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The historical path of religious tolerance and its justification: A comprehensive analysis

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Abstract

The concept of religious tolerance has undergone significant transformations throughout history. Early developments can be traced back to the Roman Empire, where enactments such as the Edict of Milan aimed to grant equal rights to Christians and pagans. During the Middle Ages, peaceful coexistence between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam became a concern, with thinkers like Ibn Rushd and Maimonides emphasizing interreligious dialogue and respect. Sufism, Christian-humanist notions, and Renaissance arguments for tolerance further shaped the concept.

The Enlightenment Age played a pivotal role in the development of religious tolerance. Philosophers such as Spinoza, Bayle, and Locke presented influential theories advocating freedom of belief and thought. Their ideas laid the foundation for modern liberal perspectives on human rights, emphasizing the importance of a secular state and religious freedom. In the 20th century, the establishment of intentional laws and international treaties in support of religious tolerance was observed. This paper examines the evolution of religious tolerance, its justifications, and the factors influencing its development as a social, political, and ethical norm

Keywords: Religious Tolerance; Justification; Renaissance Age; Human Rights

1. Introduction

Religious tolerance is the capacity to accept and peacefully coexist with people of diverse religious affiliations, beliefs, or faiths. Embracing religious tolerance fosters a peaceful environment that supports economic and cultural progress, education, unity, and national cohesion [1]. Religious diversity is common in many countries, and people must learn to accept each other's religious beliefs and practices [2]. Religious tolerance allows citizens to live without fear of discrimination. This secure environment encourages innovation, growth, and development. Tolerant countries attract more investments and economic opportunities. However, maintaining unity requires continuously cultivating the mindset of tolerance [3].

Religious tolerance is complex, encompassing varied meanings, diverse viewpoints, paradoxical elements, and inherent limitations, which have evolved and shifted over time in response to specific conflicts [4]. It is not a static or universally applicable idea but a concept that has developed historically. The tumultuous events of the European religious civil wars in the 16th and 17th centuries significantly influenced the contemporary conception of tolerance [6]. Subsequently, the Enlightenment period from the late 17th to 18th centuries gave rise to new interpretations of tolerance as a direct reaction to these conflicts [5].

This paper examines the historical evolution of religious tolerance across different regions and periods. It analyses the underlying justifications and rationale used to promote and defend the principle of religious tolerance. This

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comprehensive analysis will identify the key factors, events, and philosophical/theological arguments that have shaped the development of religious tolerance as a social, political, and ethical norm over time.

2. The Historical Path of the Religious Tolerance Concept

2.1. Early and Middle Age Perspectives on Religious Tolerance

The concept of religious tolerance has a long history of development. It has been discussed since early [4] [6]. The first time this term appeared was in the enactments of the Roman emperor Galerius (311 CE) and the Edict of Milan (313 CE), announced by Constantine Augustus and Licinius Augustus [7]. These enactments aimed to give equal rights to Christians and pagan people to enjoy their religious liberty within the Roman Empire [8].

Later, peaceful coexistence between the three Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) was an issue of deep concern during the Middle Ages. For example, Ibn Rushd, or "Averroes" (1126–1198), as he is known in the Western tradition, was a strong supporter of Aristotelianism; he made a great effort to reintroduce Aristotle's teachings, which mainly focused on the systematic concept of logic [9]. When Ibn Rushd combined philosophy and religion in his writings, he pioneered a new idea. He considered no contradiction between theology and philosophy, which is the path to God. Moreover, he took a firm stand against those who use religion to manipulate and control people [10].

Ibn Rushd's philosophical contributions were mirrored at the time by Jewish and Catholic thinkers such as Maimonides (1138–1204) and Raimundus Lullus (1232–1316), who made significant contributions to intercultural and interreligious dialogues [9]. For example, in *Ars Magna*, the essential product of the philosopher and theologian Lullus's thoughts, he exchanged his views about the three Abrahamic religions using a rational approach to convince Jews and Muslims of the truth of the Christian faith. Nevertheless, the *Ars Magna* also pointed out Lullus's openness to other monotheistic religions. He discussed the traditions that all religions have in common and stated that there are some religious and moral truths in other religions [6].

Jalal Uddin Rumi, the well-known Sufi poet (1207–1273), was a forerunner of his time and significantly influenced both Western and Arab thinkers [9]. He defended the universality of faith by saying, "Christian, Jew, Muslim, Shaman, Zoroastrian, stone, ground, mountain, river, each has a secret way of being with the mystery, unique and not to be judged" [11].

The German philosopher Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464) introduced an essential step towards a more thorough Christian-humanist notion of tolerance. In *De Pace Fidei* (1453), he presented a theory of "one religion in various rites." Even if this one religion remains a Catholic one, in his view, he made successful efforts to focus on the mutual elements between religions. Erasmus of Rotterdam, a Dutch philosopher and Catholic theologian who lived from 1466 to 1536, took this idea further by proposing a religious unity based on a small amount of faith to stop religious fights over what Erasmus thought were unimportant matters of religion [12].

In the *Six Books of the Commonwealth* by the Renaissance philosopher Jean Bodin (1576), he justified the need for religious tolerance to bring stability to the state. Bodin's arguments were based on the idea that protecting political sovereignty was more important than safeguarding religious unity and that tolerance was the best way to deal with religious diversity and conflict [6].

2.2. Enlightenment Age and the Evolution of Religious Tolerance

The rise of philosophical theories related to religious tolerance occurred in the Enlightenment Age when church and state became independent and respectable arguments for religious tolerance blossomed [13]. According to these views, the shift to a tolerance culture was motivated by a combination of urbanized trade and the Protestant Reformation that began in 1517, as well as a reaction to Europe's bloody religious wars in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, which did not succeed in creating a lasting compromise of variation between Catholicism and the eight different Protestant faiths [4]. The Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) ceased with the Peace of Westphalia (1648). This peace treaty organized European laws to allow Christian minorities to exist [14].

Overall, the writings of the Enlightenment Age were significant for further elaborating modern thinking on religious tolerance [6]. For instance, in the 17th century, they produced several theories about religious tolerance. Baruch de Spinoza (1632–1677), Pierre Bayle (1647–1706), and John Locke (1632–1704) are the authors of the most well-known versions of these theories [4] [6].

In *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670), Baruch de Spinoza emphasized that the state's role is to guarantee peace. Hence, it has the authority to control the external practice of religion. However, the state has limited authority regarding the right to freedom of belief and thought [15].

The contributions to Pierre Bayle's *Commentaire philosophique* (1686) are the most thorough attempt to refute the debates against using force in religious matters. Bayle did not get into the idea of a spiritual conscience, which must not and indeed cannot be enforced. Instead, he argued that every person, regardless of their faith, even atheists, has an inner "natural light" that can adjust people's moral compass, which means that ethical principles are not necessarily reached by religions only [6] [16]. Relating ethics and epistemological foundations in this manner, Bayle was the first intellectual to pursue and elaborate a globally valid argument for tolerance, one that creates a universal toleration approach that includes people of various religions as well as those considered infidels [16].

In the late 17th century, John Locke presented a more revolutionary theory. When he differentiated between the state and church, Locke laid the cornerstone of the modern liberal perspective on human rights. Locke discusses the responsibility of the state in protecting its citizens' "civil interests" in *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689), while the state has nothing to do with the "care of the soul." These things are considered private affairs between the person and God. According to him, churches are no more than powerless voluntary associations [17].

In the 18th century, the idea of a secular state was further developed. The American and French revolutions added a firmer and more consistent foundation to religious freedom. Enlightenment French philosophers discussed toleration on different grounds. Like Bodin, they focused on the state's political stability and religious coexistence [6]. For example, Montesquieu discussed in *On the Spirit of the Laws* (1748) the importance of religious tolerance to ensure political stability and peace. However, he argued that there is a limit to the approval of new faiths or modifications to the current ones [18].

In Jean-Jacques Rousseau's works, the distinction between the two aspects (political and inter-religious) is more apparent. In *The Social Contract* (1762), he tried to eliminate religious conflict and intolerance by making a "civic religion" that everyone had to follow. In *Emile* (1762), he explained the importance of a person's conscience and the importance of a "natural religion" that wasn't dogmatic [19].

On Liberty (1859), by John Stuart Mill, symbolizes the move to a contemporary understanding of tolerance that is unconcerned with religious harmony and does not limit the discussion of toleration to religious differences [6] [7]. Mill says tolerance is also needed in modern society to deal with cultural, social, and political differences that can't be solved [20].

2.3. Non-Western Forms of Religious Tolerance

Surprisingly, non-Western forms of religious tolerance that are not based on the norms of the liberal tradition have existed in Islamic countries since the early centuries. The Ottoman Empire's "millet system" offers one such possibility of non-Western alternatives to religious tolerance. This system was based on Islamic instructions to treat non-Muslim minorities under Islamic control. Islam was the state religion in this system, although the Jewish and Christian faiths were recognized and permitted to exist independently. The "millet system" allowed non-Muslims to rule themselves according to their religious affiliations [21].

Nevertheless, under the "millet system," people were not allowed to convert to a different faith than their own or to adopt a religion or faith not recognized by the state. The "millet system" was created to protect established communal norms, not personal ones. Kaplan (2009) don't agree with the millet system, but they both agree that it helped religious minorities become strong and united and brought most religious groups closer together [21].

The American writer and philosopher William James Durant (1885–1981), who is well known for his work *The Story of Civilization* conducted an interesting comparative analysis and concluded that Muslims showed and practiced higher tolerance than Christians in the Middle Ages. He mentioned that under the Umayyad Dynasty (661–750), the amount of tolerance demonstrated by Muslim caliphs toward non-Muslim people – specifically Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, and Sabians – was rare in the Christian world. He said significant efforts were made to preserve and repair their temples and churches. He continued by stating that the state's non-Muslim residents enjoyed considerable freedom to perform their rituals in line with their religious principles. They were also seen as independent because they didn't have to follow the religious rules set by Muslim judges and intellectuals [4].

According to Sir Thomas Arnold (1864-1930), a British orientalist, Muslims did not use coercive conversion as some Christians did. If Muslims had been intolerant of Christianity, they would have annihilated it. As believed by Sir Arnold, if any of the devout caliphs had pursued a strategy of religious oppression and extermination, he might have easily removed the Christian religion, just as Isabella and Ferdinand had obliterated Islam from Spain. They would have quickly deported Christianity the way the Jews were exiled from England for almost three centuries [22].

Lothrop Stoddard (1883–1951) acknowledged Umar's leniency and respect for the sacred places of Christians. He stated that Umar protected the sanctity of Christian holy places and monuments with the utmost care. Subsequent caliphs maintained the same strategy of religious tolerance. They erected no impediments to the yearly pilgrimage of Christian pilgrims from every corner of Christendom to Jerusalem. While there are historical cases of Muslim rulers mistreating non-Muslim minorities, it is essential to remember that they did so in violation of the Qur'an and Sunnah's fundamental teachings [23]. Nevertheless, despite the history of religious tolerance in Islamic regions, it is strongly believed that without the support of Western liberal culture on the issue of religious tolerance, the movement of religious tolerance may be a fleeting intellectual trend that won't last long [4].

2.4. Evolution of Religious Tolerance as International Law in the 20th Century

The development of the religious tolerance concept as an intentional law supported by world governments occurred in the 20th century. Indeed, throughout the twentieth century, various international treaties, declarations, and conventions codified shared norms relating to religious and philosophical freedom [24]. Many people have become aware of the fact that the progress of humanity depends to a great extent on the fundamental right of religious freedom. That commitment has been reflected in Article 18 of "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights" (1948), announced by the UN General Assembly: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom to manifest his religion or belief, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, in teaching, practice, worship, practice and observance" [25].

Following the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 1965 Vatican decree *Dignitatis Humanae* (Religious Freedom) confirmed everyone's right to freely choose and practice their religion [7]. Article 18 of the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights also has comparable provisions [25].

The 1981 United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Intolerance and Discrimination based on Religion or Belief establishes a pattern for promoting religious tolerance. Although it needs to provide more ways to ensure its implementation, the Declaration is the most important statement of modern religious and belief freedom principles [26].

In 1986, a vast assembly representing 120 religions gathered in Assisi to celebrate the first World Day of Prayer for Peace. The struggle for religious freedom has never been stopped. Various calls to promote religious tolerance have actively considered the value of peaceful coexistence to global security [7]. However, efforts to create an enforceable, binding agreement relating solely to religious or belief freedom have been fruitless [26].

Araújo et al. summarized the long history of the religious tolerance concept into four stages [5]:

2.4.1. The Permission Conception

Religious tolerance is a minimal form where a governing authority permits a minority to practice their beliefs without challenging the dominant authority. It is characterized by hierarchy, asymmetry, and non-reciprocity, often resulting in discrimination and limited rights for the minority.

2.4.2. The Coexistence Conception

Religious tolerance is primarily a strategy for avoiding conflict rather than an inherent value. Conflicting groups tolerate each other to ensure security and possess relatively equal status.

2.4.3. The Respect Conception

Religious tolerance is rooted in respecting individuals as autonomous beings. It entails a reciprocal and non-hierarchical relationship where equal rights are acknowledged at the state level. This form of tolerance emerged with constitutional states during revolutionary periods, enabling the coexistence of diverse religious beliefs while maintaining equal societal membership.

2.4.4. *The Esteem Conception*

Tolerance goes beyond respect and appreciates cultural differences as valuable and desirable for society. Plurality is regarded as a fundamental value alongside equality. While some question its categorization as tolerance, proponents argue that the unity of reason and equality of rights necessitates the recognition of plurality as a significant societal value.

3. Justifications of Religious Tolerance

Religious tolerance has various systematic reasons, including theological, pragmatic, ethical, and epistemic considerations [6]. However, pragmatism is the most explicit approach to giving grounds for religious tolerance [4]. Some religious behaviors may be unacceptable to members of our community, and as a group, we can stop them from occurring. However, the price of oppression may provoke public unrest and even result in civil wars. As a result, we can see that it is in both our own and other people's best interests to be tolerant of other people's religious practices [27].

Nonetheless, pragmatic explanations for religious tolerance have been seen as inadequate by many supporters since they depend on circumstances that might change. Suppose the only reason we should be tolerant of a religious group's behavior is that the costs of repression don't outweigh the benefits. If that's the only reason, we should not tolerate them when the situation changes and they are more readily repressed [4].

Non-pragmatic justifications for religious tolerance are connected with liberal views. The liberal approach offers a remarkable disengagement between the state and religious entities. In classical liberal traditions, the state has authority over the public domain but no authority to intervene in private life [27]. Religious activity is often considered private and immune to government intrusion. The modern explanations of liberalism elaborate further on this point by asserting that the state's role entails non-interference in religious affairs and stands as a neutral party between different religious communities within society. The state should maintain a neutral and impartial attitude so rival religious groups don't interfere with anyone else's practices [28].

In liberal traditions, religious tolerance is based on three main ideas: Pierre Bayle's "uncertainty principle" in the spiritual sphere (1685), John Locke's "impossibility of compulsion in religious matters" (1689) [4], and John Stuart Mill's "value of individual autonomy" (1859) [29].

As Bayle (1685) states, religious believers need to open their minds and consider the possibility that their religious convictions may be wrong and those of their numerous adversaries are correct. They need to accept that other religious ideas may be valid. They should also want to learn about and value other religious truths [16].

Locke (1689) is often read as advocating religious tolerance because religious oppression is unsuccessful and illogical [17]. Nevertheless, his assumption that compulsion cannot change religious beliefs is not expressly supported by relevant psychological data and has been vigorously contested by Waldron (1991). Even if a devout believer cannot be forced to change their faith, different forms of coercion can be used to stop them from being missionaries for their religion and teaching religious practices to future generations. This may be enough for religious fanatics to feel like they've won [4].

Among modern liberals, the Millian justification is the most well-known and strongly related to the universal belief in religious freedom that liberals hold (Perry, 2009). Mill (1859) gave three primary reasons in favor of tolerance. According to his "harm principle," the use of political or social authority is only justified if it is essential to avert substantial harm to one person caused by another, not to paternalistically enforce some concept of the good [30]. Secondly, tolerance is supported on practical grounds, as truthful and false opinions contribute to positive social learning processes. Finally, tolerance for unusual "experiments of living" is romantically defended by emphasizing the importance of the uniqueness and originality of individuals [31].

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, religious tolerance is a vital part of societies, helping to promote peace, progress, and unity within nations. Throughout history, religious tolerance has been shaped by different ideas, events, and societal changes. It has evolved from giving fair rights to specific religious groups to valuing understanding, respect, and peaceful living among various beliefs.

The above summary highlights the complex history of religious tolerance, showing its many forms and the reasons supporting its acceptance. Looking at religious tolerance in both the East and West shows that religious tolerance has been many things historically: a strategy for maintaining power by granting some form of liberty to minorities; a policy for harmony and peace between various religious groups that share a mutual core; a term for respecting people's freedom; or the moral approach that enables the creation of a productive pluralistic society.

The reasons for religious tolerance cover theological, practical, ethical, and knowledge-based considerations. Tolerance helps prevent social unrest and conflicts arising from religious repression, promoting stability and societal progress. Ethically, it fits with liberal values that support personal freedom and respect for different beliefs. Knowledge-wise, religious tolerance acknowledges that people's understanding is limited, creating a space where diverse perspectives can enhance academic discussions and intellectual growth.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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