

On May 13, my column provided the global history of religious tolerance. This column features the history of western religious persecution that led to today's modern values of tolerance.

European religious intolerance dates back to when the Romans made Christianity the state religion. Other faiths were discouraged and some actively persecuted. The arrival of Islam in North Africa and the formerly Christian Holy Land created a conflict that soon became the three-century "Crusades" fought in the Middle East. For centuries afterwards, Muslim pirates raided and took slaves from southern Europe and Turkish (Ottoman) Muslims seized and occupied Eastern Europe. Spain, which had been overrun by Muslims in the 8th century faced its own Crusades as the Christians in the north took back all of Spain over an eight-century conflict.

Tolerance of another religion, whether Muslim intolerance of Christianity or Christian intolerance of Islam, Judaism, or dissident sects, was the rule from 1000 to 1800 AD. Spain's Inquisition was the Catholic response to Islam's prior inquisitions. In the 14th century, Christianity in Europe split between Roman Catholicism and the new Protestant sects (Luther, Calvin, and Henry VIII Church of England). These sects became enmeshed with state identity. Northern European princes adopted Protestantism as their state religions while Roman Catholicism remained strong in southern Europe.

East-Central Europe, where three religious identities met and fought (Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and pockets of Islam), became and remain volatile, as we saw in the breakup of Yugoslavia along religious lines. Tolerance was never an option there.

The 15th-18th centuries ushered in religious wars between and among Catholics and Protestants. These wars were responsible for swaths of deaths by invading armies and famine throughout Germany and bloody persecutions in England, first by Protestants and then briefly by Catholics. By the end of the 18th century, the religious wars ended by treaty, granting tolerance to citizens of both sects of Christianity. The Catholic papacy still persecuted Protestants and Jews living in Catholic lands but eventually joined the religious tolerance treaty for Protestants, but not yet for Jews.

The earliest and least tolerant American Protestant sect (Puritans) persecuted Quakers and other dissidents, but all of them soon became part of the mainstream of American Protestantism. Mormonism gave rise to a new persecution, and American religious liberty was not extended to practitioners of polygamy. The Mormon Church was compelled officially to abandon that principle to be admitted into the Union as the state of Utah. Religious toleration has limits.

Catholicism and Judaism, both brought to America by the impoverished immigrant hordes fleeing Europe, were initially met with social prejudice, but not legal prejudice. This prejudice has largely melted away over time as all religions, including secularism, have morphed into a common culture with Protestant values. Victorian England accepted legal equality for England's Catholics when the Pope granted it to Rome's Protestants. Reciprocity was the demand.

After defeating the Nazis in World War II, the winners discovered Germany's nasty secret: the genocide of millions of Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, and the handicapped. Europe made toleration and acceptance the lynchpin of postwar Western European law. This tolerance is now being challenged by a flood of Muslim refugees from failed states, some of whom are intent upon getting tolerance for themselves to live in Europe without adopting the cultural norms around them. The fanatics threaten their less fervent co-religionists when they attempt to secularize and they lawyer-up to force acceptance of unsavory practices on their tolerant hosts.

Today, Europeans and some Americans are revisiting limitations of tolerance to some aspects of Islam. A close examination of Sharia Law exposes its antipathy toward Enlightenment democracy, angry refusal of equality of women, and tribal practices widely embraced by Muslims: honor killings for disobedient females and female genital mutilation. Our religious tolerance should never be blind.

The modern world has only recently stopped persecuting homosexuals. The Muslim world and dictatorships everywhere double down on persecuting and murdering their homosexual fellow countrymen. Their religions and cultures demand this prejudice.

Enlightenment values are at war with very dark cultures, cultures that have little to recommend them.

677 words

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