



MARK DRISCOLL
MINISTRIES

Dear Christian Leader,

You are receiving this research brief because you have signed up for free leader equipping ministry resources at markdriscoll.org. I want to personally thank you for loving Jesus and serving his people. I also want to thank you for allowing me the honor of helping you lead and feed God's people.

This research brief is a gift from Mark Driscoll Ministries. It was prepared for me a few years ago by a professional research team. I am happy to make it available to you, and I would request that you not post it online. If you know of other Christian leaders who would like to receive it, they can do so by signing up for free leadership resources at markdriscoll.org.

It's a great joy helping people learn about Jesus from the Bible, so thank you for allowing me to serve you. If you would be willing to support our ministry with an ongoing or one-time gift of any amount, we would be grateful for your partnership.

A Nobody Trying to Tell Everybody About Somebody,

Pastor Mark Driscoll

Should Christians Be Tolerant?

Research brief prepared by a research team

I. Philosophy of Toleration

Philosophers have devoted much time and energy to formulating an account of what it means to be “tolerant.” Most basically, “The term ‘toleration’—from the Latin *tolerare*: to put up with, countenance or suffer—generally refers to the conditional acceptance of or non-interference with beliefs, actions or practices that one considers to be wrong but still ‘tolerable,’ such that they should not be prohibited or constrained. There are many contexts in which we speak of a person or an institution as being tolerant: parents tolerate certain behavior of their children, a friend tolerates the weaknesses of another, a monarch tolerates dissent, a church tolerates homosexuality, a state tolerates a minority religion, a society tolerates deviant behavior. Thus for any analysis of the motives and reasons for toleration, the relevant contexts need to be taken into account.”¹

A. The Components of Toleration

According to Rainer, the concept of tolerance involves three components: an objection component, an acceptance component, and a rejection component. Toleration includes an *objection component* because some beliefs or practices are considered objectionable, wrong, or bad. If one does not find the specific practices or beliefs to be objectionable, then one is not able to practice “tolerance” but rather “indifference” or “affirmation.”

Second, toleration includes an *acceptance component*. What this means is that for one to be tolerant, one must not remove one’s negative judgment of a given belief or practice. Instead, there are certain positive reasons that “trump” the negative judgments and lead to tolerance. That is, one judges the said practices or beliefs to be wrong, but not intolerably wrong.²

Third, toleration includes a *rejection component*. That is to say, there is a point at which tolerance is no longer to be practiced. It lies “at the point where there are reasons for rejection that are stronger than the reasons for acceptance.”³ At some point and for

¹ Forst Rainer, “Toleration,” *The Standard Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2012 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2012/entries/toleration/>

² Rainer, “Toleration.”

³ Rainer, “Toleration.”

some reason, beliefs or practices are such that they are deemed no longer to be worthy of tolerance.

Rainer speaks of two additional “boundaries” relevant to the concept of tolerance. The first boundary is between those practices and/or beliefs with which one agrees and those practices and/or beliefs one finds wrong but can still tolerate. The second boundary exists between those practices and/or beliefs one finds wrong but can still tolerate and certain beliefs and/or practices that are rejected as intolerable. This is just to say that there is a point at which one leaves the realm of one’s own beliefs and enters into the realm of tolerance; moreover, there is a point at which one draws a line in the sand and says that certain beliefs and practices are no longer worthy of tolerance.

B. The Paradoxes of Tolerance

Corresponding to the three components of tolerance mentioned above, philosophers discuss three paradoxes that arise when one attempts to think clearly about tolerance.

The first, which deals with the objection component, is referred to as the “paradox of the tolerant racist.” Imagine that a man exists who thinks there are inferior races. Some people may say this man should be more tolerant—that he should not discriminate against the members of the groups he deems inferior. However, if tolerance is considered a moral virtue, the paradox arises that an immoral attitude (namely, racism) is turned into a virtue. “What is more, the racist would be more ‘tolerant’ the stronger his racist impulses are if only he did not act on them. Hence, seen from a moral perspective, the demand that the racist should be tolerant has a major flaw: it takes the racist objection against others as an ethical objection that only needs to be restrained by adding certain reasons for acceptance.”⁴ The racist does not need to be more tolerant; he needs to overcome his racist beliefs. According to Rainer, “This shows that there are cases in which tolerance is not the solution to intolerance.”⁵

Second, the “paradox of moral tolerance” corresponds to the acceptance component of toleration. On this paradox, “If both the reasons for objection and the reasons for acceptance are called ‘moral,’ the paradox arises that it seems to be morally right or even morally required to tolerate what is morally wrong. The solution of this paradox therefore requires a distinction between various kinds of ‘moral’ reasons, some of which must be reasons of a higher order that ground and limit toleration.”⁶

Third, the “paradox of drawing the limits” corresponds to the rejection component of toleration. “This paradox is inherent in the idea that toleration is a matter of reciprocity and that therefore those who are intolerant need not and cannot be tolerated, an idea we find in most of the classical texts on toleration. But even a brief look at those texts, and

⁴ Rainer, “Toleration.”

⁵ Rainer, “Toleration.”

⁶ Rainer, “Toleration.”

even more so at historical practice, shows that the slogan ‘no toleration of the intolerant’ is not just vacuous but potentially dangerous, for the characterization of certain groups as intolerant is all too often itself a result of one-sidedness and intolerance...[T]his leads to a fatal conclusion for the concept of toleration: If toleration always implies a drawing of the limits against the intolerant and intolerable, and if every such drawing of a limit is itself a (more or less) intolerant, arbitrary act, toleration ends as soon it begins—as soon as it is defined by an arbitrary boundary between ‘us’ and the ‘intolerant’ and ‘intolerable.’ This paradox can only be overcome if we distinguish between two notions of ‘intolerance’ that the deconstructivist critique conflates: the intolerance of those who lie beyond the limits of toleration because they deny toleration as a norm in the first place, and the lack of tolerance of those who do not want to tolerate a denial of the norm. Tolerance can only be a virtue if this distinction can be made, and it presupposes that the limits of toleration can be drawn in a non-arbitrary, justifiable way.”⁷

Given the components of toleration discussed above as well as the paradoxes that arise out of the concept of tolerance, it is important to note that tolerance is a “normatively dependent concept.” “This means that by itself it cannot provide the substantive reasons for objection, acceptance, and rejection. It needs further, independent normative resources in order to have a certain substance, content, and limits—and in order to be regarded as something good at all. In itself, therefore, toleration is not a virtue or value; it can only be a value if backed by the right normative reasons.”⁸

C. Four Conceptions of Toleration

It is important to understand that there is not one, monolithic concept of “tolerance” that has existed in discussions of the idea throughout history. Indeed, many of the disagreements over the meaning of tolerance result from conflicts between the following conceptions.

a. Permission Conception

On this view, tolerance is “a relation between an authority or a majority and a dissenting, ‘different’ minority.”⁹ Tolerance, therefore, is seen as the authority giving permission to the minority to live according to the minority’s beliefs so long as the minority recognizes the dominant position of the authority or majority. “So long as their being different remains within certain limits, that is, in the ‘private’ realm, and so long as the minority groups do not claim equal public and political status, they can be tolerated on pragmatic or principled grounds.”¹⁰ This version of tolerance is a hierarchical version, in that it assumes a majority and minority—the former allowing the latter to practice or believe certain things that are wrong but not “‘intolerably’ harmful.”¹¹

⁷ Rainer, “Toleration.”

⁸ Rainer, “Toleration.”

⁹ Rainer, “Toleration.”

¹⁰ Rainer, “Toleration.”

¹¹ Rainer, “Toleration.”

b. Coexistence Conception

This view shares with the “permission conception” the idea that toleration is the best means toward avoiding conflict and pursuing one’s own goals.¹² The difference, however, lies in the relationship between the subjects and objects of toleration. Rather than authority/majority and minority, the two groups are equal in power, “and who for the sake of social peace and the pursuit of their own interests mutual toleration is the best of all possible alternatives.”¹³ Tolerance is no longer vertical but rather horizontal.

c. Respect Conception

The “respect conception” of tolerance is more reciprocal. “Even though they differ fundamentally in their ethical beliefs about the good and true way of life and in their cultural practices, citizens recognize one another as moral-political equals in the sense that their common framework of social life should...be guided by norms that all parties can equally accept and that do not favor one specific ethical or cultural community.”¹⁴ To break it down further, there is a distinction within the respect conception between “formal” and “qualitative” equality. “The former operates on a strict distinction between the political and the private realm, according to which ethical (i.e., cultural or religious) differences among citizens of a legal state should be confined to the private realm, so that they do not lead to conflicts in the political sphere.”¹⁵

In contrast, the “qualitative” equality model “recognizes that certain forms of formal equality favor those ethical-cultural life-forms whose beliefs and practices make it easier to accommodate a conventional public/private distinction. In other words, the ‘formal equality’ model tends to be intolerant toward ethical-cultural forms of life that require a public presence that is different from traditional and hitherto dominant cultural forms. Thus, on the ‘qualitative equality’ model, persons respect each other as political equals with a certain distinct ethical-cultural identity that needs to be respected and tolerated as something that is (a) especially important for a person and (b) can provide good reasons for certain exceptions from or general changes in existing legal and social structures. Social and political equality and integration are thus seen to be compatible with cultural difference—within certain (moral) limits of reciprocity.

d. Esteem Conception

Finally, on the “esteem conception” of tolerance, “being tolerant does not just mean respecting members of other cultural life-forms or religions as moral and political equals, it also means having some kind of ethical esteem for their beliefs, that is, taking

¹² Rainer, “Toleration.”

¹³ Rainer, “Toleration.”

¹⁴ Rainer, “Toleration.”

¹⁵ Rainer, “Toleration.”

them to be ethically valuable conceptions that—even though different from one’s own—are in some way ethically attractive and held with good reasons.”¹⁶

II. Christian Worldview and Ethics

In order to understand how Christians must approach discussions of (in)tolerance, it is important to note the basic features of the Christian worldview as well as the basic categories Christians use to think ethically about the world.

A. The Christian Worldview

As Ronald Nash recognizes, “In its simplest terms, a worldview is a set of beliefs about the most important issues in life.”¹⁷ Nash continues by noting the five areas that make up one’s worldview, in general: God, reality, knowledge, morality, and humankind.¹⁸ To be more specific, the Christian worldview is committed to specific conceptions of each of these five areas.

The Christian worldview is first of all theistic, differing from polytheism and pantheism. Christians affirm that God is the creator from whom all things come into being. But more than that, Christians affirm the existence of a Trinitarian God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Second, Christians have specific convictions about the nature of reality. Christians affirm that there is more to the world than the material structure of the universe, namely, the immaterial spiritual reality of God himself. While God has established physical laws in the universe, God stands outside of time and is able to interact with the world in a way that neither compromises his distinctness from the world nor the world’s integrity as a system. God does miracles in the created order, reveals himself in it, and providentially rules over it. Reality, according to Colossians, is Christ-centered.

Third, as Nash notes, Christianity is compatible with quite a few philosophical positions in epistemology, “But there do seem to be limits to this tolerance.”¹⁹ For example, Christians cannot buy into relativism or skepticism; rather, Christians understand that knowledge of God and God’s world are indeed possible. Christians are made in God’s image to know him, and while sin distorts that knowing process, Christians are still able to form coherent and accurate beliefs about God as the Spirit enables them to do so. As Nash notes, “Human beings can know God’s creation; they are also capable of attaining knowledge about God.”²⁰

¹⁶ Rainer, “Toleration.”

¹⁷ Ronald H. Nash, *Worldviews in Conflict: Choosing Christianity in a World of Ideas* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 16.

¹⁸ Nash, *Worldviews in Conflict*, 26-32.

¹⁹ Nash, *Worldviews in Conflict*, 37.

²⁰ Nash, *Worldviews in Conflict*, 40.

Fourth, as beings created in God’s image, humans are moral beings. According to Nash, “Because of the image of God, we should expect to find that the ethical recommendations of the Christians worldview reflect what all of us at the deepest levels of our moral being know to be true.”²¹ Christians affirm that God is the ground of morality, which entails that there are objectively true and universal moral laws. According to Nash, “While a properly formed Christian worldview allows a great deal of leeway regarding the positions sincere Christians may take on many of the tough problems that rise in the formulation of an ethical theory, informed Christians will have to reject certain views.”²² God’s ethical standards—of loving God and loving neighbor—are revealed unambiguously in Scripture, both in the Old and New Testaments.

Finally, the Christian sees human beings as paradoxical—as created by and for God yet living in sinful rebellion against God. In other words, to make sense of humans, one must have a robust theology of sin. Humans are finite and seek that which is infinite; as Augustine put it, the human heart is restless until it finds its rest in God. Humans are capable of redemption in Christ, and they need salvation in order to live in perfect eternal fellowship with God.

Ronald Nash boils the Christian worldview down to the following proposition: “Human beings and the universe in which they reside are the creation of the God who has revealed himself in Scripture.”²³

B. Christian Ethics

While the Christian view of reality is shaped by the basic worldview categories discussed above, there are several significant categories that shape the way Christians view ethics and morality.

Richard Hays, in his work *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*,²⁴ argues that Christian ethics must be shaped by the biblical storyline, and in particular the vision of the New Testament. He says that “three closely linked themes... frame Paul’s ethical thought: new creation in collision with the present age, the cross as paradigm for action, and the community as the locus of God’s saving power.”²⁵

In a different but similar vein, Oliver O’Donovan argues that “Christian ethics depends upon the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” because the resurrection is “God’s gift that carries the promise of ethical illumination with it.”²⁶

²¹ Nash, *Worldviews in Conflict*, 41.

²² Nash, *Worldviews in Conflict*, 45.

²³ Nash, *Worldviews in Conflict*, 52.

²⁴ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: HarperOne, 1996)

²⁵ Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 36.

²⁶ Oliver O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 13.

According to O'Donovan, "The order of things that God has made is there. It is objective, and mankind has a place within it. Christian ethics, therefore, has an objective reference because it is concerned with man's life in accordance with this order. The summons to live in it is addressed to all mankind, because the good news that we may live in it is addressed to all mankind. Thus Christian moral judgments in principle address every man... They are founded on a reality that God has given it... The way the universe is, determines how man ought to behave himself in it."²⁷ Moreover, "[m]orality is man's participation in the created order, [and] Christian morality is his glad response to the deed of God which has restored, proved, and fulfilled that order, making man free to conform to it."²⁸

Even while the fall has significant epistemological ramifications for the way Christians discover the moral order of the world, the ontological basis for Christian ethics remains intact. In fact, God reveals the moral order through his own self-disclosure. This means, among other things, that "[m]oral knowledge is also part of the subjective disposition with which we respond to God's work, [and is] inseparable from the freedom and obedience to which it summons us."²⁹ Importantly, however, O'Donovan locates human freedom as a response to the Spirit's authoritative and redemptive reality.

III. Tolerance and Intolerance in the United States

Three books that relate to the question of tolerance and intolerance in the United States are *American Grace*,³⁰ *Habits of the Heart*,³¹ and *After Virtue*.³² What follows is a discussion of the major points of these works relevant to discussions of tolerance.

A. American Grace

American Grace is the newest book from the author made famous for his 2000 bestseller, *Bowling Alone*.³³ His co-author, Dr. David Campbell, is an associate professor of political science at the University of Notre Dame. This book is a wide-ranging tour of religion and society in the United States since the 1950s.³⁴ *American Grace* has received acclaim in many journalistic and church circles. But among sociologists of religion, the book has been widely criticized for simply repackaging for a popular audience concepts

²⁷ O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 17.

²⁸ O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 76.

²⁹ O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 76.

³⁰ Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010).

³¹ Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, [1985] 2008).

³² Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, [1981] 2007).

³³ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

³⁴ For an older attempt at this same task, see: Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

and theories that have been known for many years. Despite the disagreements on the academic contributions of the book, the concept of “American Grace,” as explained below, is a helpful and catchy phrase to understand how Americans think about tolerance. Before that point, though, I provide a quick description of the book as a whole.

The editors of *American Grace* offer a helpful summary of Putnam and Campbell’s work: “Unique among nations, America is deeply religious, religiously diverse, and remarkably tolerant. But in recent decades the nation’s religious landscape has been reshaped. America has experienced three seismic shocks, say Robert Putnam and David Campbell. In the 1960s, religious observance plummeted. Then in the 1970s and 1980s, a conservative reaction produced the rise of evangelicalism and the Religious Right. Since the 1990s, however, young people, turned off by that linkage between faith and conservative politics, have abandoned organized religion. The result has been a growing polarization—the ranks of religious conservatives and secular liberals have swelled, leaving a dwindling group of religious moderates in between. At the same time, personal interfaith ties are strengthening. Interfaith marriage has increased while religious identities have become more fluid. Putnam and Campbell show how this denser web of personal ties brings surprising interfaith tolerance, notwithstanding the so-called culture wars.”³⁵

They continue: “*American Grace* is based on two of the most comprehensive surveys ever conducted on religion and public life in America. It includes a dozen in-depth profiles of diverse congregations across the country, which illuminate how the trends described by Putnam and Campbell affect the lives of real Americans. Nearly every chapter of *American Grace* contains a surprise about American religious life. Among them: (1) Between one-third and one-half of all American marriages are interfaith; (2) Roughly one-third of Americans have switched religions at some point in their lives; (3) Young people are more opposed to abortion than their parents but more accepting of [so-called] gay marriage; (4) Even fervently religious Americans believe that people of other faiths can go to heaven; (5) Religious Americans are better neighbors than secular Americans: more generous with their time and treasure even for secular causes—but the explanation has less to do with faith than with their communities of faith; (6) Jews are the most broadly popular religious group in America today.”³⁶

This book covers a lot of ground on the issue of religion in the United States since the 1950s. As it relates to the question of tolerance and intolerance, though, the main point can be found in the book’s title. While Christians have a conception of grace rooted in the Bible, many Americans have a conception of grace (“American grace”) rooted in their social relationships. In other words, religious tolerance (in the strong sense of relativism and rejecting the exclusivity of Christ for salvation) is largely the product of the fact that most Americans know and like at least one person of another faith or no faith at all, and they simply do not like the idea that their friend or relative is going to Hell. Putnam and Campbell call this the “Aunt Susan Principle,” which is roughly equivalent to “American grace.” The heuristic of “Christian grace” vs. “American grace” is a good

³⁵ Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*, front flap.

³⁶ Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*, front and back flaps.

way to frame this Americanized version of grace (i.e., the Aunt Susan Principle) when it comes to relativism and the demand for (the strong, relativistic version of) religious tolerance.

B. Habits of the Heart

In his now-classic book, Robert Bellah and his research team provide a portrait of how average Americans think about morality and the making of a life. The most famous part of this book, at least for sociologists of religion, is the section in which a woman named Sheila speaks of her own religious beliefs as “Sheilaism.” As far as the question of tolerance, intolerance, and relativism relates to the American undercurrent of individualism, *Habits of the Heart* is still the go-to book for a broad picture of the deep assumptions of average adults in the United States.

This book is included in a brief on intolerance because, like so much else in American life today, the postmodern demands of tolerance and relativism are actually cultural expressions of our deeper unspoken commitment to individualism, both in its utilitarian and therapeutic forms. The only way one can understand why some beliefs and lifestyles are actually wrong is first to unmask the individualist ethos that far too often goes unrecognized and unquestioned.

A couple other points are worth noting before offering some snippets. First, in the late 1960s Robert Bellah wrote an essay on “Civil Religion in America.” Secondly, Robert Bellah passed away just over one month ago, on July 30, 2013. And this past month, Bellah posthumously won the award for best new book from the religion section of the American Sociological Association for his 2011 book, *Religion in Human Evolution*.³⁷

As Bellah notes regarding his work, “The fundamental question we posed, and that was repeatedly posed to us, was how to preserve or create a morally coherent life. But the kind of life we want depends on the kind of people we are—on our character. Our inquiry can thus be located in a longstanding discussion of the relationship between character and society. In the eighth book of the *Republic*, Plato sketched a theory of the relationship between the moral character of a people and the nature of its political community, the way it organizes and governs itself. The founders of the American republic at the time of the Revolution adopted a much later version of the same theory. Since for them, as for the Americans with whom we talked, freedom was perhaps the most important value, they were particularly concerned with the qualities of character necessary for the creation of a free republic.”³⁸

To be more specific, “The central problem of our book concerns the American individualism that Tocqueville described with a mixture of admiration and anxiety. It seems to us that it is individualism, and not equality, as Tocqueville thought, that has

³⁷ Robert N. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

³⁸ Bellah, et al, *Habits of the Heart*, xlvii–xlvi.

marched inexorably through our history. We are concerned that this individualism may have grown cancerous—that it may be destroying those social integuments that Tocqueville saw as moderating its more destructive potentialities, that it may be threatening the survival of freedom itself. We want to know what individualism in America looks and feels like, and how the world appears in its light. We are also interested in those cultural traditions and practices that, without destroying individuality, serve to limit and restrain the destructive side of individualism and provide alternative models for how Americans might live. We want to know how these have fared since Tocqueville’s day, and how likely their renewal is.”³⁹

Bellah offers the following helpful outline of his project: “The first two [chapters] provide an introduction and orientation to the study as a whole. Chapter 1 consists of four portraits of individuals, drawn from each of the four research projects, who represent different ways of using private or public life to find meaning in contemporary America. Chapter 2 provides a historical sketch and, in particular, a description of the four major traditions that we believe have been important in the self-interpretations of Americans. Chapter 3 through 6 deal with private life, going from ways of thinking of the self to marriage, the family, and other forms of personal relationship, including therapy. Chapter 6 sums up the American ideology of individualism and suggests some of the alternatives to it in our society. Chapters 7 through 10 deal with public life. Local politics, civic volunteerism, and the larger meanings of citizenship and religion are discussed in chapters 7 through 9. Chapter 10 considers several successive historical stages of interpretation of the national society and how these relate to the views of those with whom we talked. In a concluding chapter, we try to sum up the implications of our research for the future of American society.”⁴⁰

Bellah offers helpful insight for how American individualism and freedom relates to the experience of “leaving church”: “The self-reliant American is required not only to leave home but to ‘leave church’ as well. This may not literally happen. One may continue to belong to the church of one’s parents. But the expectation is that at some point in adolescence or early youth, one will decide on one’s own that that is the church to belong to. One cannot defend one’s views by saying that they are simply the views of one’s parents. On the contrary, they must be particularly and peculiarly one’s own. Traditionally, Protestant piety demanded that a young person experience a unique conversion experience of his or her own... More recently we have come to expect even greater [religious] autonomy.” “...[R]elatively few middle-class urbanites described themselves to us as ‘children of God,’ created in his image and likeness, bound by his commandments, and inspired by his love. Liberalized versions of biblical morality tend to subordinate themes of divine authority and human duty to the intrinsic goodness of human nature, since ‘God does not make junk.’”⁴¹

In viewing the human person as “a child of the Universe,” “...the self as metaphoric child echoes ecology, aestheticism, and nature mysticism, not biblical

³⁹ Bellah, et al, *Habits of the Heart*, xlvi.

⁴⁰ Bellah, et al, *Habits of the Heart*, lii.

⁴¹ Bellah, et al, *Habits of the Heart*, 62–63.

revelation... [T]his formula confirms our individual rights instead of calling for our obedience to God's authority. The unfolding of the universe justifies no rational principles of conduct based on natural law... Instead, it reassures us of our freedom to choose our own God, our own labors, and our own ultimate ends, whatever they may be. Following on the heels of liberalized religion's relaxed sense of duty, authority, and virtue, comes the rejection of institutional religion itself on the grounds that it is morally 'hypocritical.'" "...[T]he notion that one discovers one's deepest beliefs in, and through, tradition and community is not very congenial to [most] Americans. Most of us imagine an autonomous self existing independently, entirely outside any tradition and community, and then perhaps choosing one." "The irony is that here, too, just where we think we are most free, we are most coerced by the dominant beliefs of our own culture. For it is a powerful cultural fiction that we not only can, but must, make up our deepest beliefs in the isolation of our private selves."⁴²

American individualism has had similar affects on religious pluralism: "The American pattern of privatizing religion while at the same time allowing it some public function has proven highly compatible with the religious pluralism that has characterized America from the colonial period and grown more and more pronounced. If the primary contribution of religion to society is through the character and conduct of citizens, any religion, large or small, familiar or strange, can be of equal value to any other. The fact that most American religions have been biblical and that most, though of course not all, Americans can agree on the term 'God' has certainly been helpful in diminishing religious antagonism. But diversity of practice has been seen as legitimate because religion is perceived as a matter of individual choice, with the implicit qualification that the practices themselves accord with public decorum and the adherents abide by the moral standards of the community."⁴³ There are also oftentimes meaningful religious differentiations based on ethnicity and class.

Finally, American individualism has impacted the way the local congregation is viewed. After a discussion of what "the local church" has historically meant and looked like in the Judeo-Christian tradition, Bellah et al. write: "The very freedom, openness, and pluralism of American religious life makes this traditional pattern hard for Americans to understand. For one thing, the traditional pattern assumes a certain priority of the religious community over the individual. ... There is a givenness about the community and the tradition. They are not normally a matter of individual choice."⁴⁴ This is no longer the case. After a few case studies that show the *personal* emphasis that most Americans (and even many pastors) assign to the purpose and meaning of the church community, they note: "The salience of these needs for personal intimacy in American religious life suggests why the local church, like other voluntary communities, indeed like the contemporary family, is so fragile, requires so much energy to keep it going, and has so faint a hold on commitment when such needs are not met."⁴⁵

⁴² Bellah, et al, *Habits of the Heart*, 64–65.

⁴³ Bellah, et al, *Habits of the Heart*, 225.

⁴⁴ Bellah, et al, *Habits of the Heart*, 227.

⁴⁵ Bellah, et al, *Habits of the Heart*, 232.

C. After Virtue

In his classic work *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre claims that “[I]t is only possible to understand the dominant moral culture of advanced modernity adequately from a standpoint external to that culture. That culture has continued to be one of unresolved and apparently unresolvable moral and other disagreements in which the evaluative and normative utterances of the contending parties present a problem of interpretation. For on the one hand they seem to presuppose a reference to some shared impersonal standard in virtue of which at most one of those contending parties can be in the right, and yet on the other the poverty of the arguments adduced in support of their assertions and the characteristically shrill, and assertive and expressive mode in which they are uttered suggest strongly that there is no such standard. My explanation was and is that the precepts that are thus uttered were once at home in, and intelligible in terms of, a context of practical beliefs and of supporting habits of thought, feeling, and action [i.e., virtues], a context that has since been lost, a context in which moral judgments were understood as governed by impersonal standards justified by a shared conception of the human good. Deprived of that context and of that justification, as a result of disruptive and transformative social and moral changes in the late middle ages and the early modern world, moral rules and precepts had to be understood in a new way and assigned some new status, authority, and justification.”⁴⁶

The main purpose of *After Virtue* is to argue for a revival of virtue ethics⁴⁷ as a moral philosophy, which is derived from the writings of Aristotle.⁴⁸ Virtue ethics as a pre-modern idea stands in contrast to competing theories about morality that emerged in the post-Enlightenment, modern era (consequentialism⁴⁹ [including utilitarianism], social contract theory,⁵⁰ deontological ethics,⁵¹ etc.). Virtue ethics basically holds that there is an objective moral good, and that moral good is human flourishing.⁵² In that sense, the moral good is also teleological and built into the nature of reality. Virtue ethics as a philosophy emphasizes the development of personal character and virtues rather than, say, following rules or duties (as in deontological ethics) or the outcome of actions (as in consequentialism). MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* was a pivotal book in the effort to bring this pre-modern, Aristotelian moral philosophy back into the philosophical mainstream.⁵³

For the purpose of this research brief on the topic of tolerance and intolerance, the most important point in *After Virtue* comes early in the book. MacIntyre thinks that the state of moral discourse (that is, talking or debating about what is good and bad, right and wrong) in advanced modernity is irrational and doomed to failure because it rejects a teleological view of ethics. Without an Aristotelian (that is to say, realist and teleological)

⁴⁶ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, ix.

⁴⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virtue_ethics

⁴⁸ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross, ed. Lesley Brown (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁴⁹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consequentialism>

⁵⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_Contract

⁵¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deontological_ethics

⁵² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eudaimonia>

⁵³ A synopsis of *After Virtue* is available here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/After_Virtue

understanding of the moral good, all we are left with is what MacIntyre call “emotivism.” The basic idea of emotivism is that we make moral claims that sound like we’re referring to an objective standard but really all we are doing is appealing to our own subjective feelings, preferences, and emotions about what we want and what we feel is good.⁵⁴ As MacIntyre explains it: “[F]rom the standpoint of an ongoing way of life informed by and expressed through Aristotelian concepts it is possible to understand what the predicament of moral modernity is and why the culture of moral modernity lacks the resources to proceed further with its own moral enquiries, so that sterility and frustration are bound to afflict those unable to extricate themselves from those predicaments.”⁵⁵ The demand for tolerance (in the strong sense of accepting all positions as equally valid), unsupported appeals to various kinds of “rights,” and moral relativism find their sources in rejecting teleological virtue ethics. The book *After Virtue*, and understanding virtue ethics more generally, will help explain the source and nature of our current confusion about tolerance, intolerance, and moral relativism.

⁵⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emotivism>. See also: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ayer/#7>

⁵⁵ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, x.