

# Three Concepts of Tolerance

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## SUMMARY

This article begins by briefly discussing two well-described concepts of tolerance, and offering some acknowledged critiques of both. It then highlights Jesus' counter-cultural practice of table-fellowship and draws on this to pro-

vide a third model of tolerance, based around the art and science of conversation. It suggests that the contemporary dinner party provides a concrete example of this tolerance which, with appropriate modifications, could be scalable to provide a paradigm for tolerance at the macro, public level of discourse.

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## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG:

Dieser Artikel beginnt mit einer kurzen Diskussion über zwei gut erläuterte Konzepte von Toleranz und präsentiert einige anerkannte Kritiken zu beiden. Dann beleuchtet er die gegen die gängige Kultur laufende Praxis der Tischgemeinschaft, wie sie Jesus praktiziert

hat. Auf dieser Grundlage stellt er ein drittes Modell der Toleranz vor, das sich an der Kunst und Wissenschaft der Konversation orientiert. Er schlägt als konkretes Beispiel dafür die zeitgemäße „Dinner Party“ vor, die bei angemessener Veränderung als ein expansionsfähiges Modell für Toleranz auf der Makroebene des öffentlichen Diskurses dienen könnte.

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## RÉSUMÉ

Dans cet article, l'auteur commence par exposer deux conceptions de la tolérance, ainsi que les critiques qui leur sont souvent opposées. Il s'appuie ensuite sur la pratique de Jésus qui pouvait manger en compagnie de toutes sortes de gens pour présenter un troisième

modèle de tolérance, fondé sur l'art et la science de la conversation. Il suggère que la convivialité autour d'une table ou les repas en commun sont un exemple concret contemporain de pratique de la tolérance qui peut servir de modèle paradigmatique dans le discours public sur la tolérance.

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## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

'Can you tell stories in a cabinet meeting? Advocate a cause in the barracks.'<sup>2</sup> What kind of conversation is permissible in the public square? The significance of this quotation from the late Jean-Francois Lyotard is that this question comes up in all kinds of settings. A rugby club and a church elders' meeting are very different, but both are governed by a set of unwritten rules that dictate the kind of speech that is allowed. We live by means of social conventions in which the rules of discourse are rarely discussed (or broken), but rather assimilated unconsciously by those attending. As C.S. Lewis pointed out in *The Inner Ring*, it is precisely by the acceptance of these unwritten

rules that we often find ourselves admitted into the group in the first place.<sup>3</sup> In such settings, the issue of tolerance appears fairly straightforward. As long as people operate in public according to the group consensus, then whatever they do in their private lives is tolerated. Problems only arise when someone in the group plays according to a different set of criteria – 'tell stories in a cabinet meeting, advocate a cause in the barracks'.

Arguably, the situation in which this is most frequently experienced is the family home, especially a home populated by teenagers who have not quite learned that the rules of discourse with their friends do not necessarily obtain with their parents. In such a setting, a different kind of toler-



ance operates. This is not so much a tolerance of the private sphere – as within the home the public-private split has less meaning – but it is a pragmatic tolerance, in which parents and teenagers arrive at some kind of truce on a daily basis.

At the macro level of society we find these conventions as, what I will call, ‘the liberal consensus’ and ‘agonistic politics’. According to the former, the public square must be a tightly controlled environment in which only certain forms of discourse are allowed. All other differences can be tolerated as long as they remain firmly in the private sphere. According to the latter, the public square should be a multiplicity of competing voices each speaking from within their own frame of reference, and the tolerance to be adopted is merely that which is pragmatically necessary to function. In milder forms, this latter kind of political arrangement is known as multiculturalism, and for a while it was celebrated in Britain as the way to organise society. However, its death knell was sounded by the then Prime Minister Tony Blair when in a speech addressing the issue he said,

Obedience to the rule of law, to democratic decision-making about who governs us, to freedom from violence and discrimination are not optional for British citizens. They are what being British is about. Being British carries rights. It also carries duties. And *those duties take clear precedence over any cultural or religious practice*.<sup>4</sup> (Emphasis mine)

For many Christians, this statement is deeply problematic as it is our faith that leads us to obey the rule of law, to respect democracy and freedom. Our duties to one another and to the state arise in response to our faith, but can never take precedence over it. What has become clear, though, since Blair’s speech is that, as a society, the British people have little idea how best to acknowledge (or celebrate) diversity, whilst maintaining some form of national identity. As one commentator put it,

We are at sea without social norms, and yet who’s to decide them? We’re all confused, but we need to talk about it. It’s not enough for us just to retreat from this issue, afraid of interfering with other people’s lives.<sup>5</sup>

We have already alluded to the fact that our concepts of tolerance go hand-in-hand with our concepts of political organisation, and I would suggest that part of the reason for our conceptual murkiness in relation to diversity politics is that we

do not have a sufficiently robust idea of tolerance to work with. One example will suffice. Tolerance is defined as the acceptance (in some sense) of that of which I would otherwise disapprove. But why is it good for me to accept what I consider bad? This is the ‘paradox of toleration’, and the reality of it means that our notions of tolerance cannot bear the conceptual (or real) weight that is placed upon them as we struggle with the reality of multicultural societies.

Against this background it may therefore be understandable, if regrettable, that notions of tolerance and equality have often been accompanied by responses of cynicism and mistrust. ‘Political correctness’ appears to many to assume that not only do I have to exercise a respectful attitude to others with whom I disagree, but that at the same time I have to accept other views as equally true, even though contrary to mine.

In this article, then, I would like to make a contribution to this discussion by offering an alternative concept of tolerance – beyond the liberal consensus or agonistic approaches – one that is based on the teachings and practice of Jesus Christ, and one that begins with the first-century practice of table-fellowship but ends with the contemporary phenomenon of the dinner party.

## 2. Table-fellowship

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’ (Luke 15: 1-2)<sup>6</sup>

A remarkable feature of the gospel accounts of Jesus are his table manners. Who you ate with and how you ate were important issues in first-century Palestine. Jesus managed to upset everyone by how he did it. One New Testament scholar even says that Jesus got himself killed by how he ate.<sup>7</sup> Even if that is an exaggeration, it highlights the truth that Jesus’ approach to eating was at odds with the societal norms. Joel Green writes:

In the ancient Mediterranean world, mealtime was a social event whose significance far out-distanced the need to satisfy one’s hunger. To welcome people at the table had become tantamount to extending to them intimacy, solidarity, acceptance; table companions were treated as though they were of one’s extended family. Sharing food encoded messages about hierar-



chy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and crossing boundaries. Who ate with whom, where one sat in relation to whom at the table – such questions as these were charged with social meaning in the time of Jesus and Luke. As a consequence, to refuse table fellowship with people was to ostracize them, to treat them as outsiders. It is against this backdrop that Jesus' table practices ... are set in sharp relief.<sup>8</sup>

Jesus' table manners were significantly different from those of his contemporaries. Whilst their emphasis was on maintaining purity in terms of how you ate (washing ceremonies before eating, limitations on food preparation on the Sabbath), what you ate (kosher food), and who you ate with (only the ritually clean), Jesus challenges all these boundaries. In feeding large groups at once (Matthew 14:13-21 and parallels), he seems to pay no attention to the inevitable mix of Jews, Gentiles and outcasts that would have been present, or what the seating arrangement would be, let alone how they were all supposed to wash ceremonially before the meal.<sup>9</sup> Even more astonishing is the story in Luke 7 where during a meal at Simon the Pharisee's house, Jesus is joined by an ex-prostitute.<sup>10</sup> The account describes her washing Jesus' feet with her tears, then drying his feet with her hair, and kissing and pouring perfume on them. As Green comments,

Within her cultural context ... her actions on the whole would have been regarded (at least by men) as erotic. Letting her hair down in this setting would have been on a par with appearing topless in public... It is no wonder that Simon entertains serious reservations about Jesus' status as a holy man.<sup>11</sup>

Yet, Jesus' response is not to rebuke the woman or to say that her actions were inappropriate in this meal setting. Rather, he praises her as an example of faith:

Then turning towards the woman, he said to Simon, 'Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little. (Lk 7:44-47)

It is not that Jesus is somehow unaware of the societal norms. The very fact that a prominent Pharisee has invited him to his home demonstrates that Jesus, at least, was considered an appropriate guest, and therefore one who understood the normal conventions. It is, rather, that Jesus is deliberately and provocatively breaking those conventions. As Green says,

Because the sharing of food is a 'delicate barometer' of social relations, when Jesus subverts conventional mealtime practices ... he is doing far more than offering sage counsel for his table companions. Rather, he is toppling the familiar world of the ancient Mediterranean, overturning its socially constructed reality and replacing it with what must have been regarded as a scandalous alternative.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, it is precisely this challenge to the norm that lends historical weight to this facet of Jesus' ministry,<sup>13</sup> prompting J.D. Crossan to acknowledge its veracity and in the process describe Jesus as 'the consummate party animal'.<sup>14</sup>

But the question remains, why Jesus behaves in this manner. What is his purpose, and what relevance does it have for us as we struggle with issues of tolerance at the beginning of the twenty-first century? An answer to these questions begins to appear if we consider the final few verses of the story regarding Simon and the prostitute:

'Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.' Then he said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven.' But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, 'Who is this who even forgives sins?' And he said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace.' (Lk 7:47-50)

There is a danger, evident in some circles, of merely interpreting Jesus' actions as a celebration of diversity, as if all he was interested in was wining and dining with as many different kinds of people as possible. If that were true, the description of him as 'the consummate party animal' would be entirely apt, and nothing more need be said. However, as Craig Blomberg has argued, Jesus' wider purpose is transformation by means of acceptance. Surveying the passages that describe Jesus' unusual table practices, Blomberg concludes:

The unifying theme that emerges ... is one that may be called 'contagious holiness'. Jesus



regularly associates with the various sorts of sinners on whom the most pious in his culture frowned, but his association is never an end in itself. Implicitly or explicitly, he is calling people to change their ways and follow him as their master. But unlike so many in his world (and unlike so many cultures throughout the history of the world), he does not assume that he will be defiled by associating with corrupt people. Rather, his purity can rub off on them and change them for the better. Cleanliness, he believes, is even more 'catching' than uncleanness; morality more influential than immorality.<sup>15</sup>

We see this pattern in the story above. At great personal cost, Jesus welcomes and accepts the prostitute, whilst still acknowledging her sin and the transformation that is made possible by her faith in him. Crucially, as Ben Witherington III has observed, Jesus does not insist on this transformation to have taken place *in advance* of his acceptance.<sup>16</sup> In enjoying table-fellowship with Jesus, the tax collectors and sinners are called to repentance and faith in him, but there is no evidence that a moral perfectionism is required before they can sit and dine. The door is open, the food is waiting, the invitation has been offered – and whilst the invite comes with a call to transformation, it is not dependant on that transformation having been realised before they sit and party. Indeed, how could it be? The message of the gospels is that personal transformation is only possible by means of our fellowship with Jesus. All attempts at transformation outside a relationship with him are doomed to failure. Hence, what Jesus offers is an open invitation to everyone, irrespective of background and social standing, and yet an invitation that is not just to fellowship, but also to transformation. That is Jesus' model of table-fellowship. Its relevance to contemporary issues of tolerance is where we now turn.

### 3. Tolerating tolerance

As already indicated, there are, roughly speaking, two concepts of tolerance evident in the contemporary political and cultural climate. These two concepts, in turn, relate to two distinct styles of political organisation. However, as the introduction has indicated, neither of these concepts is adequate for the serious social and political situations in which we find ourselves.

The first of these concepts conceives of tolerance as a substantive good (in contrast to a pragmatic necessity), and its political bedfellow is a consensual approach. This is the standard liberal paradigm for tolerance, in which we tolerate the differences that divide for the sake of a unity around some public consensus such as freedom, rationality or human rights.

Under this rubric, political discourse takes place within circumscribed boundaries – the notional public sphere. Tolerance is operative to the extent that we put up with those aspects of the individual that – even though we disapprove of them and disagree with them – we will not outlaw as long as they remain within the private realm. The language of tolerance in association with issues of sexuality is the classic example of this paradigm. What people do in their own bedrooms – so the argument goes – is of no relevance to their public performance, and so there must be no restrictions or infringements of their opportunities. Such tolerance operates in the privatised space, and it represents a substantive good to the extent that it fosters a public consensual space in which discourse can proceed along agreed lines. Kristen Johnson describes it thus:

Liberal invocations of tolerance have their roots in a very distinct epistemology, which includes a belief that through the use of reason all people can be unified around a body of common truths and morals, regardless of their other differences. The goal is a unity that can stand despite and independent of differences, so that 'public' life engages only with that which is held in common, while 'divisive' differences are left in the 'private' sphere.<sup>17</sup>

Such a concept of tolerance as a substantive good is predicated on the good of individual freedom. In popular parlance it says, 'I can do whatever I like as long as I don't harm anyone else.' Indeed, this sentiment is the leitmotif of modern liberal democracies. The good of personal autonomy substantiates the good of tolerance. The only threat to this model is when some bring that which rightly should remain private into the consensual public sphere. So, Richard Rorty describes 'religion as a conversation stopper' in precisely this way.<sup>18</sup> According to Rorty, religion is just about acceptable in the private realm, but in the public realm all it does is inhibit conversation – as the other partners round the table have no way to respond.

As already indicated, at the local level this



approach to society is the predominant one. In sport's clubs, church meetings and scientific conferences different conceptions of acceptable public speech may be operative, but in each of those settings some such conception *is* operative. Problems only arise when that convention is breached.

This is not, though, the only concept of tolerance, and certainly not the only form of political discourse that is evident in contemporary Western society. The second concept of tolerance to be described is tolerance as a pragmatic necessity, and its dining partner is an agonistic political theory. Kristen Johnson again explains,

For agonistic theorists ... difference is to be celebrated because it lies at the very heart of the way the world is and the way our identities are constituted. They bring to the conversation a concern that liberal tolerance is not sufficient because it still, by definition, involves disapproval rather than embrace of difference and, to work, it requires that differences not be recognized in any public way. By assuming that it is possible to keep difference and conflict out of our common political life, political liberalism overlooks the conflictual, agonistic nature of reality. The presence of conflict and power in all aspects of life, relationships, institutions, and structures means that attempts to find unity or to develop political theories in the name of unity always suppress or do violence to difference. Unity cannot, according to these agonistic or post-Nietzschean political theorists, be the goal, nor tolerance the way to get there. Instead, these theorists search for a way to move beyond tolerance and unity to a deeper and richer embrace of difference. For the sake of diversity, they relinquish the hope of unity.<sup>19</sup>

Philosophically, John Milbank has described this understanding in terms of the ontology of violence.<sup>20</sup>

More popularly, it is simply called the Big Brother house! Although these theorists abandon notions of tolerance, this is only the case at the ideal or principled level. As a pragmatic necessity, even such theorists adopt some form of tolerance. The important point is that it is not considered as itself a good, but merely a tool that enables us to survive in such an agonistic environment. Its pragmatism is evident to the extent that it is used instrumentally to protect diversity.

Numerous commentators have pointed out that both these concepts of tolerance and their atten-

dant politics have a range of problems associated with them. The first relates to the boundary conditions that must be articulated. In other words, what precisely can and cannot be tolerated? We saw this recently in the debates over gay marriage in the UK. The Green Party was reported to have expelled someone from the party because of her views on gay marriage. The issue was not whether the party agreed with her views – they clearly did not – but whether someone representing the party could even be allowed to hold such views.<sup>21</sup>

The second problem affecting our contemporary conceptions of tolerance is the inevitable passivity that they engender. By definition, tolerance is to refrain from acting or speaking in situations where one might have acted otherwise. Yet, it is precisely this reticence to interfere that has arguably contributed to one of the more pernicious features of our culture: a walk-on-by mentality. Whilst those who challenge antisocial behaviour are rightly praised, the more common trait amongst the UK population is to turn a blind eye to even the most atrocious behaviour. Not long ago, in a busy tube station, I saw three large men clearly harassing a young woman. What I found shocking was not only the scores of people who simply ignored the plight of the young lady, but my own hesitation at getting involved. We prize the have-a-go-heroes precisely because they are not the norm. And yet, what we have failed to recognize is that this attitude is one that stems from our celebration of modern forms of tolerance. The obvious corollary of 'I won't interfere in your life, if you don't interfere in mine' is 'I won't help you, if you won't help me'. In 2003 an opinion poll found that whilst 78% of people in the UK said they would intervene if they saw someone mistreating or kicking their dog, only 53% of people would intervene if someone was mistreating or kicking their partner. What is the difference here? Presumably the danger of retaliation is the same in both cases. So, perhaps the only difference is that we do not think of animals as having a private life that is none of our concern.

Luke Bretherton, drawing on the work of David Hollenbach, comments,

It seems tolerance acts as a break [*sic*] to any constructive action. Hollenbach notes that 'any form of genuine human action adds to or tries to change the direction of what is happening.' Yet, tolerance, understood as never challenging opinions [we might add 'or behaviours']



others hold, reduces us to silence and inactivity, because to add to and seek to change what others think is by definition intolerance. As Hollenbach notes, it is obviously a *reductio ad absurdum* to imply that a public philosophy built around tolerance aims to get people to stop talking and acting. However, this is the effect it has.<sup>22</sup>

It is worth pointing out that this passivity applies to both concepts of tolerance. In regard to tolerance as a substantive good, such passivity is evident when we fail to challenge behaviours that are directly harmful to those involved out of some misplaced notion that what they do in their private lives is none of our business. The support of some for decriminalisation of cannabis is probably a case in point here: the value of individual autonomy outweighs the cost of personal harm. In relation to a pragmatic conception of tolerance, a similar passivity has been evident in the way in which certain ethnic or religious communities in the UK have developed in isolation from the rest of society. Out of a desire to respect diversity, which in some cases has simply meant doing nothing to encourage integration, we have ended up with sections of the populace severely polarised.<sup>23</sup> Now, it is clear that this line of argument is frequently overstated – but that does not remove the fact that it has some validity. Tolerance as passivity does not solve social problems; in fact it creates them. As Hollenbach, in relation to the US scene, states,

Acceptance or tolerance of difference will certainly not knit up the tears in the flesh of the American body politic today. When acceptance of difference becomes acquiescence in deep social disparities and human misery it becomes part of the problem, not part of the solution.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, our modern conceptions of tolerance fall short in respect of the individualism upon which they are based. Whilst many liberals like to think they have moved beyond former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's comment 'There's no such thing as society', they fail to see that they have simply taken an alternative branch up the Enlightenment tree. As Susan Mendus puts it,

We need to understand how people are *interdependent* as well as *independent*. We need to explain how autonomy is formed, not solely from the internal nature of individuals, but also from the nature of the society in which they find themselves.<sup>25</sup>

Neither of our two modern conceptions of tolerance recognises sufficiently the interdependence that characterises humans as social beings. They both work with a flawed conception of human nature. Tolerance as a substantive good fails to appreciate it because it is predicated on a notion of individual autonomy as *the social good*. However, even tolerance as a pragmatic necessity fails to recognise it as it assumes we can operate within a rarefied schema in which a continual antagonism does not fundamentally alter our state of being. It seems to believe that we maintain our identity in opposition to those around us, rather than by relating rightly to those around us. It is, if you like, the billiard ball version of society, rather than the web. We bounce off each other, rather than connect. We are hard, rather than sticky. The failure, then, of both conceptions is simply to fail to spot the wrong turn that Descartes and others took when they placed the individual at the centre of reflective thinking. If human beings, and therefore society, are inherently relational and interdependent, then any procedure for social and political interaction that fails to take this into account will have failed before it has begun. It is time for an alternative approach.

#### 4. Jesus and politics<sup>26</sup>

In this paper, I want to contend that Jesus' example of table-fellowship is a model and example of tolerance. Moreover, this paradigm can be applied in our contemporary situation at both the local and macro scale. In the first place, Jesus' practice is an example of tolerance to the extent that he welcomes and accepts all into relationship with him. We must not lose sight of the fact that in opening the door to tax-collectors, prostitutes and outcasts, and inviting them to dine with him, Jesus was not just providing food. In fact, the provision of food was the least significant aspect of his actions. Rather, it was the social and religious acceptance that his actions indicated that would have had the main impact.<sup>27</sup> In welcoming these people, Jesus was making it clear to the rest of society that these groups were just as much part of God's kingdom as the religious elite. In fact, frequently they were ahead of the religious leaders in entering God's kingdom (Mt 21:31-32). Moreover, in accepting them irrespective of past behaviour – including behaviour of which Jesus disapproved – and in advance of moral transformation, Jesus exhibited what can only be described as tolerance. It is not



the case that Jesus thought prostitution or avaricious tax collecting was acceptable. Jesus' point was that even though he disapproved of their behaviour, those people were still welcome at his table, and by extension in the kingdom of God.<sup>28</sup>

Yet, at the same time, Jesus' practice of tolerance avoids the pitfalls we mentioned earlier. In the first place, it has clear boundaries. Jesus is not saying, 'Come join the party and nothing more is expected.' He is saying, 'Join the party, fellowship with me, and by means of that fellowship expect to be transformed.' His only requirement, and yet it is a requirement, is a willingness to be changed. Blomberg has developed the notion that Jesus' role in these events was that of host. He was not always the host in the sense of providing the food, but he was the spiritual host, making it clear who was, and who was not acceptable at the party. The significance of this is that we see that the criterion for entering the party was not just openness to transformation, but also respect for the host, and especially the authority of the host. The people that Jesus rejected were precisely those who refused to recognise his authority by rejecting the invitation he had extended, and who, by extension, were unwilling to change (Lk 14:15-24). His was not, then, an entirely open invitation; it has conditions attached. The boundary, however, is clear: respect and recognition for the authority of Jesus Christ as religious host.

In the second place, Jesus' model of tolerance avoids the dangers of passivity. Once again, he is not saying, 'Come dine with me, and I will leave you as you are' but rather, 'Come dine with me, and I will change you.' As we have noticed, Jesus' goal was not diversity for diversity's sake, but rather the possibility of change by means of a relationship with him. Bretherton writes,

Jesus relates hospitality and holiness by inverting their relations: hospitality becomes the means of holiness. Instead of having to be set apart from or exclude pagans in order to maintain holiness, it is in Jesus' hospitality of pagans, the unclean, and sinners that his own holiness is shown forth. Instead of sin and impurity infecting him, it seems Jesus' purity and righteousness somehow 'infects' the impure, sinners and the Gentiles.<sup>29</sup>

Finally, his table-fellowship is not based on a flawed conception of humanity. The substantive good that Jesus recognises is not the good of individual autonomy but the good of interdependence,

in particular dependence on Christ himself. The good upon which his practice of tolerance is based is the good of knowing Jesus, and by means of that, the good of living in community with fellow believers. Jesus calls us to a true freedom, in which we are at liberty to accept responsibility, obey God and serve our neighbour. We have, then, a thick description of tolerance that arises from the practices of a first century preacher – but does it have relevance for our contemporary political arrangements?

We shall go on to suggest that it does, but not that there is a direct line from the practices of Jesus to contemporary politics. Rather, we are asking whether reflection on the practices of Jesus Christ might enable us to imagine a different kind of political arrangement in the present. It is possible that such a work may fail, but it is also possible that it may succeed, and nothing is lost by engaging creatively and constructively in the task. It is in that spirit that we proceed.

Given that in Jesus' model of table-fellowship the most important boundary condition identified was respect for the authority of the host, can we recognise a suitable host in our current situation? At first sight, we might consider the reigning government as the host; after all they have been democratically elected. However, let me propose that the true host we should recognise is the whole populace, or even possibly the global population.<sup>30</sup> In saying this, it is important to emphasize that by 'populace' I do not mean some abstract notion of the 'nation'. Rather, we would draw on Jesus' definition of our 'neighbour' to articulate the parameters of this conception.<sup>31</sup> According to Jesus, our 'neighbour' is not someone in geographical, social, religious, cultural or ethnic proximity. Rather, his point in the so-called parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37), in which this question is addressed, is that in respect of the love command all those boundaries are illegitimate, and that our neighbour is simply anyone and everyone.<sup>32</sup>

The populace, then, to whom we must show respect consists of our 'neighbours' in the sense outlined above, whether considered individually or corporately. What this means, though, is that the boundary marker between those we tolerate and those we do not, is defined by this attitude of respect. This does not mean that individuals, or groups, must agree with the majority opinion – for the majority is not the populace, but they must, as a whole, respect the populace. On these grounds, then, the terrorist or violent offender need not



be tolerated whereas those who disagree with the majority, even by means of protest, should be. But what kind of tolerance are we talking about? What does it mean to tolerate all who respect the host of the populace?

As host, Jesus accepted lavish banquets from rich tax-collectors, cups of cold water from disgraced single women, and perfume from prostitutes. He did not put limits on the manner in which people demonstrated their respect, nor did he reject them purely because the guardians of the population rejected them. In like manner, might not our public square be characterised by a far greater plurality of voices, each of which speaks in its own terms, in line with its own categories? According to the consensual model of tolerance, we can only allow certain forms of discourse, thus negating at the outset the genuine concerns and modes of expression of some. However, by means of the agonistic approach, all we get is a loud shouting match that is insufficiently controlled until it spirals out of control. Given a robust concept of a boundary condition of respect for the host, namely the populace, why could we not have a public square characterised by a multitude of voices all speaking in their own categories, and in their own terms? Why is it that Descartes or Kant or Epicurus can be referenced in the town hall, but not Jesus or Mohammed? Now admittedly, the former are not usually quoted by name, but that is not the point – their philosophies and presuppositions are prevalent in the discourse. As we have indicated, this is not, though, merely a return to an agonistic politics, in which tolerance is no more than a pragmatic construct. Rather, the tolerance we need here is a deliberate, intentional tolerance that welcomes this multitude of voices on the basis of respect for the whole populace. It is tolerance as table fellowship.

When we apply the example of Jesus' table fellowship to the requirements of a just political community, the thrust is towards a much more open system of representation. The goal, unlike Jesus' dinner parties, is not the religious transformation of those admitted into the representative system, but something much less, though still vital: basic respect for their rights as fully equal citizens to participate fully in the public realm, which may also have the benefit of elevating the level of political debate and the opening up of new solutions to policy questions that the dominant groups cannot see.

Utilising such a conception, the problem of

passivity is also avoided. Precisely because there is a single public sphere in which all modes of discourse are allowed, including those that usually take place within the conventional private sphere, the existence of that passively accepted sphere becomes irrelevant. Precisely by being allowed to have a genuine voice at the public table, it is likely that the isolation that we perceive in certain communities would be diminished.

This point has recently been argued by the chief executive of the (English) National Association for Voluntary and Community Action (NAVCA) in responding to government proposals to restrict funding for community groups that only represent one sector of the population. He wrote:

The commission's report ... took the view that funding minority groups increases segregation and should become the exception. I disagree. During my career I have worked with community groups in Hull, Newcastle and Derby, and I am now in touch with Navca's members throughout England. That experience has convinced me that, far from reinforcing segregation, funding for faith and minority ethnic groups often helps them become effective advocates on behalf of their communities... By helping minority ethnic groups build their self-sufficiency we enable them to take an active part in civil society.<sup>33</sup>

Clearly, this is not precisely the same as the active stance that Jesus took in relation to his dinner guests, but it is certainly a more active approach than we currently enjoy.

In a similar vein, this approach is not based on a flawed conception of the individual in isolation from society. The paradigm we are working with is one in which all voices are allowed at the table, because all voices are necessary for the sustenance of a healthy community. It is not I as an individual, or my freedom, that grounds this conception, it is *us* and *our* good. That is the ultimate basis for such tolerance.

But the question remains, whether we have any concrete examples in which this kind of paradigm has been practised. Well, there are none at the macro level for the simple reason that it has never been adequately tested. However, at the local level, it happens all the time in a social setting that strangely enough is very similar to the one in which Jesus was engaged: the dinner party.



## 5. The dinner party

At the typical British dinner party, there exists a very free approach to discourse. Not only might the topic of discussion range from the latest scientific discovery to politics to sport to sex to children to foreign travels, the mode of conversation is similarly varied depending on who is sitting round the table. At times, someone will state authoritatively what the latest academic research on a topic is. Someone else will provide a piece of insider information. Another might conduct a conceptual analysis, and another will reflect with a personal reminiscence or experience that is relevant to the topic. No one mode of discourse is privileged above the rest. Indeed, the person who dogmatically considers their own view as the only one worthy of merit is usually considered a bore – and may find that the invites dry up.

Whilst this kind of conversation can end up in post-modern relativism, it is often the case that a genuine consensus can emerge that has taken into account the whole range of views as they have been expressed in their own terms. In other words, the academic is allowed to speak *as* academic, and their contribution is evaluated on those terms. The personal experience is shared *as* a personal experience, and is similarly evaluated with its own integrity. Human beings are generally rational enough to know that these different kinds of speech are all of value, and whilst they cannot be directly compared, they can both contribute to a wider vision of reality. The dinner party, then, allows all participants to be heard – and to be heard in their own terms. In addition to this, the dinner party does not invent or baptise the artificial notion of a public-private split. Giving space to all participants to share means that whatever each person wants to contribute, they are allowed to contribute. It is not, then, the same as the scientific convention, or indeed the parliamentary Select Committee on Science and Technology where certain forms of discourse are explicitly barred. And the notion of tolerance that is operative is precisely not the notion of tolerance as a substantive good based on individual autonomy. Something else is going on here.

But the dinner party is also not the same as the kind of agonistic politics evinced in the Big Brother house. Whilst all topics and modes of discourse are allowed – whether private or public – there remain some boundaries. Respect for one another is the first of these. Even at the dinner party, there is a

line that can be crossed and at which point the guest is asked to leave. If, for instance, someone was unnecessarily rude, threatening or violent, the rest of the party would support the one at the receiving end of that behaviour and demand that the perpetrator leave. It is important to note that this would happen whether or not the rest of the party agreed or disagreed with the point the perpetrator was making. The requirement to maintain a certain level of civility outstrips the issue at question. Yet, at the same time, this is a minimal commitment. It is not there to stifle conversation, or even vehement disagreement; it is there to ensure that conversation can continue, rather than be stifled. Whilst this social convention applies in respect of one's fellow guests, it applies particularly in respect of the host. Whilst one might ignore someone else in the party asking you to leave, if the host says your time is up, then it really is.

This is all part of the unwritten contractual arrangement with the host. In accepting their invitation, and receiving their generosity, you are also agreeing to abide by their code of conduct in respect of dinner party manners. Respect for the host, then, becomes the guide to the nature of the dinner party boundaries.

Hence, in the contemporary dinner party, tolerance is evident to the extent that all modes of discourse are allowed, none are rejected at outset. Yet, at the same time, the boundary marker is clear: respect for the other guests and especially respect for the host, including their authority. Passivity is avoided in that all guests come with an expectation that they might learn something from one another. It is certainly a less passive environment than our macro, public approach to social engagement. In addition, the ultimate good at stake is not the good of individual autonomy, but the good of the shared social space that is the dinner party.

There are, of course, some points of divergence between Jesus' practices and our contemporary setting, but my purpose in drawing attention to the dinner party is heuristic. The fact that as twenty-first-century people from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences we manage to negotiate successfully that social space suggests that if we applied a similar approach to our public macro discourse, we might discover a richer, fuller concept of tolerance, as well as a richer, fuller model for society. This, at least, is what Jesus' example suggests. It is also what another rabbi – this time from the twenty-first century – seems to have had in mind:



The answer ... is *conversation* – not mere debate but the disciplined act of communicating (making my views intelligible to someone who does not share them) and listening (entering into the inner world of someone whose views are opposed to my own). Each is a genuine form of respect, of paying attention to the other, of conferring value on his or her opinions even though they are not mine. In a debate one side wins, the other loses, but both are the same as they were before. In a conversation neither side loses and both are changed, because they now know what reality looks like from a different perspective. That is not to say that either gives up its previous convictions. That is not what conversation is about. It does mean, however, that I may now realize that I must make space for another deeply held belief, and if my own case has been compelling, the other side may understand that it too must make space for mine. That is how public morality is constructed in a plural society – not by a single dominant voice, nor by the relegation of moral issues to the private domain of home and local congregation, but by a sustained act of understanding and seeking to be understood across the boundaries of difference.<sup>34</sup>

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## Endnotes

- 1 An earlier version of this article was part of the 7th Temple Address, an event hosted by the UK Evangelical Alliance on 13 November 2007.
- 2 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984) 17.
- 3 C.S. Lewis, 'The Inner Ring', Memorial Lecture at King's College, London, 1944, at <http://www.lewissociety.org/innerring.php> (accessed 18 October 2014).
- 4 Tony Blair, 'The Duty to Integrate: Shared British Values', speech delivered on Friday 8 December 2006, at [http://mercury.ethz.ch/serviceengine/Files/ISN/26685/ipriadoc\\_doc/a8bc50ed-bf39-443b-a269-49b6bcd681cf/en/1147\\_blairimmigration.pdf](http://mercury.ethz.ch/serviceengine/Files/ISN/26685/ipriadoc_doc/a8bc50ed-bf39-443b-a269-49b6bcd681cf/en/1147_blairimmigration.pdf) (accessed 5 July 2013).
- 5 Jenni Russell, 'Basic civility is about social solidarity, not priggishness', *The Guardian*, 3 May 2007.
- 6 All scripture quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.
- 7 Robert J. Karris, *Luke: Artist and Theologian* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985) chapter 4.
- 8 Joel Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 87.
- 9 J.R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Leicester: IVP, 2002) 193; W.C.K. Poon, 'Superabundant Table Fellowship in the Kingdom: The Feeding of the Five Thousand and the Meal Motif in Luke', *Expository Times* 114 (2003) 224-230 (226-228).
- 10 Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 309. The Greek term is of a sinner in the town.
- 11 Green, *Luke*, 310.
- 12 Green, *Luke*, 550.
- 13 This is the case because it passes the double dissimilarity criterion for authentic sayings of Jesus; see Craig Blomberg, *Contagious Holiness: Jesus' Meals with Sinners* (Downers Grove: Apollos, 2005) chapter 1.
- 14 Blomberg, *Contagious Holiness*, 97.
- 15 Blomberg, *Contagious Holiness*, 128.
- 16 Blomberg, *Contagious Holiness*, 102.
- 17 Kristen Johnson, *Theology, Political Theory and Pluralism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 2.
- 18 Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin, 1999) 168-174.
- 19 Johnson, *Theology*, 3.
- 20 John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990). For Milbank, such 'violence' is evident whenever we view society as a sphere of necessary conflict.
- 21 'The Green Party has an unpleasant way of dictating matters of conscience', *Telegraph* 23 November 2012.
- 22 Luke Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness: Christian Witness amid Moral Diversity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006) 147.
- 23 Incidentally, the same phenomenon is evident in our unwillingness to challenge certain forms of family life irrespective of whether they harm the child or not. Our passive valuing of adult autonomy seems to outweigh our active safeguarding of children.
- 24 David Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 41.
- 25 Susan Mendus, *Toleration and the Limits of Liberalism* (London: Macmillan, 1989) 67-68.
- 26 Much of this section is derived from or inspired by Bretherton, *Hospitality*; Blomberg, *Contagious Holiness* and Johnson, *Theology*. A number of the ways in which I describe 'tolerance' parallel, in particular, Bretherton's description of 'hospitality'. My reasons for choosing the nomenclature of tolerance rather than hospitality are heuristic. While



Bretherton is right to point out that the concept of 'hospitality' brings with it a biblical and theological depth that is perhaps missing from 'tolerance', that depth does not pertain for non-theologians who are liable to misunderstand its connotations. I would suggest that the concept of 'tolerance', appropriately amended – as I believe I have done in this paper – brings a greater degree of meaning for a non-theological audience, and that is why I have chosen it. Cf. Bretherton, *Hospitality*, 121-126.

27 Poon, 'Table Fellowship', 228.

28 Bretherton, *Hospitality*, 131-135.

29 Bretherton, *Hospitality*, 130.

30 Given the reality of climate change, one could even argue that the host to be respected is the *future* global population.

31 See also the recent report by the British group

Theos which draws a distinction between 'nation' and 'neighbour' as two alternative paradigms for building the civil society. The Theos report makes a strong case for the latter as the more effective approach. Stephen Backhouse, *Red, White, Blue... and Brown: Citizens, Patriots and the Prime Minister* (London: Theos, 2007), available at [www.theosthinktank.co.uk](http://www.theosthinktank.co.uk) (accessed 10 February 2013).

32 A point that Richard Dawkins completely fails to see. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006) 254-257.

33 Kevin Curley, 'Response: Minority and Faith Groups Can Help Cohesion', *The Guardian* 17 October 2007.

34 (Chief Rabbi) Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference* (London: Continuum, 2002) 83.

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