

***Tolerancia: Teoría y Práctica en la Edad Media*, ed. Rubén Peretó Rivas, *Textes et Études du Moyen Age 64* (Portugal: Porto 2012) xxi + 295 pp.**

Historically tolerance has travelled choppy waters. *Que drôle d'histoire*, Voltaire may have said. Gregorio Piaia tops it off by adding, “che molteplice e varie, se non proprio infinite, sono le vie percorse dall’idea di tolleranza nel suo faticoso e talora ambiguo affermarsi” (“that multiple and varied, if not infinite are the ways travelled by the idea of tolerance in reaching its wearied and at times ambiguous affirmation”—195). Piaia’s is just one of the many gems collected by Rubén Peretó Rivas. The essays included are proceedings of the Colloquio de Mendoza (Arg.) from June 2011. That conference—a collective instrument of scholarship that should be more prevalent in our country than it is—performs the service that all such colloquia should do, and that is its transactions become an inventory of current opinion, a register of scholarly interest. All sixteen of the essays gathered are learned, sensitive, and sensible. Their extent edges somewhat beyond the bounds of what is normally considered medieval, but one can hardly complain of the inclusion of the

sublime thoughts of Gregory of Nisa or those equally sublime of Nicholas of Cusa. Here the editor performs a useful service when he contributes in his Introduction an elegant summary of each of the essays. This allows the reviewer the license to focus on features in common, notable alignments of thought, and greater issues, but also, regretfully, to neglect more localized works that are of equal worth.

The first essay by Ernesto Arguello places Thomas Aquinas at the entrepôt of thoughts on the subject of tolerance; he does so by engaging Thomas in his favorite practice of making distinctions. Against the flat-out charge that Thomas thought the heretic ought in no way be tolerated, Arguello introduces levels of offense and varieties of punishment. Always the thought is to spare the heretic but crush the heresy and to proceed with patience and understanding. Thus, Thomas advocates at first several admonitions; should these first measures not succeed due to obduracy there is in reserve the punishment of excommunication, prior to the last resort of turning the offender over to the civil authorities. The principle operating is that of finally eliminating “the greater evil.” If growing modern sentiment opposes execution of any one at any time, “medieval philosophy considers heresy to be so terrible an evil because it considers Faith to be a precious good” (10).

Christian thinkers from Augustine to Aquinas developed a relationship with tolerance that was neither love nor hate, rather ambiguous at best, even as the word itself was slowly sliding over from its original meaning (to endure with patience and fortitude) to a secondary meaning indicating one person’s granting of allowance toward another person or cause. These thinkers allowed tolerance a limited usefulness regarding such sideline offenses as brothels, the practice of usury, the necessary activities of minority groups, etc. The public executioner (“verdugo”) is granted clemency, according to Augustine, because his action is a necessary evil. They could tolerate that of which they disapproved. *Ecclesia non approbat sed permittit*. (Silvana Filippi, in *Tolerancia* 112–113; for a summary of this mode of thought, see also 115).

The essay by Francisco Bastitta Harriet indicates that other understandings of faith were available along with the “greater good” that outweighs the “greater evil.” These have much to do with the image of God. Much of the argument of tolerance depends upon the accepted nature of the Godhead. And this in turn depends in part (and only in part) upon our sense of life and of nature. If our experience is harsh and life one of struggle, then our conception of divinity might well be equal to that rule. Yet Gregory of Nisa would argue (and Erasmus follows) that if we are made in the image of God, then we too must be tolerant and “philanthropic.” And if we are all God’s children then we should treat those who are different (the “other”) with the same love and forbearance. One sees two philosophies already available to medieval thought with profound social consequences. Gregory condemned slavery and espoused the goodness of women and children. His doctrines tended to advance social equality particularly between man and wife. Nevertheless, there are two principles (even if they were left at times unspoken) on which most Christians held firm: one was the conformation (“adequation”) of the mind to the world and the other was the unmolested availability of truth, thus avoiding the gap

(highlighted in this book's subtitle) between theory and practice. The same pragmatic allowances toward tolerance were not necessary in modern thought because it differed quite clearly on each of these points. It observed an "abstinentia epistemica," or suspension of any prohibition toward tolerance; it admitted human fallibility and the inaccessibility on the part of humans to any certain truths (102–103). There is no continuum between medieval thought about tolerance and the modern. In fact, there is only opposition: the one upholding the unity of faith by virtue of the "adequation" of the human mind to the world, and the recognizability of truth; the other pleading the variability and fallibility of human opinion, the uncertainties implicit in the world and the absence of anything like coherence. The growth and spread of skepticism contributes to a suspension of belief, thus abetting the growth of tolerance.

This is not quite the viewpoint of two thinkers who receive special billing in this compilation—two essays devoted to Nicholas of Cusa and a major essay detailing in its historical development the complex thought of Marsilio of Padua. The essays concerning the Cusano, by Claudia d'Amico and Paula Pico Estrada, respectively, engage a similar paradigm. Humankind has a natural thirst to uncover truth, this they can only find in unity, and ultimately this unity is God. For purposes of contrast I here simplify the much more intricate itinerary explicated by the two exegetes. But it does not stop there: among the various religions this common quest manifests itself in different rites, according to their different times and places. One does not go to war over the differences among rites because they are all subordinate to the fundamental principles. As with the more beneficent anthropology of Gregory of Nisa, humankind made in the image of God is imbued with a natural desire for intellectual justice. For this reason the tolerance exhibited by Nicholas of Cusa has nothing to do with the toleration of some socially necessary evils, but has rather the much more comprehensive force of emphasizing unity amid difference (Estrada 261).

One of the brazen impediments to the doctrine of tolerance was the papal claim to supreme authority. The power shift to the secular monarchical state abetted the advancement of tolerance—hence Gregory Piaia's tracking the spread of Marsilio's *Defensor pacis* until it found its great centers of scholarly appeal in the late nineteenth and at the turn of the twentieth century. But it was not a voice crying in the wilderness prior to then. In fact it was anticipated for some decades by Dante's great *De Monarchia*, with its magnificent Third Book, so underappreciated by critics, yet which is essential to an understanding Dante's neo-Ghibellenism in the *Comedia*. But these fourteenth-century programs were dependent upon the advent of the Emperor, a universal power able to quell the claims of the Papacy. The great separation of powers would not become a reality until the fuller development of the nation state. Marsilio's arguments for the separation of Church and State, in fact, its subordination of Church to State, found new life in the sixteenth century, with the Henrician reforms in England and the arguments of Arminius and Grotius in the Netherlands. It stripped the Church of the dread powers of excommunication. In its arguments in favor of consensus in the body politic, it opened the way for liberty of conscience to be allied with tolerance (an alliance that George Sabine disputes in his *History of Political Theory*, 299–300). One can insert an intermediate development between the two and that is the notion of Christian

liberty, so advanced by Luther (and by Erasmus, too, prior to his abjuration). But Professor Piaia's discourse does not end with a totally rosy picture, the Hegelian march of freedom. The supremacy of the State also led to the opposite of toleration, and that is the triumph of totalitarianism.

Tolerance played and plays to mixed reviews. One cannot shake off its sense of condescension, a residue from its etymological origins. But as Voltaire reiterated there are certain values that tolerance brings which cannot be denied. Tolerance never incited civil war, while intolerance filled the world with carnage. Tolerance allowed peoples of different sects and ethnic or religious backgrounds to live and thrive in peace, which cannot be said of bigotry. It all depends upon the contrasting terms of the dichotomy; almost anything would be superior to intolerance and bigotry. What happens to tolerance if we place it into the balance with respect? If tolerance is in the nature of an allowance, given on the part of a majority partner to a minority partner, then just as freely as it was given so it can be withdrawn. The revocation of the edict of Nantes (1685) followed without too much scruple the very edict itself (1598). There seems to be a greater reliability of relationship in respect.

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