Worlds of Difference: European Discourses of Toleration C. 1100-C. 1550

Cary J. Nederman
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This is an appealing and clearly written account of how European thinkers from late medieval to early modern times reflected upon and explored the question of what to do about people of different religions and cultures. In other words, how should their divergent opinions be understood and, eventually, what practical dispositions should be taken toward them? Cary Nederman devotes the introduction and first chapter to an excellent, detailed explanation of the book's focus and goals. Simply put, he is intent upon challenging two currently dominant views: that toleration emerged in Europe only at the time of the Reformation, and that it is ineluctably linked with the kind of political liberalism usually associated with John Locke. To this end, he calls the reader's attention to expressions of religious, and even somewhat political, toleration that appear early in the twelfth century and continue well into the sixteenth century. Unfortunately, he does not succeed in this ambitious, even appealing, stratagem as fully as he would have wished, for he admits in passing that he is content to "offer illustrations," instead of a "comprehensive account," of this phenomenon.

Thus, while the exposition demonstrates the author's broad awareness of the relevant secondary literature, it tends to treat the primary sources in a cursory and almost superficial manner. Ever willing to take issue with the different interpretations set forth in the secondary literature, Nederman tends to refrain from engaging the primary sources directly. Rhetorical considerations seem to guide this choice, for he is clearly knowledgeable about the principal teachings of the primary sources. Yet throughout the book, he contents himself with summaries, rather than analyses, of those teachings. He does devote some attention to the writings of William of Rubreck, Marsilius of Padua, Nicholas of Cusa, and Bartholomé de Las Casas, to be sure. But even with these authors, general summary prevails. Although such a procedure allows Nederman to state and restate his central thesis, it exposes him to fundamental problems of interpretation from which he cannot extricate himself.

Thus, in order to present Peter Abelard's *Dialogue between a Philosopher, a Jew, and a Christian* as an example of interfaith toleration, Nederman stresses the work's unfinished character and the fact that it ends without Abelard explicitly passing judgment on the relative claims of the philosopher and the Christian. However, he does not acknowledge how easily the Christian disposes of the Jew's arguments. Nor does he say anything about how the Christian goes on to engage the philosopher in a spirited and quite learned exchange leading from an inquiry into true ethics to the issue of how to recognize God's existence and characteristics. The Christian's rejection of the philosopher's attempts to argue that virtue is the same for all people also facilitates his giving precedence in such matters to Christianity. More important, the Christian easily persuades the philosopher of the insufficiency of natural law or natural right on the grounds that Christian revelation has rendered it irrelevant. The dialogue ends with the philosopher being obliged to admit the merit, even the superiority, of Christianity. Clearly, an explicit statement or judgment from Abelard would be superfluous.

Though the author is not really concerned with the extent to which debates on toleration can be found in medieval Jewish and Muslim sources, he does claim that instances of such debates can be found. He cites Judah Halevy's *Book of the Kuzari* and a chapter from Joel L. Kraemer's *Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam*, but seems not to have actually looked at either work, for neither advances his cause. In the *Book of the Kuzari*, Halevy explains why the worship pursued in Judaism appears to a pagan king to be that which must be most pleasing to God, while Kraemer nowhere mentions anything that even remotely points to toleration.

Halevy's pagan king had dreamed repeatedly that an angel came to him and said that God was pleased with his intentions but not his actions. Therefore he decided to investigate what actions might be pleasing to God. From the outset, the king is presented as religious. He diligently observes his religion's rites of worship, for he thinks that God is an active force in the universe. Consequently, he is not likely to be easily persuaded by what the philosopher will say about God. Indeed, he rejects the philosopher's praise of non-worship and actions purportedly leading to intellectual union with the cause of the universe, just as he rejects the Christian's and the Muslim's arguments for the superiority of their respective faiths. However, he does not talk to them about the worship pursued in their faith.

Even with the Jewish sage, by whom he is ultimately convinced, the Kuzari king does not reach matters of worship until he is persuaded that Judaism is best. In the *Book of the Kuzari*, then, we find a defense of Judaism's religious law or revelation that shows its superiority to those of Christianity and Islam. If there is any ground at all here for toleration, it must be negative, for no claim is made that those other revelations are wrong. All the Kuzari king says is that their learned representatives did not persuade him.

Kraemer's book provides a detailed examination of how Greek thought and learning entered the discussions and themes current within several intellectual schools and circles during the Buyid dynasty (334/946-447/1055), especially during the early period. He pursues the debates and activities that took place in the schools of Yahya ibn ʻAdi and Abu ʻAbd Allah al-Basri, the circles of Abu Sulayman al-Sijistani and the Vizier Abu ʻAbd Allah ibn Saʻdan, as well as the group known as the Sincere Brethren associated with Abu Sulayman al-Maqdisi. In addition, he profiles such scholars, patrons, and rulers as Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi, Abu ʻAli ibn Miskawayh, Abu al-Hasan al-Amiri, and even ʻAdud al-Dawla. Impressive as this research is, it touches upon the theme of toleration in no way.

In sum, while Nederman does not prove that toleration was a concern in medieval Christianity any more than in medieval Jewish or Islamic thought, he does provide an interesting survey of the major Christian thinkers one would want to consider within this period. In addition, he shows, despite himself, why their efforts fall short. His claims to be able to point to a teaching in favor of toleration become credible only as he turns from the medieval period *per se* to the early fourteenth-century *Defender of the Peace* by Marsilius of Padua and then to the mid-fifteenth century *On the Peace of Faith* by Nicholas of Cusa. And he comes to very sound ground in his survey of the treatises in which Bartholomé de Las Casas,

about a century later, urged better treatment for the New World's Indians and sought to educate fellow Europeans about their ways. While the book has major pluses, such as the concision of his exposition and clear ordering of his argument, it is a pity that the footnotes are marred by so many errors with respect to foreign languages.

Nederman has addressed a problem that is just as important to students of medieval Jewish and Islamic thought as to those of medieval Christian thought. Why is it that clear appeals for toleration do not arise until early Renaissance and Renaissance times? Why do all ancient and medieval thinkers deem religious conformity to be so important? What shift in thought occurs between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries that permits a Marsilius to challenge received doctrines so thoroughly, and why is no kindred spirit to be found in contemporaneous Jewish or Islamic thought? More troubling, why is none to be found in Jewish thought until the European Enlightenment movement and none, not a single one, in Islamic thought even today?

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