

## **Constantinian Toleration**

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**Rainer Forst, *Toleration in Conflict: Past and Present*, translated by Ciaran Cronin**

Ideas in Context series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016). xiv + 635 pp. £22.99, ISBN 978-1-316-62167-7 (pbk)

**Teresa M. Bejan, *Mere Civility: Disagreement and the Limits of Toleration***

(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017). 288 pp. £35.95/US\$45.00  
ISBN 978-0-674-54549-6 (hbk)

**John R. Bowlin, *Tolerance Among the Virtues***

(Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016). 265 pp. £29.95/US\$39.50. ISBN 978-0-691-16997-2 (hbk)

Sometimes toleration is framed as a quintessentially modern problem, entailed by liberalism. When framed in this way, toleration is a secular problem:

once Christianity has receded from the domain of politics, how can the secular state prevent various minority communities and beliefs from being quashed by a majority? This question must be answered without the normative resources to support toleration that Christianity might bring to bear; novel, secular accounts of toleration must be invented. Once the confidence of secular liberalism is shaken, in a postmodern moment when multiple stories proliferate without being judged by any shared criteria, the secular problem of toleration would seem to pose itself anew, all the more acutely. The liberal, modern ethos of toleration remains, but the rational mechanisms for realizing toleration fall under suspicion – and the very project of developing new mechanisms is itself suspect. In this context, some secular theorists have turned to affective and embodied encounters with difference to provide accounts of toleration that do not rest on the foundation of the autonomous, rational subject.<sup>1</sup>

But in the last two decades the cultural context has changed again. Instead of deep pluralism motivating accounts of toleration, deep difference now draws theorists' attention. What is to be done with those who are not content to live by one of many stories, with those who claim a story that desires to subordinate all the rest, using force if necessary? Clearly, terrorism performed in the name of Islam was an occasion for deep difference to capture North Atlantic consciousness, but

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<sup>1</sup> Lars Tonder, *Tolerance: A Sensorial Orientation to Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

deep difference is also found, in other ways, on questions of immigration, anti-black racism, and perceived authoritarianism (e.g., China and North Korea), among others. One response to this confrontation with deep difference is a return to secularist liberalism, which proffers even more elaborate accounts of toleration that begin with our shared human capacity to reason. Another response is to expose the project of toleration as a ruse of ideology, a tool of the wealthy and powerful to manage difference. In this view, the discourse of toleration, from political rhetoric to state and non-governmental institutions, accepts and mollifies some difference (paradigmatically, “moderate Islam”) while waging war against other difference (“radical Islam”), with the distinction between the two groups based on the self-interest of the powerful rather than on any coherent rational criteria. Those groups that are willing to place themselves within a narrative offered by the powerful will be tolerated by the powerful; other groups face demonization and extermination.<sup>2</sup>

Returning to secular reason, on the one hand, and exposing toleration as a ruse, on the other are not the only two options. The last few years have seen new accounts of toleration put forward that emphasize continuities with Christian practices of toleration. Culturally, this move is made possible by a newfound self-reflectiveness in the West. If “radical Islam” is the other, who are “we”? For better

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<sup>2</sup> Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolrance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

or worse, this question elicits reflection on the specifically Christian heritage of the West. (Unfortunately, this question at the same time solidifies boundaries, and antagonisms, between images of Islam and Christianity, the West and the Middle East, that have been, in reality, porous.) From within the academy, the energetic critique of secularism by scholars in a variety of fields also calls attention to the continuities between Christianity and ostensibly secular liberal modernity. It is in this context that Rainer Forst, Teresa Bejan, and John Bowlin have turned to Christian accounts of toleration to inform contemporary debates. With the possible exception of Bowlin, however, the turn to Christian sources is not in the service of Christian ethical reflection. Rather, Forst and Bejan write as secular political thinkers searching for the most effective resources to confront what is presented as a secular problem, and Christian thought just happens to be a particularly potent resource. While Bowlin is a religious ethicist teaching at Princeton Theological Seminary, he too retrieves Christian resources and makes them accessible for those who do not necessarily share Christian convictions. In other words, the critique of secularism has seemingly only gone half way: these theorists recognize the import of the West's Christian heritage without grappling with Christianity's continuing normative pull on those living in the West.

In short, given the direction that scholarly discussions of toleration are moving, Christian ethicists are positioned to play an important role not only in

speaking from the Christian tradition to fellow Christians about toleration, but also in engaging the broader scholarly discussion about toleration that is beginning to cross the divide between secular and theological scholarship. In this essay I consider how Christian ethicists might engage with the recent books on toleration by Forst, Bejan, and Bowlin. I argue that each of these authors offers a stimulating new approach to the question of toleration that Christian ethicists should take seriously. But I also worry that these authors offer Constantinian accounts of toleration, accounts that take as their starting place the perspective of the powerful, and I end the essay by asking what shape a Christian-ethical account of toleration that rejects a Constantinian perspective might take.

Rainer Forst is a German philosopher based at Frankfurt and identified with the most recent iteration of the Frankfurt School of critical theory. He is sometimes classed among the third generation of this School, with the first including, preeminently, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, and the second including, most famously, Jurgen Habermas. Both Forst and the other third generation luminary, Axel Honneth, were students of Habermas, and their work reflects the spirit of his, offering historically engaged accounts of what characterizes social life at its most robust. Like Honneth and the later Habermas, Forst is aware of and responsive to developments in French social theory, most importantly the work of Michel Foucault, but he is familiar also with those in Anglo-American philosophy.

Where Honneth draws particularly on American pragmatism, Forst is especially attuned to the concerns of political philosophers working in the analytic tradition.

In Forst's hefty book – the slightly abridged English translation has 635 pages, while the German original, published in 2003, ran to 807 pages – he devotes the majority of his effort to offering a history of toleration, before advancing his own constructive account. The first section of the book is not a straightforward history, however, but is instead a philosophical history, one that moves in a specific direction, revealing certain insights as it unfolds. From the Bible through the Church Fathers and the middle ages to the Renaissance, Reformation and Enlightenment, and into modernity, Forst demonstrates how efforts to theorize toleration turn into their opposite: the same conceptual resources that advanced toleration are later employed to advance intolerance. Augustine gives a well-known example of this process, with the conceptual apparatus developed during his early advocacy of religious toleration later deployed to justify violence against the Donatists. Among other places, Forst finds this process also at work in Martin Luther's thought: in the reformer's early days he offered an account of religious toleration closely tied to his core commitment that the individual should engage with Scripture himself, but later Luther aligned himself with state powers that can only be read as intolerant of religious diversity.

Like classic Hegelian dialectic, the repeated process of assertion and negation moves in a particular direction, toward the present. Forst's understanding of history is not unique: the great (European, male) philosophers are all represented, from Erasmus to Montaigne to Spinoza to Montesquieu to Voltaire to Kant. Each has thoughts on toleration, whether or not that word is central to his vocabulary, and Forst provides a sketch of how toleration is situated within each thinker's broader philosophical project. Whereas Frankfurt School theorists of the first generation were famously suspicious of Enlightenment, deploying dialectic without a sense of progress in order to demythologize progress, Forst does not share these worries. He is pleased to see the importance of the individual development in the Renaissance and Reformation, and he celebrates Pierre Bayle and Kant for coming closest to getting the concept of toleration right, even if moments of antithesis persist throughout the unfolding of this history.

What Forst means by getting toleration right is subtle. He opens his book by announcing that toleration is a concept that all human communities have, though each community understands it in a different way. At its core, the concept includes three features: something that one objects to, a willingness to accept certain objectionable things, and a limit beyond which certain objectionable things are rejected. To get toleration right means to offer an account of how these three features can hang together that is justifiable. The only way to do this, according to

Forst, is “recursively,” by means of a theory of justification. This is what Forst sees emerging in Bayle and Kant and what Forst himself develops in the constructive portion of his book. At the end of the day, “the fundamental respect for others as morally autonomous persons” forms “the basis for toleration” (p. 9), and this respect results in a requirement that norms be justifiable to those on whom they are imposed. In other words, and in line with the style of historical analysis Forst presents, toleration must be embedded in broader philosophical commitments, and for toleration to be justifiable it must be accompanied by a commitment that all norms are justifiable – a commitment that itself entails toleration. If norms were imposed that were not justifiable to all, they would be intolerant, on Forst’s account.

By tracing the history of toleration, particularly regarding the Jews in Europe, and by engaging with contemporary critical theories of toleration, especially the work of Wendy Brown, Forst shows he is well aware of the potential for toleration to serve as a mechanism to contain minority populations. But Forst responds to this by arguing that that is evidence of an unjustified understanding of toleration, one moment in the dialectic that we are able to learn from as we, today, embrace a justifiable account of toleration. For Forst, toleration is, indeed, always linked with power and, as power disciplines, critique is necessary. Critique entails a demand for reasons that justify while allowing “a plurality of ethical modes of

valuation” to flourish (p. 542). The demand for justification applies universally and it is a tool that can be wielded against domination; but it is not, according to Forst, a demand for everyone to live the same sort of life or assign values in the same way. At the end of the day, as Forst quite plainly states, his position resembles that of John Rawls. The many pages of deep engagement with New Testament and early Christian sources concerning toleration all are in the service of a larger secular history and a larger secularist constructive project that is essentially a defense of the liberal status quo.

The Christian ethicist could take Forst’s historical narrative and further develop the early Christian sources, attempting to demonstrate that the account of toleration offered there is explicitly or implicitly justifiable in the sense Forst develops. Or the Christian ethicist could offer an alternative historical narrative. While Forst’s story follows the secularizing philosophical tradition in reducing Christianity to “religion,” and to “faith,” he does not attend to the theological resources that develop a more robust account of religious tradition while resisting being circumscribed by the terms of essentially secular philosophy. How might Christian accounts of toleration appear in those contexts? This would mean turning away from the great books of philosophy and from the dynamics of secular politics, and attending instead to Christian thought in modernity in places where it

is no longer aligned with, and so constrained by, the highest echelons of state power.

While Forst is interested in the history of ideas of toleration, he is also careful to track the social and political context in which they are emerging – and which ultimately will lead to their reversal, from toleration to intolerance, when ideas of toleration are insufficiently justifiable. The political theorist Teresa Bejan is also interested in the social and political context of ideas concerning toleration, and she helpfully fills out this context for three key thinkers on toleration in the early modern period: John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, and Roger Williams. It is the last of these that she champions, arguing that he offers an account of toleration that we can usefully learn from today. Attending to social and political context for early modern thinkers necessarily means attending to religious context, and Bejan is an astute reader of the various currents of Christianity that were shaping her theorists and to which they were responding. Indeed, she argues that other readers of early modern accounts of toleration, particularly of Williams, have not taken the tumultuous world of Christian thought and practice in the period seriously enough, effectively viewing Christian thinkers through secularist lenses.

Unlike Forst, who seeks normative foundations for an account of toleration and who is interested in joining accounts of interpersonal and state toleration, Bejan is focused on practical politics. Given a rowdy context with many sorts of

actors holding strong and varied opinions, what account of toleration will work the best? (What the exact pragmatic criteria are remain rather obscure in Bejan's project.) To answer this, Bejan argues that secular liberal theorists have gone astray by incorporating a certain secularized theological concept into their thinking on toleration. There is a deep hope for *concordia* that follows from the writings of John Locke and is evident in Locke's commitment to civic charity, as Bejan develops it. While Locke fills out shared basic commitments in religious terms – specifically, albeit minimally, Christian terms – and these shared values make possible civic life together, contemporary political philosophers talk in ostensibly secular terms about “our respect or recognition of others' equal dignity” as the basis for civic life together (p. 160). But in Bejan's view this gets the human condition wrong. To civic life people bring all sorts of motivations, many of them not reducible to reasons generated by respect for dignity. Similarly, Bejan describes just how raucous religious life was in Locke's day, with Quakers appearing in the nude and interrupting others' worship, Anabaptists refusing to pay taxes, Catholics plotting, and evangelists name-calling. Locke sought to distill a common denominator as a prerequisite to civic life, whereas Hobbes had, on Bejan's reading, sought to enforce civil silence on questions of potentially sharp controversy. But people naturally disagree with passion about matters of deep import.

Unlike Hobbes and Locke, who considered questions of toleration from a distance, Roger Williams was in the fray, in the New World. He was dealing with Christians living in his colony who could not obtain a conviction for bestiality because the witnesses were Native Americans who did not share the faith. He was himself thrown out of the Massachusetts Bay Colony for his rowdy evangelizing, using harsh words against his opponents and inflicting his exacting standards of piety on his neighbors. While some political philosophers today, including Martha Nussbaum, regard Williams as a precursor to theorists of liberal toleration, Bejan recovers in rich detail Williams's evangelical fervor and his impatience and even intolerance for those around him motivated by his faith. He thought women should wear veils in public, he thought the English flag idolatrous, and he objected to the title "Good-man" (then used among Puritans) because of human sinfulness. Williams seems deeply intolerant, but Bejan argues that Williams actually represents an underappreciated form of toleration that she labels "mere civility." After being kicked out of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and founding his own, Rhode Island, Williams worked out a practice in which, on civil matters, everyone could participate. This did not mean everyone had to like each other, or that everyone had to remain silent about their differences with each other. On the contrary, mere civility meant that Christian evangelicals like Williams could loudly make their religious claims and condemnations, insulting their fellow citizens and

employing blustery rhetoric. When it came to civil matters, however, even those Williams would polemicize against were allowed to participate fully.

Today, civility means toning down the force with which one expresses one's commitments for the sake of maintaining the comfort of shared, diverse spaces. For Williams, and following him Bejan, however, civility means something quite different. Civility is not the result of respecting each other or loving each other; it concerns "*bodies or goods*" in contrast to the spiritual domain, "concerning *Soule and worship*" (p. 59, italics original). Marriage and oaths are spiritual, not civil, matters, according to Williams, and should not be part of civil government. The domain of the civil concerns just the safety of people and things, and in that domain all are equal. Bejan argues, implicitly against secularism, that only when toleration is understood following Williams, as making room for harsh polemic about deep convictions can various ethical and religious traditions fully express themselves and so take part fully in public life. Engaging with deep disagreement at first seems painful but with practice becomes easier, and the sort of tolerant society that Williams envisioned would provide plenty of opportunities for such practice. On Bejan's reconstruction, Williams is an imperfect practitioner of mere civility, and his colony is ultimately destroyed in a conflict with the Native Americans, but he offers a valuable model for toleration today that is ultimately motivated by his deep Christian convictions.

Whereas Bejan recovers Roger Williams as an exemplary advocate of toleration, John Bowlin turns to Thomas Aquinas. It is less Aquinas's specific thoughts on toleration that matter to Bowlin than his general virtue-ethical framework. Where Bejan is concerned with the way a group of people live together, Bowlin is concerned with how one ought to live, ethics instead of politics. Forst offers the helpful language of toleration's vertical dimension, that by an authority of its subjects, which concerns Bejan, and toleration's horizontal dimension, that by fellow citizens of each other, which concerns Bowlin. In whatever place or time one can think of, humans have encountered others whose actions they find objectionable and have withheld condemnation. This is the basic intuition Bowlin begins with. He then deploys all of the technical apparatus that develops around virtue ethics, both historically, especially with Aquinas, and in contemporary philosophical discussions in order to fill out an account of the virtue of tolerance. This virtue arises naturally out of the circumstances in which humans live, it is performed habitually, and its objects and accompanying passions can be enumerated. When tolerance is considered a virtue, we know to be on the lookout for acts that resemble the virtue but are deficient in some regard, unworthy of praise as genuine tolerance. While tolerance arises naturally, it can be perfected, and the theorist, Bowlin, is tasked with describing what that perfection looks like.

Bowlin is particularly fond of considering a father whose child plays music of questionable quality in their shared home. The father strongly dislikes this music and worries that the music is leading his son to develop further bad tastes. One response is to force the child to stop playing the music. Another response is indifference: for example, wearing headphones or convincing oneself that the music really is not that offensive. A third response is to learn to accept and even, perhaps, to enjoy the once-despised music. None of these options represents the virtue of tolerance. What tolerance involves is patient endurance. An offensive act is encountered, the offense is registered, but the instinctive reaction to correct the offense is withheld. As Bowlin rightly points out, not all circumstances call for tolerance. If the father discovered that the child was running a meth lab from his room, patient endurance would not be the virtuous response. Like any virtue, tolerance involves responding appropriately to the circumstances, and it takes practice and formation to acquire the habit of perceiving circumstances correctly and responding appropriately. This may sound messy, and the heavy technical apparatus Bowlin introduces makes it sound even messier, but it captures an intuition about how we are already familiar with tolerance that is often lost when discussion focuses on abstract principles of toleration advanced by philosophers or political theorists.

Bowlin is a religious ethicist drawing on Thomas Aquinas, but he is careful to present his account of tolerance in a way that makes Christian convictions optional. He does, however, draw inspiration from the rich ethical vocabulary of Christian thought, not only Aquinas's account of virtue ordered to the good but also Christian reflection on the virtue of forbearance, which is closely related to tolerance. Bowlin presents forbearance as "love's endurance," drawing on Scripture, and he describes how forbearance is understood in the Christian tradition as the result of God's grace. Our loving relationships are made possible by God's grace, and an element of these relationships is enduring what gives us offense rather than acting on our offense. This is how God, who loves humanity, acts with respect to human sins, and God's forbearance provides a model for how humans are to act with those we love. In one sense, forbearance is tolerance writ small, on the scale of family, romantic relations, and friendships. Both people with tolerance and those with forbearance "intend to maintain the relationship shared with those they endure *and* the autonomy enjoyed with respect to their differences, and they [also] want their act to express the regard they have for that relationship" (p. 215, italics added). But, in the case of forbearance – when a relationship is necessarily animated by love rather than just, for example, fellow-citizenship – patient endurance aims at reconciliation, closing the distance that has emerged between those who love; tolerance, in contrast, maintains a distance between the one who is

tolerating and the one who is tolerated. As this presentation makes clear, even with a concept growing out of Christian theological reflection, like forbearance, Bowlin aims to offer an account that opens to a non-Christian as well as a Christian audience.

The start and end to Bowlin's book reflect on a specific, difficult example of tolerance that tested the author. He was living in Tulsa, Oklahoma and the state was considering a ban on cockfighting, an activity enjoyed in rural, marginalized communities at a distance from urban areas like Tulsa. Bowlin and colleagues went to a small town to watch a cockfight to determine how to vote in the referendum on the practice – and, it seems, to determine whether patient endurance was the appropriate response. The author describes what he took to be an appeal for tolerance by a member of the rural community, a man who understood that the sophisticated professors would be offended but who nevertheless solicited their patient endurance. Bowlin notes that such an appeal is striking because so much contemporary discourse about tolerance has to do with supposedly intolerant conservative communities and liberal cosmopolitans who are tolerant only within limits chosen to preserve liberals' comfort. Shifting focus to the shared virtue of tolerance softens the public polemic and potentially creates ways of forging a shared life together, across ideological divides.

Forst, Bejan, and Bowlin, drawing on dialectic, political history, and moral philosophy respectively, and appealing to Pierre Boyle, Roger Williams, and Thomas Aquinas, open new conversations about toleration that draw on Christian resources in order to avoid both liberal rationalism and Nietzschean suspicion. What they also share is a point of view identified with the position of authority. Forst tracks theologians and philosophers in their political contexts theorizing about who ought to be tolerated and to what extent. In doing so, he seeks a theory of toleration that would hold together both vertical and horizontal dimensions, toleration by those in authority, and toleration among fellow citizens. Bejan wonders what policies a state ought to implement in order to grapple most successfully with deep diversity. Bowlin seeks to privilege the horizontal over the vertical dimension of toleration, but his examples suggest that the vertical dimension retains a privileged position. It is, after all, the father who must decide what music to tolerate his son playing, and the urbane academic in a position of relative authority who must decide to what extent he must tolerate rural neighbors' violent pastimes. The return to Christianity, in discussions of toleration, has not displaced the fundamental dynamic that toleration's critics worry about: that the question is posed from the position of those in power, and everything that is said to elaborate a theory of toleration necessarily functions (in its effect rather than its content) to entrench the powers that be and so to marginalize further those already

at the margins. This worry is compounded when the powers that be are identified with their Christianity: toleration elaborated in this way would serve to secure Christendom. Given the specific historical context in which this turn to Christian resources for theorizing toleration is taking place, in the face of a perceived challenge from “radical Islam,” particular caution is called for regarding activity that could be perceived to be building the battlements of Christendom.

While Christian ethicists have for decades worried about the dangers of Constantinian Christianity, the secular theorists turning to Christianity for resources to theorize toleration do not come with this background. What would it mean to draw on Christian resources while refusing the identification of Christianity with state power or with worldly authority more generally (including patriarchy)? Most fundamentally, it would mean looking for a new vantage point from which to approach toleration: neither vertically nor horizontally but from below. If we take Christian ethics to privilege the perspective of the most marginalized, to follow Jesus in standing with the poor, the orphaned, the diseased, and the incarcerated, what does the question of toleration mean from such a perspective?

Each of the three authors under discussion hints at, but does not fully develop, such a perspective. For Bejan, the account of mere civility that she draws from Williams allows for communities regardless of their relative power to air

their commitments and claims as loudly as they want. While Bejan only gives pragmatic reasons for this position, a Christian ethicist might view it favorably from the perspective of those marginalized. Ideally, in Bejan's view, the disciplining power of toleration that a majority inflicts on a minority is refused because fiery speech and variant practices are allowable so long as all are able to participate in the most basic functions of government equally. (This last qualification opens up all sorts of complications, as litigation around military service, education, and access to the legal system itself have shown, but it is the general instinct toward government restraint that is of interest here.) This should please critics concerned with marginalized communities, but these same critics may worry that raucous public discourse and evangelism puts groups that are already vulnerable at greater risk. There are material conditions that amplify certain loud voices and not others, and that insulate certain voices from risk. After all, Roger Williams was able to petition Parliament for permission to lead his own colony after being expelled from the Massachusetts Bay Colony while other dissenters were simply expelled into the wilderness. Bejan suggests that our capacity to listen deeply to others will improve if we are all able to express our deep convictions without restraint, but even if this is the case, might it not be overridden by the power of, say, a well-funded Anti-Semite or xenophobe to saturate the mass media? What if cultural forces teach boys to speak out and girls

to remain quiet about their opinions, resulting in the vast majority of contributions in a seemingly chaotic public debate coming from male participants?

On the other hand, there is something healthy about a society where groups with sharply divergent views are able to participate in public deliberation without moderating the extent of their differences. The philosophical literature on epistemic justice has demonstrated how relatively homogenous populations tend to give their own beliefs higher credence than they deserve while minority populations tend to discount the credence of their beliefs. The decisions made in such a society, even if they are ostensibly directed toward the common good, will suffer from lack of knowledge. In contrast, when communities with strongly divergent views are able to share those views, rubbing up against each other with no group having a monopoly on the terms of discourse, discounting and overvaluing of beliefs will eventually be corrected, making it possible for a community to make better decisions – and more effectively to pursue the common good.<sup>3</sup> Marginalized communities benefit, and everyone benefits. Something like this vision seems to lie in the background of Bejan’s endorsement of mere civility as a program for toleration, but the sort of vibrant exchange that can advance justice cannot happen without mechanisms for addressing material inequities. The

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<sup>3</sup> Jose Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Elizabeth Anderson, “The Epistemology of Democracy,” *Episteme: A Journal of Social Epistemology* 3:1-2 (2006), 8-22.

challenge remains how to address these inequities without invoking the disciplining power of the state, and so the Constantinian perspective.

In Forst's account of toleration in the early days of Christianity, he turns to a time that is literally pre-Constantinian. The question about toleration that Christians faced then, as Forst describes it, regarded their own suffering of persecution. According to Forst, the very first move in the conceptual history of toleration in the tradition is when Christians move from speaking of tolerating persecution to tolerating others. While Forst quickly leaves behind this "prehistory" of toleration, it is one place where we glimpse an alternative account of toleration from the perspective of the marginalized. Offense is patiently endured, tolerated, because of faith in God (a view Forst attributes to Tertullian). Jesus endured, so Christians can endure – in Bowlin's extension of this argument, so, borrowing his example, I can endure when my wife is in a cantankerous mood, with the endurance aimed at ultimate reconciliation. This might seem like the worst of Christianity, an imperative to suffer injustice silently in this world in the hopes that rewards will follow in the world to come. Certainly, this is one way that the tradition has understood suffering – and so further disenfranchised those at the margins, and, as Nietzsche intentionally and Bowlin unintentionally demonstrate, offered Christians who are in positions of power an opportunity to valorize discomfort that they take to be redemptive suffering.

But a more empowering understanding of toleration from these early days of Christianity is also possible. One explanation for not taking offense when offense would normally be taken is the presence of the virtue of tolerance, but in the context in which Tertullian is writing it could better be said that deep faith in an otherworldly God overshadowed the worldly game of praise and offense. Compared to the majesty of God, why would worldly praise or blame have any significance? Ignoring such praise and blame, even when the latter comes with bodily punishment, could serve as an exercise in perfecting faith in an authority higher than any worldly authority. In other words, reflection on this example suggests that there are times when toleration can remind us that we are not at the mercy of the world, but at the mercy of God. Toleration in this sense, privileging the experience of the persecuted Christian community, has an effect opposite to that which toleration's critics worry about today. Instead of disciplining a minority community and strengthening the hold of the powers that be in the world, toleration loosens the hold of worldly powers – and so prepares the one who is patiently enduring for the rapture, or for revolution. Toleration in this sense cannot become a habit, otherwise it would just become subordination. It must be paired with other practices that sustain an orientation away from the ways of the world, toward the Wholly Other, lest even a one-off instance of such toleration is merely deluded self-interest.

Once the Constantinian perspective is abandoned, we can ask what it would mean for a Muslim immigrant to tolerate her inhospitable German neighbors, what it would mean for a black American to tolerate her authoritarian white boss, and what it would mean for a child to tolerate her abusive parents. These are the difficult questions that present themselves when toleration is approached from below. Should the child run away, the black worker start her own business, and the Muslim immigrant return to the country she fled? There are cases where the offense is so grave and so frequent that flight is necessary, but in many cases for individuals in these situations toleration is not an abstraction to be theorized but an unavoidable lived reality. There are undoubtedly more specific resources from the early days of Christianity that could be tapped to address this reality, but the broad insight is clear. Experiences of toleration from the margins are not chosen to teach lessons about the limits of the world, although they certainly do teach such lessons. The word of the abusive father, or the white boss, or the Christian neighbor is not the last word – the wisdom of the world must be radically amiss.

One response is for the will to collapse, to live a life totally subordinate to a system of domination. This entails abandoning toleration: offense is no longer taken, so it cannot be patiently endured. Another response is to strike out once the offense becomes too great, but this can only result in violence, in the will being smashed. Toleration is called for, but such toleration is not quite a virtue. Surely a

reasonable, well-adjusted person, exemplary in the virtues, suddenly placed in a situation of abuse or some other form of domination would likely respond in a way that makes the situation worse. What is necessary for a Christian ethics of toleration is an account of the resources from Scripture, tradition, and lived experience that can make such toleration of domination possible – resources that can be learned best by listening to those patiently enduring domination themselves.