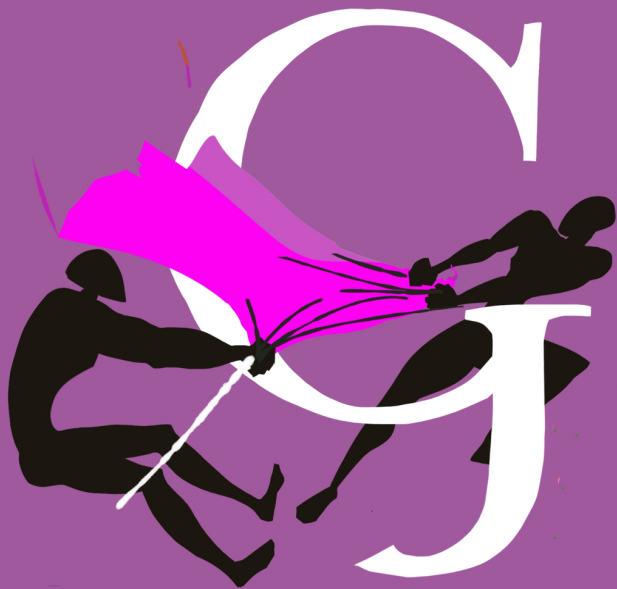


— LETTERS
on LIBERTY



TOLERATION AND
GAY LIBERATION

Ryan Hoey

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Welcome to *Letters on Liberty* from the Academy of Ideas. *Letters on Liberty* is a modest attempt to reinvigorate the public sphere and argue for a freer society.

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Academy of Ideas team

TOLERATION AND GAY LIBERATION

In recent years, many people who fall under the LGBT umbrella have found themselves increasingly at odds with the direction of mainstream LGBT activism. What once began as a movement for gay liberation has evolved into one promoting policies that often seem diametrically opposed to the liberal conception of tolerance and freedom of speech. This shift prompted the formation of the LGB Alliance in October 2019, as a response to the concern that many of the ideas championed by the ‘T’ section, claiming to represent all in the umbrella, are either misguided or actively harmful. This split has emerged among former allies in the fight for gay rights. In April 2021, when the LGB Alliance was granted charitable status, the UK Pride Organisers Network released an open letter signed by more than 50 LGBT Pride groups condemning the decision.¹ Overall, there is a sense among many gay people that the current state of LGBT activism is a bit of a mess, and does not represent our interests.

The movement for gay liberation, which emerged in the late 1960s and gained momentum throughout the 1970s, was a multifaceted campaign aimed at achieving legal and social equality for gay people. In many ways, central to this movement was the demand for

tolerance. Gay activists sought an end to the criminalisation of same-sex sexual activity, the ability to freely express their beliefs without facing police harassment, and the assurance that their lifestyles would not lead to dismissal from their jobs. As with all movements there were tensions, especially led by radicals, about what ideas would be tolerated. For example, the Gay Liberation Front Manifesto from 1971 proudly proclaims: 'GLF has held demonstrations against publishers and bookshops who distribute anti-gay literature.'ⁱⁱ However, the gay liberation movement of the past - the original LGB movement without the T - embraced a diversity of political beliefs and approaches, engaging in internal debates, not benefiting from the cultural ascendancy of current LBGT activists (who very firmly demand the T).

In the 1970s, the Campaign for Homosexual Equality (CHE) published *Out Magazine*, which provided a platform for various perspectives within the gay community. The earlier issues included articles that challenged the organisation itself, reflecting the importance of tolerance within the movement. One such article, titled 'Why I won't join the CHE', by Michael Holt, poignantly captured the essence of tolerance and its role in fostering understanding. Holt emphasised the significance of recognising that wider society had the capacity to implicitly tolerate gay

people, without feeling the need to express active approval:

*'Of course, I could let myself be overpowered by a feeling that the normal world is actively against me but, instead, I chose to recognise that for the most part the het world I move in has a capacity implicitly to tolerate queers without feeling any necessity to express active approval. Which, let's face it, is my attitude and the attitude of most of my friends to any behaviour of which we have no previous knowledge or experience.'*ⁱⁱⁱ

Holt's piece encapsulates the nuanced understanding of tolerance that many supporters of the gay liberation movement had. It went beyond seeking active endorsement, but rather acknowledged the importance of a respectful coexistence. Tolerance was not only seen as a virtue to be practised by society, but also as an attitude that individuals should cultivate within themselves. Holt also highlights the changing meaning of the word 'queer', now used by activists to represent almost anything. The word is contentious not only due to its historic use as a slur by homophobes, but because of the broadening of its scope - just about anyone can be queer today, even heterosexuals. For this reason, many gay people now refuse to use it.

The landscape of LGBT activism has witnessed a significant shift. Organisations like Stonewall, in its pursuit of a world where ‘everyone is accepted without exception’,^{iv} does not embrace the principle of tolerance as a core value. While there were many within the original struggle for gay rights who recognised the importance of freedom of conscience and the ability to express differing opinions in empowering marginalised groups, the current focus revolves around policing speech and suppressing dissenting views. This change in approach is rooted in a belief that, as LGBT people, we are inherently vulnerable and lack the capacity to independently navigate or challenge offensive or distressing comments.

The meaning of tolerance

We must not content ourselves with the narrow measures of bare justice; charity, bounty, and liberality must be added to it. This the Gospel enjoins, this reason directs, and this that natural fellowship we are born into requires of us. If any man err from the right way, it is his own misfortune, no injury to thee.”

- John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*

Until the late 1600s, differing religions and opinions were met with little toleration. To tolerate such divergence was seen as complicity in the perceived sins of others. However, this attitude began to change as Enlightenment thinkers started to re-evaluate the relationship between authority, conscience and freedom.

John Locke, in his seminal work, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, posited that every individual possesses a fundamental right to autonomy of conscience. Locke advocated for the absence of compulsion or coercion when it comes to adopting particular beliefs. He astutely observed that pressuring individuals to profess beliefs they do not genuinely hold does not serve to advance the cause of those beliefs. Instead, Locke called for toleration, wherein those in positions of power and authority refrain from interfering with the autonomy of conscience. If someone deviated from what was considered to be the correct belief system, Locke did not see that to be a justification for punishment or censorship.

In his influential work, *On Liberty*, JS Mill expanded on these ideas with the adoption of the harm principle:

If he refrains from molesting others in what concerns them, and merely acts according to his own inclination and judgment in things which concern himself, the same reasons which show

that opinion should be free, prove also that he should be allowed, without molestation, to carry his opinions into practice at his own cost. ^{vi}

According to Mill, acts should only be regulated if there is compelling evidence of them causing harm to others. Expanding on Locke's call for the toleration of beliefs, Mill extended this to the right to act upon those beliefs, provided they do not inflict physical injury. He also broadened our understanding of tolerance to the concept of social tolerance. Mill was not only concerned with the power of the 'magistrate' but the 'tyranny of the majority' and how a culture of social intolerance can marginalise and suppress minority views.

Tolerance rests upon respect for individual autonomy of conscience and the freedom to express and act upon one's beliefs.

Whereas Locke and Mill called for toleration on the grounds of freedom of conscience, the notion of tolerance has undergone a significant mutation. It is no longer solely interpreted as refraining from suppressing others' beliefs or lifestyles, but abstaining from judging people and their perspectives. The contemporary understanding of tolerance discourages the expression of moral judgments, thereby limiting

our capacity for moral reasoning. This detachment of tolerance from the value of conscience has eroded its central tenet - upholding freedom of belief.

Consequently, tolerance is no longer viewed as a virtue, but rather as an expected behaviour.

The true meaning of tolerance is not indifferent acceptance and non-judgementalism. It rests upon respect for individual autonomy of conscience and the freedom to express and act upon one's beliefs. When tolerance is no longer underpinned by this core value, movements claiming to be promoting tolerance can often do the exact opposite.

The trans debate

In May 2023, the social intolerance promoted by contemporary LGBT activists was on full display with the protest that erupted at Kathleen Stock's speech at the Oxford Union. Before the talk began, trans rights activists disrupted the event, with one protester gluing themselves to the floor wearing a t-shirt that read 'no more dead trans kids'.^{vii} The assertion made by these protesters was that Stock's expression of gender-critical beliefs leads to trans people taking their own lives. Taking place at one of the world's leading academic institutions, this protest revealed the

infantilisation of LGBT people by the activists claiming to represent them. In particular, it showed that the activists view trans people as immature children who lack the ability to engage with an argument they may find offensive or distressing, undermining their autonomy and stifling open discussion.

Before the talk, the Oxford LGBTQI+ society released a statement saying: ‘We believe that trans students should not be made to debate their existence.’^{viii} This statement reflects the hostility of contemporary LGBT activists towards open dialogue and debate. They consider being put under pressure to defend gender ideology as a form of bullying. It is seen as threatening the self-esteem of trans people, even though a great many trans people reject the radical claims of the activists purporting to speak on their behalf and simply want to get on with living their lives.

The activists insult both trans people and the wider public by suggesting that they should not be exposed to gender-critical views. They dislike debate because if gender ideology is questioned, they must account for it and are perhaps not confident that they will come out on top. We must reject this therapeutic censorship. Instead, we must demand our autonomy by insisting that no one has the right to prevent us

from hearing an opinion on the basis that we are not able to listen to it and, if we disagree, push back independently with reasoned debate.

The trans-rights activists are not only hostile to debate - there is a broader push within the 'movement' for compelled speech. Employers are increasingly, at the direction of Stonewall, coercing their employees to display pronouns in email signatures or on name badges. In 2021, West Yorkshire Police instituted a policy that mandated police officers to use people's preferred pronouns, saying officers were responsible for doing so 'regardless of their presenting or assigned gender.'^{ix} Such policies, which are now widespread in both the public and private sectors, promote social intolerance, as they disregard the conscience of the individual and force them to conform regardless of their beliefs.

How do we allow trans people to live their lives freely while protecting the rights of women to single-sex spaces?

The sensitivity surrounding pronouns may initially appear as an enlightened endeavour, promoting politeness and non-judgementalism. Employers who insist that their employees respect people's preferred pronouns undoubtedly view it as part of their

commitment to tolerance. However, this again underscores the transformation of our understanding of tolerance and its detachment from the value of conscience and moral autonomy. While there is nothing positive about being needlessly rude to other people - I always try to self-regulate my behaviour to exhibit good manners to others - the activists display increasing intolerance towards those who don't agree, or are unwilling to play along if it means affirming people's identity in bad faith.

The toxicity of the trans debate means that people can feel uneasy about joining in. The instance at Trans Pride 2023 of an activist calling for violence against 'Terfs' (trans-exclusionary radical feminists) highlighted how extreme some of these activists can be.^x However, it is important for those who are level-headed to contribute to this debate, as there are nuanced public-policy questions that need to be carefully considered and answered. For example, how do we allow trans people to live their lives freely while protecting the rights of women to single-sex spaces?

When these clashes become so personal, it is difficult to remain tolerant. People often feel strongly that their identity or safety are called into question by the debate and end up dehumanising those on the other side. This often leads to a climate of social intolerance, exacerbated by certain LGBT activists who are so

certain of their convictions that they now seek to impose them on others.

Infantilising LGBT people

The 2018 report by Stonewall on LGBT people in the workplace found that almost one in five LGBT staff had negative comments made about their identity at work in the previous year.^{xi} In response to this and other findings, the report called on employers to develop clear ‘zero tolerance’ policies, forcing all staff to undertake ‘diversity and inclusion’ training. While these recommendations could be seen as a well-meaning response to the difficulties LGBT people face, they also signify a belief that we are inherently vulnerable and lack the capacity to challenge these comments independently. I reject this idea that we lack the ability to deal with ‘microaggressions’. We are not victims in need of the protection of our superiors.

By infantilising LGBT people, the current approach adopted by activists undermines our personal autonomy and independence. The ability to navigate and respond to negative experiences is an essential aspect of adulthood, emphasising the development of individuals capable of self-advocacy and resilience. Attempting to shield us from all instances of

discomfort or offence denies us the opportunity to cultivate emotional strength.

Furthermore, the infantilisation of LGBT people has a profoundly negative impact on the practice of social tolerance. While groups like Stonewall can often appear to be champions of tolerance on the surface, the demand for 'zero tolerance' and the imposition by employers of the need to express acceptance exposes that the concept is not taken seriously. Tolerance is no longer enough for the activists. What is now required is active recognition and affirmation. This culture of craving for affirmation causes us to project insecurity in our identity, and reveals the underlying insecurity of certain LGBT activists, who struggle to cope with challenges to their authority.

This shift in perspective is driven by the idea that LGBT people are subject to psychic harm unless our identity is affirmed by others. Consequently, speech must be restricted to protect us, as we lack the intellectual capability to cope with conservative moral opinions. As a result of this expansion of the harm principle to cover emotional harm, freedom of speech and the liberal concept of toleration are degraded. Emotional harm, unlike physical harm, is subjective and open to interpretation, making it difficult to objectively measure. Therefore, all comments can be taken in ways that claim emotional harm, even if

offence was not the intention. Conversely, limiting the principle of harm to physical harm does not have such a corrosive impact on freedom. If someone punches you in the face, it is not at your discretion to decide how to take it or whether it hurts.

The consequences for tolerance of this expansion of harm can be seen by the treatment of street preachers in Belfast, where I live. In June 2022, Councillor Anthony Flynn of the Green Party argued that the preachers' words were having 'a huge impact on the LGBTQ community' and called on people to report them to the police so 'action will be taken to stop it'.^{xii} Flynn undoubtedly sees this as an enlightened statement that seeks to protect LGBT people from emotional distress, rather than an authoritarian call to restrict the freedom of speech of members of the public. However, it is these kinds of calls for the criminalisation of speech that show contemporary LGBT activists do not care for the value of tolerance. In fact, they actively promote social intolerance.

Rediscovering tolerance

The pioneers of the gay-rights movement often struggled to have their right to freedom of conscience and speech recognised. But the landscape has shifted, and most LGBT activists now display a profound social intolerance, continually questioning the importance of free speech. This is not to say that previous generations of gay activists are without blame in enabling this change. With the commercialisation of Pride and the shift towards identity politics in the movement, gay-rights activists increasingly called upon employers and the state to police speech and suppress dissenting opinions. It is crucial for LGBT activists to revisit the concept of tolerance, embracing it as a fundamental virtue in their pursuit of greater acceptance.

Both morally and practically, tolerance serves as a guiding principle for creating a society that values people as individuals and not as members of identity groups.

Today, the intolerance displayed by LGBT activists is often disguised by an altruistic language and the claim that the intention of their censorious policies is to

protect LGBT people from harm. The regulation of speech is now seen to promote the freedom of LGBT people, and therefore make society more tolerant. This approach has led to the expectation that various authorities - such as the state, universities, and employers - must intervene in interpersonal exchanges. Therapeutic censorship is viewed as an enabler of tolerance, despite its threats to freedom and diversity of thought.

Tolerance is not always something that comes naturally to us. Even those who recognise its importance as a core value can fall into the trap of social intolerance. We often struggle to be forgiving toward those with differing views, failing to respect their capacity for exercising moral autonomy. It is tempting to respond with intolerance when faced with others' intolerance, especially when our own beliefs are under attack. However, it is crucial that we strive to rise above such temptations and genuinely embrace tolerance as a guiding principle.

Practicing tolerance is not only important morally, but practically, too. Rather than challenging prejudice through debate, LGBT activists have increasingly resorted to bureaucratic methods of suppression. This shift in approach is starting to prove counterproductive, as evidenced by a recent Gallup poll.^{xiii} The percentage of Republicans in the US who

view same-sex relations as morally acceptable declined significantly from 2022 to 2023, reaching its lowest point in nearly a decade after years of a steady increase in acceptance. This highlights the unintended consequences of suppressing opposing views instead of engaging in respectful dialogue.

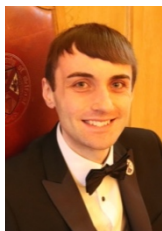
The cultivation of tolerance is vital for the flourishing both of individuals and society as a whole. We can only grow and develop our capacity for moral reasoning by exposing ourselves to a range of views, especially those that challenge our own beliefs. Practicing tolerance reflects a commitment to respecting each person's autonomy and their freedom to choose what to believe. By recognising the difficulties in identifying and practicing tolerance, we acknowledge the need for self-reflection and growth. Both morally and practically, tolerance serves as a guiding principle for creating a society that values people as individuals and not as members of identity groups. It is time for LGBT activists to rediscover tolerance and, in doing so, once again be proponents of individual liberty.

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Author

Ryan Hoey is a politics graduate of Queen's University Belfast. He is a trustee of the Literific, the University's debating society, and one of the 2023-24 Northern Ireland Emerging Leaders. He regularly appeared on TV and radio during the UK's withdrawal from the European Union and was a candidate in the 2018 local elections in England.



Illustrations

Jan Bowman is an artist and author of *This is Birmingham*. See her work at janbow.com

Letters on Liberty identity

Alex Dale

Pamphlet and website design

Martyn Perks

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