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THE FRAGILITY OF TOLERANT PLURALISM

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For my grandchildren,
Sophia, Isabel and Kieran,
that they may live in a tolerant, diverse, and accepting world

Acknowledgements

In 2017, the social good of tolerant pluralism is precariously balanced. Terrorism at home and abroad, mass migrations from the troubled historical Levant area, and rapidly changing social mores, have all created a climate in which tolerant pluralism is challenged. In this extended essay I look at the early sixteenth-century in Europe to consider what I perceive as tolerant pluralism's nascent beginnings in the radical sects of the European Reformation.

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CHAPTER 1

The Vulnerability of Tolerant Pluralism

The slowly evolving, and fragile, European and North American experiment in tolerant pluralism is under threat today as at no time since the Second World War. Thomas Connelly states of pluralism that it:

> provides the most humane and promising agenda, even as we encounter strong pressures against it. To bypass pursuit of deep, multi-dimensional pluralism today would be to fail an elemental test of fidelity to the world.[1]

In this extended essay, in chapter I consider the present threats to tolerant pluralism arising from the mirrored movements of nativism and Islamist terrorism, together with a suggestion that, 500 years ago, not dissimilar issues were faced in the beginnings of the European Reformation; in Chap. 2 I look in some details at the teachings of the Anabaptist sectarians with regard to society and the toleration of religious minorities; and in Chap. 3 I suggest six areas of enquiry, drawing parallels and inferences that may help our current situation, and that may lead to further discussion and research.

This essay is not, however, intended to be a social history of radicalism in the sixteenth-century,[2] nor a complete history of the development of toleration in the European context,[3] nor an analysis of the development of the philosophical and political notions of tolerance and pluralism.[4] Its aim is more modest: to consider the seeds of tolerant pluralism in the writings of a small number of radical sectarians in the early sixteenth-century, to consider the social, philosophical and political importance of those writings, and to

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ask if such may shed light on our current position. To do that I will use primary sources in English translation.

A word about language. In this extended essay, "tolerance" or "toleration" refers to a moral virtue that, in the face of real difference, determines to refrain from harming the Other—a virtue in both a personal and a social sense.[5] I use tolerance and toleration interchangeably. Some scholars seek to make a distinction between tolerance as an ideal, and toleration as a practice,[6] or else tolerance for the interpersonal attitude and toleration for the social and political principle.[7] Though such stipulative definitions have their place, I have not, chosen to make use of them. In ordinary language, tolerance and toleration are used interchangeably, and I have followed that usage. By "pluralism" I mean a social practice that moves beyond mere tolerance of difference to acceptance of the Other, and even toward celebration of difference for the good of society—that is, to take delight in the multifarious expressions of differing cultures. "Monism" refers to a social practice that accepts only one overriding cultural narrative, with concomitant derivative policies, to which all in a given society must conform. I generally characterize pre- and post-Reformation European societies as monist. While pre-Reformation Europe could sometimes absorb dissenting groups into its framework (such as the Franciscans), other dissenters were outlawed and persecuted. When the Protestant Reformation began in the early sixteenth century, the then monist religious vision could not tolerate the challenge to its existence that Protestantism brought. State Protestantism, in its turn, introduced a new kind of monism that brooked no alternatives. Violence features large in these pages, and I use "violence" in the broadest sense as the intentional, or unintentional, infliction of physical, psychological, sexual, or systemic harm on the Other.

On January 7, 2015 two Islamist extremists forcibly entered the offices of French satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo* and killed twelve staff. Apparently, the attackers were reacting to the frequent ridicule of religion in the name of secular atheism, and especially mockery of the Prophet Muhammad. During the attack, the terrorists shouted "God is Great!" and "The Prophet is avenged!" Ironically, during their initial escape from the scene—caught on a video that went viral on social media—the two mercilessly killed a Muslim police officer. The bloody attack on a symbol of the western value of freedom of expression—even when that which is expressed is uncomfortable, or offensive—seemed like a new stage of European terrorism.

I heard about the terrorist attack a few hours after it took place through French-American friends who had changed their status on the social media

site Facebook to the "Je Suis Charlie" meme. People around the world had quickly picked up the meme—white words on a black background. It became a Twitter hashtag, and was used extensively over the next few days in all forms of media and public protest. Among its layers of meaning it was easy to detect solidarity with the victims of the attack, defiance at violent extremism, a plea for the toleration of all views in a free society, a call for French national solidarity, support for free speech, and an invitation for the unity of all democratic nations. Media comment after the attack ranged from shock that western values were again under assault (combined with a reassertion that such attacks would not derail the drive toward democratic pluralism) to an aggressive stance against the religion of Islam (with various proposals how to defeat the terrorist threat, and calls for a war on Islamism).

The cover of *Charlie Hebdo* after the terrorist attack was adorned with another cartoon of the Prophet, this time with the words "Tout Est Pardonné"—all is forgiven—with the Prophet holding a "Je Suis Charlie" sign, and a tear in his eye. The typical print run for *Charlie Hebdo* of 60,000 was surpassed beyond expectation with, finally, seven million being produced, and translated into sixteen languages. In the aftermath of the "survivors' edition," reaction was swift and massive protests were called for in predominantly Muslim countries, with thousands taking to the streets to protest yet other "blasphemy" by the paper. The repercussion was further violence against western and Christian targets.

Paris was attacked again on November 13, 2015, with 130 people killed and nearly 400 injured, many seriously. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, otherwise known as ISIS), claimed responsibility in response to French bombing in Syria. The terror attacks were seen by French President François Hollande as an act of war, in much the same way that the United States President George W. Bush had seen the September 11 attacks.

On July 14, 2016, France suffered yet another terrorist attack when 84 people were killed by a self-confessed, but only recently radicalized, Islamist, who killed by driving a heavy truck into crowds celebrating Bastille Day in the city of Nice. Another 308 people were injured in the attack. Since then, London saw vehicular terrorism on March 22, 2017 and Manchester a suicide bombing on May 22, 2017. These major terrorist events, together with a score of smaller, but fatal, terrorist attacks in France and Germany have brought the countries of Europe to a new attention; Islamist terrorism was something that happened on the margins of Europe, not in major

European cities. That its tentacles might reach into the very heart of European society was all but unthinkable.

Threats to Tolerant Pluralism

These terrorist events, more than anything at any other time in the previous half century, have brought Europe to a new period of angst and self-examination with regard to the possible futures of European society. European countries face a stark choice between liberal pluralism with open borders, and fortress Europe with resurgent nationalisms. This new fearfulness was a contributing factor that resulted in a referendum on membership of the European Union (EU) for the United Kingdom. On June 23, 2016 the people of the United Kingdom voted by a small margin to leave the EU. The result revealed a divided, rather than united, kingdom, with Scotland, Northern Ireland and the major English cities of London, Manchester, Newcastle, Oxford, and Cambridge voting to remain with a large majority, while a large majority in the rest of England voted to leave. At the time of writing, almost a year after the vote, future repercussions are uncertain, and matters are far from settled.

What is clear, is that the fragility of Europe's nascent open, liberal, and pluralistic democracies has been uncovered. This new vulnerability raises many questions: What is the appropriate response by a liberal democratic society to terrorism? What are the limits of freedom of speech? What about speech that has the potential to harm others by inciting violence? What is the place and function of religion in a pluralist society? Can a charge of "blasphemy" be seriously considered? How ought long-standing nations deal with an increasing diversity of cultures and traditions? These are not new questions and have been considered in the various disciplines of philosophy, sociology, political science, critical studies, and post-colonial studies since the 1960s. The fear of terrorism—much of it homegrown—has been exacerbated by the biggest migration of people since World War II; in large part fleeing the war in Syria. According to the BBC, in 2015 over 1.3 million people sought asylum, with the largest burden falling upon Greece, Italy, Hungary, and Germany.[8]

Since the beginning of European imperialism, in the fifteenth century, Europe has gradually had to face the complex issue of the stranger who brings with her difference and change. While colonialism was a meeting of the Other "over there" with very limited immigration into Europe, as the colonial empires collapsed and more and more citizens of the former

colonies made the journey west, the face and character of Europe changed dramatically. European countries have been engaged in the complex and, often, painful task of discovering what pluralism looks and feels like. In human history this is something new. A monist society morphing into a genuinely pluralist society has not yet happened in entirety, and tolerant pluralism is always under threat from old and dominant monisms.

In the United States, the issue of multiculturalism has always taken a different shape than Europe. The American project has been to meld all comers into a single, yet diverse, American identity. Successive waves of immigrants were successfully integrated into society, usually after periods of prejudice and discrimination, yet the immigrant communities have always maintained an identity of ethnic origin. Most Americans see themselves as "American," yet identifying with a country or region of origin—Italian-American, Irish-American, Asian-American, whose forebears came to the United States to find a better life. The case of African-American identity differs in that, for many Black Americans, whose forebears were slaves, immigration to the United States was involuntary, and postbellum, Black Americans have continued to be marginalized in a dominant White culture. The struggle continues today with Black Lives Matter arising after high-profile cases of a mostly white police force killing Black men. Though the American experiment has worked to a large extent with most immigrants melding into an American identity, it has become clear that some minorities have been excluded, and the focus of multiculturalism has been to include those who have been marginalized in society, and excluded from the common goods available to most—marriage equality for LGBTQ Americans, equality of opportunity for Black Americans, and the acceptance of recent immigrants with ethnic and religious diversity. In both the United States and Western Europe, the path toward a truly open and pluralist society has been fraught with difficulties. Progress has been made, but often seems like one step forward, with two steps back.

The twenty-first century brought into focus something new in the challenge to liberal pluralism by militant Islamism. The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, followed by 2004 in Madrid, 2005 in London, 2015 in Paris, 2016 in Nice, and 2017 in London and Manchester, together with the dominance of ISIL in the Middle East, have given a new pause for thought with regard to the future of the Western liberal project.

The temptation for liberal democracies, since September 11, 2001, has been to fight fire with fire, to respond hard to extremism, to batten down the hatches in a bid for national unity, to overlook hard-earned liberal values