

The Twin Towers of Toleration

“Two Theories of Toleration: Locke versus Mill” by Adam Wolfson, in *Perspectives on Political Science* (Fall 1996), 1319 18th St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036-1802.

Many Americans today worship at the shrine of tolerance. They hold fast to the “one very simple principle” that John Stuart Mill enunciated in *On Liberty* (1859): that society should never interfere with the liberty of the individual except to prevent harm to others. But, argues Wolfson, executive editor of the *Public Interest*, there are serious hazards in that libertarian outlook, as an earlier advocate of toleration, John Locke, well knew.

Mill’s expansive view of liberty rests, in most interpretations, on an interest in securing truth through open debate. But Wolfson asserts that “it is not liberty that secures truth . . . but rather, [Mill’s] peculiar, quite relativistic, notion of the truth that secures the widest possible liberty of thought and action.” As depicted in *On Liberty*, Wolfson says, truth is so complex and many-sided that it cannot be grasped by most individuals except at the level of society, where the various contending half-truths and falsehoods are brought into a rough balance. Even the “truth” thus arrived at by society is really only, in Mill’s words, a “fragment of truth.”

By the time Mill is done, Wolfson says, “there is little sense that [truth] is something available, much less desirable.” Instead, fearful that intolerance might

stamp out individuality, Mill calls for “different experiments of living,” “varieties of character,” and “free development of individuality.” Certain that the commonwealth is secure and that moral truth cannot be infallibly established, Mill, like many Americans today, “permits, indeed encourages, the cultivation of opinions and behaviors that are at odds with liberalism.”

Locke, in contrast, in *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689), largely confined toleration to the realm of speculative thought. “The Magistrate ought not to forbid the Preaching or Profession of any Speculative Opinions,” he declared. But practical opinions, which “influence the Will and Manners,” were another story. Unlike Mill, Locke believed that “Morality is capable of Demonstration, as well as Mathematicks,” and that the state ought to discourage pernicious practical opinions.

In Locke’s view, Wolfson says, “a liberal society could not survive, much less prosper, without a preponderance of morality and rationality existing among the citizenry.” And government, therefore, had “at least some interest” in shaping the character of its citizens. That is a lesson, Wolfson concludes, that modern libertarians, who often claim Locke as a founding father, seem to have forgotten.

The Feminized Church

“Gender & Religion” by Kenneth L. Woodward, in *Commonweal* (Nov. 22, 1996), 15 Dutch St., New York, N.Y. 10038.

Is the Christian church a patriarchal institution whose oppression women only lately have begun to overcome? That is not the church that most Americans know, contends Woodward, a long-time writer on religion for *Newsweek*.

“If we look inside Protestant churches on Sunday,” Woodward notes, “we find that most of the people in the pews are women. Although there are no hard-and-fast statistics, pastors I talk to say that women usually outnumber the men three-to-one.” Women also typically dominate the church com-

mittees, the prayer groups, the Bible study groups, and the Sunday schools. And most of those whom a Protestant pastor counsels during the week are women. “The pastoral challenge facing most clergy,” Woodward says, “is to find ways to draw men into active participation.”

Though it might be argued that it is the pastor who has the authority, and therefore the power, in the church, and that most pastors are male, Woodward contends that “the reality of congregational life is more complex than that.” In black Baptist