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Review: Tolerance among the Virtues

Bharat Ranganathan

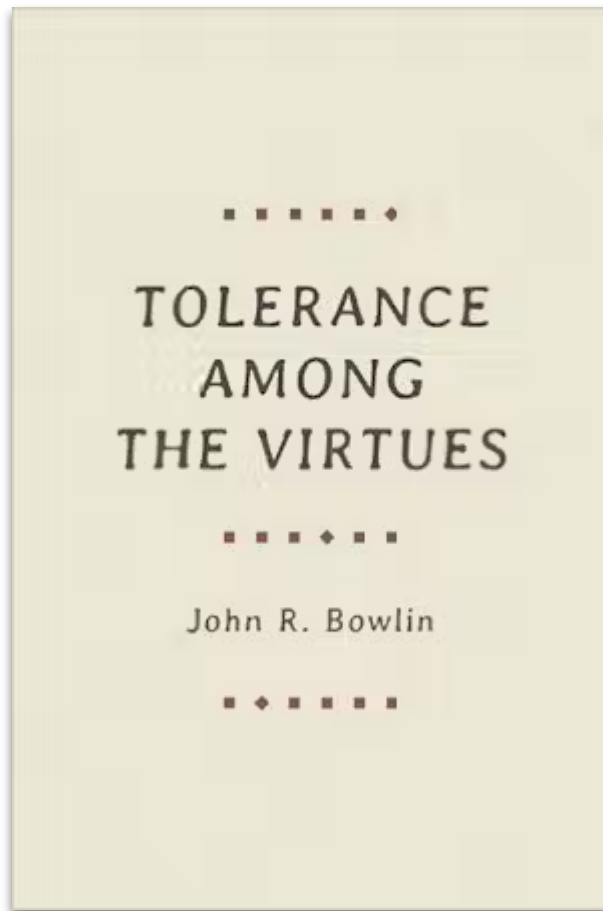
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Tolerance among the Virtues

By: John R. Bowlin**280 Pages****HARDCOVER****ISBN: 9780691169972****Published By: Princeton University Press****Published: August 2016****\$39.50****FROM PUBLISHER****REVIEW****HIDE -**

In increasingly pluralistic liberal democracies, citizens are commanded to be tolerant toward one another. Likewise, intolerance among citizens is criticized. But what exactly is *tolerance*? Is tolerance a personal attitude toward others whose beliefs and practices we neither wholly accept nor wholly reject? If it is a personal attitude, what does tolerance require from us, epistemologically, morally, and politically, in our interactions with one another? Or given the diverse communities in which we find ourselves, is tolerance something imposed upon us, for example, through coercive policies enforced by our shared social and political institutions? If our shared social and political institutions dictate and uphold tolerance, what's left for us, as conscientious citizens, in our interactions with one another? Moreover, how intensive or extensive is tolerance? Should the Evangelical tolerate same-sex marriage? Should the Jain tolerate their meat-eating coworker? Should the Roman Catholic tolerate abortion? Or should the secular humanist tolerate hate speech? Questions like these continue to confront legal, moral, political, and religious thinkers, especially in the wake of the 2016 American election cycle.

In this densely argued book, John Bowlin draws from Thomas Aquinas (especially) and Ludwig Wittgenstein in order to explicate an

account of tolerance, speaking particularly to “friends of liberal democracy and their regimes of toleration” (6). More specifically, he aims to explicate and defend a perfectionist account of tolerance as a moral virtue. On his account, tolerance “is a moral virtue and moral virtues are habits,” that is, “dispositions whereby the subject in which the disposition resides is disposed well or ill” (106). “With the consistency of habit,” Bowlin writes, the tolerant will:

single out those differences that are in fact objectionable and treat them differently from those that are not. They will distinguish those objectionable differences that are intolerably harmful from those that are harmlessly disagreeable, and they will know how to respond to each, dispensing coercion, correction, prophetic critique, and patient endurance in accord with these judgments and as circumstances warrant. And they will determine which unobjectionable differences deserve our acceptance and recognition, if not celebration and admiration, which deserve our indifference, if not apathy and inattention, and which deserve both responses—sometimes the one, sometimes the other. (134)

In identifying tolerance as something *attitudinal* or *personal*, Bowlin isn't alone—T. M. Scanlon, as only one example, comes to mind. Compared to other thinkers, however, Bowlin's account is notable in three important senses. First, it is a *perfectionist* account. That is to say, tolerance is not only a virtue but also a natural one (61). Moreover, tolerance is perfectionist in two senses: (i) “the habitual ability to perform a good act,” which includes the ability to judge “which differences are objectionable and in what way”; and (ii) “there is the right to use this ability ... in this instance the habitual will to translate the good intention elicited by the aptness to perform a tolerant act into an action into an action that is fact tolerant” (61).

Second, whereas many thinkers focus solely on *acts* of toleration, Bowlin distinguishes among “tolerance,” “a tolerant act,” and “toleration.” For him, tolerance is a moral virtue, which “accord[s] with certain norms and reasons and to a collection of actions and attitudes associated with that perfection.” “A tolerant act,” in turn, “is one that conforms to those norms and reasons.” And, finally, “toleration” picks out “either the license given to the one who is

endured to speak and act in certain ways across certain lines of disagreement and difference, or the activity of enduring some objectionable difference” (18, n.1).

Third, in developing this account of tolerance, Bowlin also believes that we must attend to tolerance’s sibling virtue: forbearance. Whereas tolerance follows from norms of justice—“that regards right relations among persons” (205)—forbearance follows from norms of friendship’s love. And whereas the tolerant “endure some objectionable difference because this act is the good that is due some person in accord with those norms,” the forbearing “endure another’s difference because they are friends, because friends wish each other well and share a life together, and because this act in this instance delivers a good to the beloved” (214). The difference between the two sibling virtues, he notes, arises because of their distinctive ends. “The tolerant,” on the one side, “endure the objectionable difference of another in order to maintain the relationship they share and autonomy with respect to those differences.” The forbearing, on the other hand, shares with the tolerant the desire to maintain relationships. But they “also intend to be reconciled with those from whom they are divided ... Unlike the tolerant, they are not content with a relatively modest union of judgment and love, one that admits of distance and difference. Rather, they assume a more substantive union at the start, one constituted by the mutual love and well-wishing, the share life and common projects, that distinguish friendships, and they hope their endurance will eventually yield an ever more perfect union, one that eliminates the need for their act” (215). Both attitudinally and practically, tolerance—and especially forbearance—are demanding. But perhaps the demandingness that these sibling virtues require is exactly what we now need and should thus embrace, foster, and habituate.

I have offered the briefest sketch of Bowlin’s searching argument, and the ways in which he develops certain aspects of it. To be sure, this book is demanding, especially given the precision with which Bowlin defines and distinguishes the relevant concepts. But it is a book that will, I believe, repay close reading and re-reading. Whether or not you’re a Christian, I think there’s much to be learned from the way in which Bowlin reads Aquinas, as well as Wittgenstein, to stake

out tolerance as a moral virtue. I think anyone—especially in light of the *intolerance* that’s permeating our current political environment—will profit from thinking through Bowlin’s argument.

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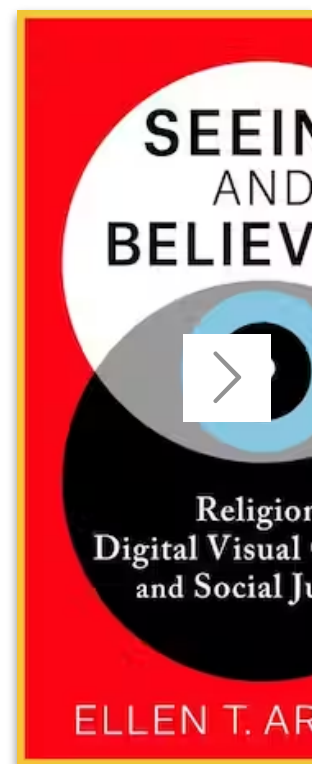
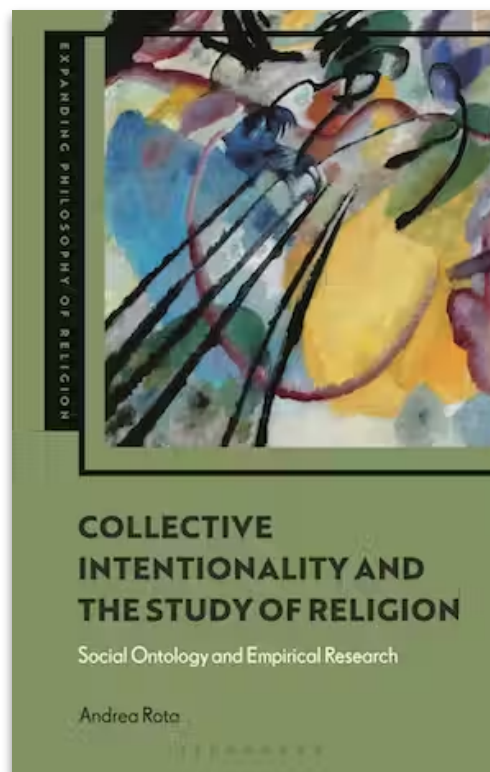
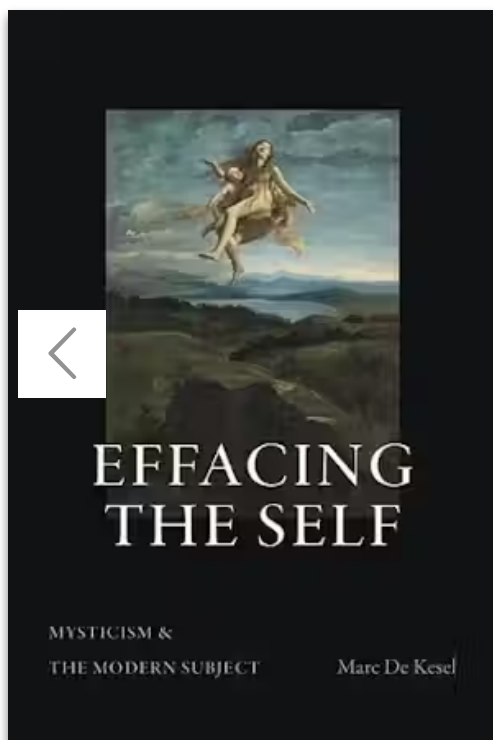
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