founding of the American republic, Europe's ruling elites may be hard pressed to defend the republican institutions and the culture they have taken for granted.

II

On both sides of the Atlantic, any effort to recapture the moral tradition that shaped the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution as well as the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights is handicapped by the current propensity to regard all moral claims as equal. The concept of "procedural democracy," now regnant in Western intellectual circles, militates against the government's casting its weight behind any one conception of the good.

The state according to this mode of thinking must remain neutral in the face of competing moral claims, favoring none. No moral system can claim superiority, it is argued, since each is merely the product of its time and of the place-bound preferences of people advancing it.

Procedural democracy itself is supported by two ancillary principles, one, the seemingly innocent call for "tolerance," and the other, the malevolent doctrine of "separation of church and state." The principle of tolerance augurs against an unabashed defense of one's own tradition, whereas the separation principle surrenders moral authority to the state or, worse still, is employed to eradicate religion from both the academy and the public square.

To offer an egregious example of misplaced tolerance, one need recall only that the 57-member Muslim Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) has prevailed upon the United Nations Human Rights Commission to adopt a resolution requiring the effective evisceration of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Henceforth, the guaranteed right of free expression will not extend to any criticism of Islam on the grounds that it amounts to an abusive act of religious discrimination.

Western officials and governmental agencies appear increasingly disposed to go along with efforts to mute warnings about the danger that the recognition or incorporation of Sharia law poses

to the West. The liberal attempt to silence criticism of Islam threatens to criminalize behavior that has long been regarded as merely "politically incorrect." If we follow the liberal agenda vis-à-vis Islam and its demand to recognize Sharia, we will mutate Western law, traditions, values, and societies beyond recognition.

III

Calls for tolerance abound, from papal statements to European conferences. Bumper stickers and postal imprints proclaim its value. One can understand John Paul II and Benedict XVI seeking tolerance for a Christian minority living amongst a largely Hindu population, but a campaign for tolerance seems paradoxical in the open societies of Western Europe and North America.

Considered abstractly, it would be easier to make the case that tolerance is a vice than to justify its putative status as a virtue. To employ a few homey examples: a parent cannot tolerate disobedience in the child; a teacher, sloppy homework or cheating on an examination; a military officer, insubordination; a CEO, deviance from company policy; or an ecclesiastical body, divergent doctrinal teaching or liturgical practice within its ranks. No state can tolerate irresponsible fiscal policy nor can any state permit disrespect for its laws. An entity must preserve its unity to preserve its very being.

The promotion of the notion that tolerance is a virtue is of relatively recent origin. Tolerance is not mentioned as a virtue by Aristotle or by the Stoics. Nor does Aquinas speak of tolerance as a virtue. To the contrary, Roget's venerable *English Language Dictionary of Synonyms and Antonyms* gives as synonyms for tolerance: leniency, clemency, indulgence, laxity, sufferance, concession, and permissiveness each of which can be used to designate questionable behavior.

Of course, certain technical meanings of the term may be identified. "Tolerance" in biology is the ability of an organism to endure contact with a substance or its introduction into the body without ill effects. "Tolerance" in the industrial order is the range within which a dimension of a machined part may vary. "Religious tolerance," which many have in mind when they use the term, is the intellectual and practical acknowledgment of the right of others to live in accordance

with religious beliefs different from one's own.

Religious tolerance, though not confined to Christianity, seems to have a particular appeal to the Christian conscience. Perhaps it does so for reasons intrinsic to Christianity itself. Hindus and Muslims, by contrast, show little similar tolerance toward Christians in their midst, being more prone to either subjugating them or forcing them to flee. The classical and biblical sources of Western civilization, although under attack for the past 200 years, may still remain the basis of Western culture, but, that said, it must be acknowledged that the Western respect for intellect and for its role in the formation of law and the practice of religion is not characteristic of all who seek shelter within the West.

Social cohesion becomes impossible if the classical and biblical heritage of the West is not respected by the immigrant whose enfranchisement can be used to undermine the institutions and freedoms of the host country. The call for a tolerance that ignores a de facto conflict of cultures is inconsistent and destructive of its own warrant. We may ask, is it not incumbent upon the West to defend its intellectual and cultural patrimony while yet accommodating the other?

Goethe, when discussing tolerance in his *Maxims and Reflections*,² offers this insightful distinction. Tolerance, he thinks, is best understood as a state of mind in transition to something nobler, namely, "recognition." The latter is a mark of true liberality, an attitude equally removed from mindless appropriation and the outright rejection of the other's point of view or culture.

The recognition of those who think and act differently is a feature of a confident mind. Upon our first encounter with another, we may derive pleasure in finding points of agreement, in a feeling of good will that follows a friendly contact. Upon closer acquaintance, differences are likely to become apparent. The important thing, says Goethe, is not to retreat but to hold fast to points of agreement and strive for a clear understanding of points of dispute without seeking an artificial agreement on them.

Throughout history, political entities have recognized the need for unity of outlook among their peoples. At times in classical Greece and Rome, atheism could be punished by death. Modern socialist regimes, whenever they come to power, rec-

ognize the influence of ideas and work to suppress religious education, if not religion itself. Within the Western democracies practical accommodation is one thing, but a nonjudgmental, nondiscriminating acceptance is another. How tolerant can a society be and yet maintain itself in existence? Of course, where nothing is prized, everything can be tolerated.

Those who advocate tolerance must first establish the context in which it should be recognized and what are its limits. It is better clearly to designate a specific activity that calls for toleration than indiscriminately to uphold an abstraction. There are times when leadership must insist on propriety, respect of the inherited, and adherence to the rule of law. In short, context determines whether tolerance is a virtue or vice.

IV

"Procedural democracy," as currently defended in academic circles rests upon the assumption that there is no way to determine the good. The state in formulating its policies is not to draw upon any one moral tradition, certainly not on one advanced from a purely religious perspective or by an ecclesial body. Religion is deemed a purely private or subjective affair, not a trustworthy source of principles applicable to public policy.

In this context, particularly in the United States, the separation doctrine is often invoked, but that doctrine is not found in the U.S. Constitution. It is rather the construct of a maverick interpretation of the U.S. Supreme Court acquiescing to the secularists who vigorously lobbied the Court. Any student of the American founding will recognize that the Constitution in its First Amendment sought only to prevent an established church for the nation as a whole and did not intend to undo establishment in the former colonies where it prevailed.

It doesn't take much research to discover that at the outbreak of the American Revolution there were established churches in nine of the thirteen colonies. At the time of the founding the positive role of religion in society was simply taken for granted. It was commonly recognized that man is by nature a spiritual and a material being and that government should not impede growth in either domain.

In his Farewell Address, for example, George Washington reminded Americans:

Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. . . . A volume could not trace all their connections with private and public felicity. . . . And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.³

As a principle, religious tolerance prevails throughout the West, but the battle to shape the common mind has been shifted from the pulpit to the classroom. While John Locke, David Hume, and Adam Smith favored religious establishment, their contemporary disciples, recognizing the need for civic unity, are in the forefront of those who would achieve that unity by giving the state exclusive control over education. Whereas David Hume maintained that, "The union of civil and ecclesiastical power serves extremely, in even civilized government, to the maintenance of peace and order," and Blackstone could hold that uniformity in religious matters is a civic good, contemporary defenders of "establishment" have shifted their focus to the control of education, effectively denying parents a choice concerning the education of their children.

In the United States, in the name of separating church and state, the choice of a religiously informed education, though not denied outright, is rendered financially difficult if not impossible for most families at the crucial primary and secondary levels. Unfortunately, with the dismissal of religion often goes that other support of republican government, the classical learning which informed the political philosophy of the founding fathers of the American republic.

At the time of the American founding, Cicero's discourses framed the issues that were addressed in the Declaration of Independence and The U.S. Constitution, topics such as liberty, the nature and source of law, the common good, security, patriotism, toleration, and the role of religion in society. Eighteenth-century readers understood Cicero to be a defender of rectitude, virtue and conservative customs and the indispensable role which religion plays in fostering these values. For Cicero, the highest aim of the ruler is the security and welfare of the community because the common welfare is the indispensable condition for personal advance-

ment.

Security justifies the use of force against aggressors, but the maintenance of morality in the populace is also a fundamental responsibility of the ruler. The ruler, of necessity, must be able to distinguish between what is truly good (the *bonum honestum*) and what is merely expedient (the *bonum utile*). Cicero acknowledges that, from one point of view, the pursuit of the *bonum honestum* is but a means for the realization of the common good in which it finds its purpose and limit; this makes *honestum* a form of *utile*. But Cicero also identifies *honestum* with the common good and *utile* with individual interest.

To what extent, then, is the common good to be pursued against the interest of the individual? This is the issue which confronts policymakers throughout the West. No ancient text can provide a ready answer to contemporary problems, yet the ancients can speak to us across the ages about human fulfillment and the ends of government.

In his own day when he wrote of a failing Rome, Livy recommended to his contemporaries the study of its founding:

I invite the reader's attention to the much more serious consideration of the kind of lives our ancestors lived, of who were the men and what the means, both in politics and war, by which Rome's power was first acquired and subsequently expanded. I would have him trace the processes of our moral decline, to watch first the sinking of the foundations of morality as the old teaching was allowed to lapse, then the final collapse of the whole edifice, and the dark dawning of our modern day when we can neither endure our vices nor face the remedies needed to cure them.⁴

Respect for ancestry, heritage, or tradition determines concretely the emphasis placed on the study of history, languages, art, and on the observance of religious and civic ritual. Failure to appreciate and defend the uniqueness of our moral and spiritual traditions or in the name of tolerance to treat them as only one among many can only end, as Spengler predicted, in the suicide of the West.

Pope Benedict XVI could have been taking a page from Livy when he touched on these issues in his 2008 visit to Paris, again in his October visit to the Quirinal Palace in Rome. Assembled to hear him at the Bernardines, the ancient Cistercian abbey in Paris, were the leading civic leaders of the

French republic, including the minister of culture, two former presidents, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and Jacques Chirac, and the current mayor of Paris.

Given the setting of his lecture, Benedict said, "We are in a place that is associated with the culture of monasticism," reminding his listeners of the Benedictine "l'amour des lettres et le desir de Dieu," and the role that monasticism played in the development of Western civilization. He went on to speak of the nature of the Church herself and of European culture. "A purely positive culture," he said, "which drives the question of God into the subjective realm, as being unscientific, would be the renunciation of reason, the renunciation of its highest possibilities, and hence a disaster for humanity with very grave consequences. What gave Europe's culture its foundations—the search for God and the readiness to listen to Him—remains today the basis for any genuine culture."

Prime Minister François Fillon, in his farewell remarks to the Holy Father, told Benedict that you have reminded us that "the fundamental separation of church and state does not prevent either from dialoging or from being mutually enriched." The prime minister spoke of an "open and reflective secularism" and stated, "The repub-

lic, profoundly secular, respects the existence of the religious fact. She appreciates the role of the Christian tradition in her history and her cultural and immaterial heritage." He thanked Benedict for "placing our civilization on guard regarding its material weakness." A weak acknowledgment of the role of religion in society, to be sure, but nevertheless an expression of what President Sarkozy has called a "more positive *laïcité*."

As a militant Islamic presence in Europe increases, even Brussels's secular elites may be faced with the limits of tolerance and the handicap imposed by their commitment to a purely procedural democracy that, in practice, is destructive of European unity. The United States is confronting the same problem.

Notes

1. Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1926-28).
2. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Maxims and Reflections* (London: Penguin Classics, 1999), 116.
3. Washington's Farewell Address, 1796, www.nhinet.org/ccs/docs/farewell1796.htm.
4. Titus Livius, Preface to his *History* (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1924), I.5.