Cycles of Tolerance and Persecution

Walsham finds the provocative title for her book in the teachings of St. Augustine. "What death is worse for the soul than the freedom to err?" Augustine asked in Ad Donatistas. "It is better to love with severity than to deceive with indulgence." To persecute one’s neighbor for heterodox beliefs was thus to express “charitable hatred” in their best interests (p. 2). In contrast, toleration of dissenting religious beliefs could invoke God’s judgment and apocalypse, or at the very least, political and social chaos or natural disaster.

This new work by Alexandra Walsham leads historians of England, the Reformation era, and of persecution and toleration more generally, toward important new understandings of how intolerance and acceptance of difference interact cyclically throughout history. In Western society, persecution and toleration are usually understood as polar opposites, as distinct, value-laden choices. Historians have tended to chart a linear rise of toleration accompanied by a supposedly natural decline in persecution as a hallmark of democracy and modernity. Walsham asks us to reconsider this “either/or” relationship between persecution and toleration. A fundamental aspect of Walsham’s approach is the rejection of traditional dichotomies that rise and fall in opposition to each other in favor of interdependent processes that feed off each other in cycles. In this case, persecution and toleration are the central processes Walsham wants us to reconsider, arguing that they exist in constant tension, stimulating one another in an endless rotation based on continuous and varied interactions between “ideology, official edict, and the ‘tolerance of practical rationality’ exhibited at the grassroots” (p. 231). Simultaneously, Walsham also asks us to question a variety of other familiar oppositional categories in the same manner: equilibrium and enmity, resistance and compromise, and assimilation and segregation.

Walsham critiques nineteenth- and early twentieth-century historians, such as A. S. P. Woodhouse and William Haller, many of whom pointed to the Reformation era as the turning point from persecution toward increased toleration, which in turn was part of an eventual triumph of liberty, democracy, and civil society. Most historians, she contends, have experienced difficulty breaking away from this model. She sees herself as building on the insights of scholars such as Bob Scribner and Ole Peter Grell, who challenge the notion that the Reformation was the origin of increased toleration. She also makes good use of works on the medieval period that revise our understanding of the level of toleration actually present within the medieval Christian church and medieval society as a whole, and of several texts published in the last few years—such as those by Perez Zagorin and John Coffey—that are injecting new life into the debate, although which are still seemingly bound by a commitment to the linear progression from persecution to toleration. What could make Walsham’s analysis even stronger however, would be the inclusion of theoretical and interpretive insights from the study of persecution and toleration in non-Christian, non-European, non-Reformation-era contexts. She has gone so far in
creating a new interpretive model. Why not take it further?

Walsham’s text begins, theoretically, with Henry VIII’s break from Rome and his contentious religious policies of the mid-1530s and ends with the Act of Toleration in 1689. Realistically, however, Walsham begins with the Lollards in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, and her last chapter takes us well into the eighteenth century. She stresses the fluidity of the religious landscape during the constant change of these centuries. Her methodology is not chronological or narrative but thematic as she attempts to move in a different direction from the linear, teleological approach of previous works. The author includes a variety of dissenting groups in her analysis: Lollards, Anabaptists, Calvinists, Lutherans, Catholics, a large variety of Protestant separatists, and even Anglicans when they fell out of favor during the Interregnum. Periodically, Jews, Muslims, and immigrant Calvinist communities from the Continent make an appearance.

One of this text’s strengths is Walsham’s logical organization of ideas and information. She weaves together a variety of sources with a careful eye toward the challenges they pose. Included in these sources are legal, theological, and philosophical treatises; a variety of church records, including episcopal visitation, and diocesan and consistory court records; as well as records of secular institutions such as Privy Court, Parliament, and county assizes. Walsham addresses the risks involved when dealing with literatures of persecution, including official records kept by persecutors, martyrrologies, and surviving archival evidence. She also argues that written records offer an incomplete view of tolerance, as few chronicles record details about times that were harmonious. Walsham thus suggests that evidence of actions rather than printed materials should be sought. Reading motivations from events, or from absences in the records, can be hazardous, but Walsham treads cautiously, laying out potential biases and challenges so readers can see how she navigated this difficult body of material.

It is Walsham’s clarity when describing her engagement with her sources—explaining what questions she asked and why—that helps make the majority of her arguments convincing. She begins by investigating how religious orthodoxy, uniformity, and the ideal of one doctrinal truth were envisioned in the early modern era, where such ideas came from, and who enforced them. From 1500-1700, Walsham argues that no religious group abandoned the belief in religious uniformity. Pleas for toleration and legislative acts of toleration were a stop-gap measure to halt religious violence until religious uniformity could be restored at some expected point in the near future. As such—and here the argument recalls Michel Foucault—the rhetoric and laws that promoted toleration were actually part of the process of persecution, not a rejection of it.

Widespread agreement on the necessity of religious uniformity masked disagreements about how to achieve or enforce it. Walsham investigates a menu of possible measures, such as execution, church attendance, the taking of oaths, the clamping down on dissenting clergy, fines, imprisonment, torture, restrictions on movements and possession of arms, and public embarrassment and penance. Despite the long list of options for enforcing religious conformity, Walsham notes that not all options were actively practiced against religious dissidents. Magistrates and priests were not always willing to prosecute their neighbors.

Changing direction, Walsham begins to question how the populace responded to dissidents in their midst. Violence, she asserts, was neither random nor disorganized. She searches for common patterns of when, why, and against whom physical, ritualized, and verbal violence was used. She contends that all these forms of violence should be seen as part of a circular process, in which the potential for persecution always existed. Intolerance was overt and targeted at some times. At other times it might be diffused or present as an undercurrent within the community. But it was always there. Walsham perhaps goes too far in describing the patterns she identifies as “tightly focused, structured and circumscribed” (p. 148) but the commonalities she identifies are persuasive.

Her next query revolves around how various religious minority groups responded to official and local intolerance. Dissidents, Walsham suggests, employed various strategies—such as martyrdom, insurrection, dissimulation, equivocation—that served both to “foster and defuse” intolerance (p. 212). Stressing the interwining of simultaneous impulses toward persecution and toleration, Walsham contends that these strategies laid the foundations for future episodes of antipathy and tolerance—again, emphasizing the circular nature of these tensions. As readers might expect given her previous publications, Walsham stresses the importance of partial and occasional conformity by dissenters, arguing that the presence of such conformers created a de facto pluralism and tolerance before 1689.

Walsham analyzes the increasing visibility of theories
of toleration and responses to them prior to 1689 and beyond. Her final chapter is perhaps the least satisfying, as she takes on the long-term consequences of religious pluralism in England, investigating issues of integration, assimilation, and increased confessionalization, making comparisons with other European experiences after 1700. The topic is so broad that what Walsham provides here can only whet the appetite. Persecution did not decrease while tolerance increased, as previous historians have suggested. Instead the balance between the two shifted. Persecution was still present in many easily recognizable forms, such as in mocking stereotypes of dissenters found in popular literature and ballads. Other forms of intolerance simply changed forms.

In sum, this is an invaluable text. Walsham throws down the historical gauntlet, in essence challenging historians and theoreticians studying a myriad of time periods, events, and regions, to reject false analytical dichotomies—the “either/or” syndrome—to which we are so often drawn. Our analysis becomes more complicated, and downright messy, but we take a step toward a deeper understanding of how societies and individuals interact in the long term. Walsham’s biggest challenge throughout in analyzing these cycles is a tendency to place either persecution or tolerance above the other in her attempt to characterize the tension between them. For example, she states that “toleration itself was a form of intolerance” (p. 5). Why not intolerance as a form of toleration? I think this reveals the limitations of our current vocabulary in describing these relationships rather than any flaw in Walsham’s analysis. But the creation of new, less polarized vocabulary is just one of the new directions Walsham’s work leads to, because the insights in this book are valuable beyond English or European experience and beyond the Reformation era for understanding cycles of violence and peace.

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