



Multiculturalism Bites

Susan Mendus on Toleration

David Edmonds:

At the core of liberalism is the idea of tolerance: individuals and groups should be allowed to live as they see fit. The state should tolerate people of all beliefs and all lifestyles, so long as other people are not harmed as a result. But what justification is there for this degree of tolerance? Should we tolerate everything and everyone? Why? Merely because doing so might help keep the peace? Or does tolerance have a moral basis *independent* of its consequences? Won't tolerance lead to the Balkanization of society – separate communities with irreconcilable values? Such questions are coming under intense political scrutiny, with many politicians, such as the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, claiming that the multicultural experiment has failed. Professor Susan Mendus, of York University, a leading theorist on tolerance, put up with our gentle grilling, and the sound of a pneumatic drill. Nigel Warburton: *Sue Mendus, we're going to focus on the question 'Why be tolerant?' Just before we get on to that, some people talk about 'toleration', some people talk about 'tolerance', do you have a preference for either of those words?* Susan Mendus: Well it's true that some people have a preference for 'tolerance' and some for 'toleration'; and some people say that 'tolerance' is most properly applied to individuals whereas 'toleration' is most properly applied to political systems or governments. But personally I tend to use them interchangeably, so I think it doesn't really matter too much whether we use 'tolerance' or 'toleration'.

NW:

Okay then, what is toleration?

SM:

Standardly toleration is defined as allowing, permitting or refraining from interfering with something which you believe to be morally wrong. So, if you behave in a way which I think is morally bad, but I don't prevent you from doing the thing which I think is wrong, that counts as tolerating. Of course underwriting all of that must also be the possibility that I could stop you if I wanted to. So I need to have the power to stop you, and I need to refrain from stopping you, *and* I need to think that what you're doing is wrong.

NW:

So toleration is very much at the heart of politics. We have to understand how we can live together, and an aspect of that has to be ascertaining the limits of toleration.

SM:

That's right, we have to live together whilst we have different ideas about what's the best way to live. That's what lies at the heart of the problem of toleration. I suppose there are two questions that arise which are then absolutely crucial. One is, 'Why might we be tolerant?' As a society, or as a government, why might a government tolerate homosexuality, atheism, Catholicism? These are all real examples of cases where toleration has been very, very vexed. So, why might a government be tolerant? And secondly, 'What are the limits of that toleration?' because, however tolerant a government, it's not going to be tolerant of *everything*, and we wouldn't want it to be tolerant of everything. I take it: we wouldn't want the government to be tolerant of rapists, or murderers, or terrorism. So toleration has got to have its limits. Then the second question then is 'What are those limits?'

NW:

Isn't the answer going to be different in different cases? How are we going to have a general theory of toleration if there's such a wide range of things that are up for consideration as possible candidates for toleration?

SM:

I think there are really two questions there. One is a question about whether the answer will be different for different cases. Another is a question about the range of cases that there'll be. Will the answer be different in different cases? Well, a lot of the history of political philosophy is a history of trying to find one answer. So if you go back to the 17th Century, to Locke's 'Letter on Toleration', Locke's big ambition is to give a principled reason for tolerating people of different religious conviction. What Locke says is we know that in many cases people tolerate because they haven't got a choice, because they have no power to do otherwise, or they tolerate in order to keep political peace.

But what Locke is looking for is a principled moral reason for tolerating across the piece. That's a big ambition, and I don't think he fully succeeds in that ambition. Then you've got a second question: historically, most questions of toleration were questions of religious toleration. In the Western liberal tradition that's where questions of toleration arose - as in the wars of religion, 16th and 17th Century, where people are killing each other furiously for religious reasons, questions of toleration arise in a very acute form. But they're questions of religious toleration.

So even if it's possible to provide a single answer to the question 'Why be tolerant as far as religion is concerned?' it may be that that isn't going to give us an answer to the question 'Why be tolerant as far as sexuality is concerned?...as far as pornography is concerned?...as far as blasphemy is concerned?'

NW: So what was John Locke's answer in this case, to the question 'Why should we tolerate people with different religions?'

SM:

I'm not sure that there's any consensus on the answer, but there are two strong candidates. One very, very familiar, very powerful argument is an argument from irrationality. So Locke's answer is that in the case of religious belief, what really matters is that each individual believe the right thing to secure salvation. And in that context Locke then says, 'But no amount of political coercion can persuade you, compel you to believe.' So he says fire and the sword are the weapons available to the state, to politics, and fire and the sword will not serve to change your mind.

So it's irrational for the magistrate, it's irrational for politicians, to try to compel people to believe or to persecute those who don't believe the right thing, because persecuting people isn't going to change their mind. Another thought which is connected is that in any case trying to dabble with or interfere with religious belief is not the business of politics. Locke makes a very clear distinction between politics on the one hand and religion on the other, and he says the magistrate is concerned with outward things: how you behave in the world, with whether you obey the law or whether you conduct yourself properly, whether you're a good citizen, that's the business of magistrate's outward form of behaviour. Religion is a very much more an inward matter and is nothing to do with the magistrate.

So it's two thoughts: the magistrate cannot change your mind; and even if he could he would be doing the wrong thing, he'd be interfering.

NW:

That makes him sound very much like a modern liberal, but actually Catholics and atheists were excluded from this toleration weren't they?

SM:

That's right. It sounds like a modern liberal because Locke probably is the father of modern liberalism. It's true that he notoriously does not extend toleration to Catholics and atheists. He does not extend tolerance to Atheists because he thinks that since they believe in no God

their promises cannot be relied upon. It's a kind of Dostoevskyan advance: if God is dead anything is possible - people who don't believe in God well they're just going to do any old thing. So that's the end of atheists.

In Locke's day, atheism was a very, very radical position to hold, very suspect position indeed. Catholics even more interesting; the reason Locke is suspicious of Catholics is because they muddle together the political and the religious. They bear allegiance to a foreign power, namely the pope, and the pope of course is a political power and a religious power. Locke's thought is insofar as they think of the pope as a political power, we should be suspicious of them too because they confuse things that should be kept separate.

NW:

Well I can see parallels there between Locke's age and our age where, in terms of Islam, there are clearly connections between the political and the religious.

SM:

That's right, and that's what poses problems, really. It's one of the things that poses problems in any society that's multicultural, multiracial, multi-faith, where people with very different understandings of the relationship between politics and religion must nevertheless try to live together in something that looks like harmony.

NW:

Now we've talked a little bit about the 17th Century and John Locke's position, but where are we now in the 21st Century?

SM:

Well, Locke as I said is really the father of liberalism. So the liberalism that we have now in the 21st Century is a liberalism that's been handed down to us through the years. And I suppose its most famous advocate now is John Rawls who advances the theory of toleration in his 1993 book, *Political Liberalism*. And the starting point of Rawls' political liberalism is the claim that political philosophy depends on the society it addresses. Modern society is characterised by what Rawls calls the fact of pluralism. That's to say society like ours, Britain, the United States, Europe; these are societies which are suffused with people who have very, very different understandings of the best way to lead one's life. There are atheists, there are Muslims, there are Catholics, there are hedonists, there are jazz saxophonists, there are sports people, there are all kinds of different people with different understandings of the best way to lead one's life.

And this pluralism is not going to go away. That pluralism is a permanent fact, says Rawls, and what's more, we shouldn't be sorry about it. Rawls thinks that it's not the case that we will all converge on a single truth about religion in an ideal world. Rawls thinks plurality is the natural outcome of the operation of reason under conditions of freedom. So he thinks it's to be celebrated that when we all think about religion, let's say, we'll come up with different answers, and we shouldn't regret the fact that in the world there are lots of people who think very differently from us.

NW:

On John Rawls' view, why should we be tolerant? Just because there's diversity, and maybe that's inevitable, it doesn't mean we should tolerate the views that we think are false, surely.

SM:

This is the heart of the matter now it seems to me. One important answer is that we should allow people to do things which we believe to be wrong because it's important they should lead their own life in their own way. And that's the answer that John Stuart Mill gives: it's important that you cut your suit from your own cloth and not from cloth that I've given you. So that's one thought that appeals to what's commonly known as the autonomy of individuals, that you should make your own mistakes, that you should lead your life the way you want to because that has a value in itself even if it's wrong. So that's one thought. But another thought which is I think is more closely John Rawls' thought is that the diversity of opinion doesn't imply that all except one opinion is wrong. He seems to think that it's quite

possible that there be a variety of very different views about the way to lead one's life and that there is no single right answer to that question 'Which way should you lead your life?' Here's an example: suppose you are a Quaker and you have a belief in, you're very committed to, a simple way of life: no ornament, no decoration, you would be a very self-effacing sort of person. There are many virtues associated with such life, and this is a point that's made in the film of *The Third Man*, those are not the virtues that are going to give you artistic glory or that will deliver Florence. On the ferris wheel in *The Third Man*, Orson Welles' character says 'In Florence there were hundreds of years of bloodshed and murder, and we had the Renaissance. In Switzerland, 300 years of peace and tranquillity, and what did that deliver? The Cuckoo Clock.'

There's a serious point behind that: certain virtues are compatible with certain ways of life, but not with all good ways of life, not with all virtues. And so if you want artistic splendour, and you want, you want the Renaissance, you have to have people who are grand and proud and arrogant, and profligate and overweening. And it seems to me that Rawls' thought is the thought: the Quaker and the Renaissance Florentine exhibit very, very different virtues. But if we're asked 'Which is the right way to lead your life?' well, it's not as simple as that. We don't want the world that's full of Quakers or a world that's full of the Medici.

NW:

So far we've talked about why we should be tolerant - it's an acknowledgement of individuals' autonomy about how they shape their own lives, that's the John Stuart Millian view. And also the Rawlsian position that toleration reflects the truth, as he sees it, that there could be more than one way of living is incommensurable, that there's no way of deciding between the different ways of living so we should just accept that and tolerate diversity. Is that exhaustive? Are those the main arguments about for being tolerant?

SM:

Well I'm looking now really at arguments for toleration which think of toleration as a moral good and not just something that's pragmatic. So let's go back to Locke again. Before Locke, there are philosophers who says it's important to be tolerant because otherwise there'll be riots in the streets. So you put up with atheists in certain circumstances or with Catholics, just for a bit of peace and tranquillity. But John Locke is the father of liberalism because he thinks that there are *moral* reasons for doing this, and Rawls carries on that tradition. Rawls thinks that it's morally important to tolerate others. And so within political liberalism, toleration isn't just what he calls a *modus vivendi*. It's not just a way of muddling along together, it's a moral belief that we owe it to others to allow them to lead their lives in their own way.

NW:

That's very interesting because when somebody like Angela Merkel who says 'multiculturalism has failed.' She presumably meant that as a pragmatic solution to rubbing along side-by-side it hasn't produce this peaceful outcome where nobody every riots, where nobody ever is in conflict. But that's very different from what you're talking about which is a moral obligation to respect other people's autonomy or to give people enough space to develop ideas, which may turn out to be the best possible lives for them.

SM:

Yes, I'm very unclear what politicians mean when they say 'I hasn't worked.' Some people think that for multiculturalism 'to work', we must end up with everybody thinking roughly the same, there must be an assimilation of some sort. Now, Rawls' thought is in a way quite the reverse of that, it is that we aren't going to reach consensus, and it's a good thing that we don't reach consensus. The best society that we can aim for is the society in which people retain their different and conflicting conceptions of the good, but where we respect the conceptions of the good that other people have even though they aren't ours.

NW:

Why should you respect somebody? Surely all you need to do with toleration is permit them to hold that belief. Respect seems to imply that you think what they're saying is somehow good.

SM:

It doesn't seem to me that I need to withhold respect from everybody who has what I take to be the wrong answer; otherwise I wouldn't respect many people at all. So it's inherent in a liberal society that we recognise that the world is full of people who have different beliefs from us, incompatible beliefs. But nonetheless, we respect their right to hold those beliefs. But of course you can't respect absolutely everything that people do, and Locke is clear about this and John Rawls is clear about this, that toleration has its limits. As I said at the beginning, we won't be tolerating rapists, we won't be tolerating thieves, we won't be tolerating murderers or terrorists. And then of course the sixty-four-dollar question kicks in, 'Where are the limits of toleration?'

NW:

It strikes me that you're obviously committed to toleration, or tolerance, and you must be aware of areas in Britain or America where governments haven't been as tolerant as you would like them to be. What would you say could be done to make life better for us?

SM:

I'm not sure I have an answer to the question of what politicians could do to make life better for us - not in the short time anyway. But as a liberal I find quite a lot to be sad about in modern British society, and I suppose the thing I would hone in on is the felt need for separate schools, particularly for separate faith schools, not because I think faith is unimportant, on the contrary I think faith is very important. But the sadness I have is the sadness that Jewish people, Catholic people, Muslim people, Church of England people, wish to educate their children separately from children of other faiths. And it seems to me the aspiration for a genuinely multicultural society should be the aspiration that we can indeed live together in the same classroom, in the same society, in the same communities whilst respecting and acknowledging the different beliefs that we have.

NW:

People often accuse philosophers of not making any difference in the world. It seems to me that here's an area where philosophers have a huge potential to affect what actually happens in politics. Do you think they're being heard by politicians?

SM:

I think politicians ask philosophers to speak quite a lot; I'm not sure that they listen as well as they should. It's certainly true that here are areas where philosophers can draw attention to the limits of political possibility. So to go back to the case of those politicians who say multiculturalism hasn't worked, I'd be interested to know what's meant by working here, what counts as success, and what is it appropriate to aim for in a multicultural society. I think philosophers have a huge amount to contribute there, to the question of what is it that we're trying to do, what can we legitimately hope for. Because if the hope is the hope that sooner or later all immigrants from different societies and different cultures will get to be like me, white and secular and liberal, it's not realistic, but I'm not sure it's even desirable to be in a society that's of that kind. So politicians need to think about what they mean when they say 'Multiculturalism hasn't worked.'