

On the Metaphysical Basis of Toleration

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One of the most marked peculiarities of recent times in England is the increased liberty in the expression of opinion. Things are now said constantly and without remark, which even ten years ago would have caused a hubbub, and have drawn upon those who said them much obloquy. But already I think there are signs of a reaction. In many quarters of orthodox opinion I observe a disposition to say, "Surely this is going too far; really we cannot allow such things to be said." And what is more curious, some writers, whose pens are just set at liberty, and who would, not at all long ago, have been turned out of society for the things that they say, are setting themselves to explain the "weakness" of liberty, and to extol the advantages of persecution. As it appears to me that the new practice of this country is a great improvement on its old one, and as I conceive that the doctrine of toleration rests on what may be called a metaphysical basis, I wish shortly to describe what that basis is.

I should say that, except where it is explained to the contrary, I use the word "toleration" to mean toleration by law. Toleration by society of matters not subject to legal penalty is a kindred subject on which, if I have room, I will add a few words, but in the main I propose to deal with the simpler subject, – toleration by law. And by toleration, too, I mean, when it is not otherwise said, toleration in the public expression of opinions. Toleration of acts and practices is another allied subject on which I can, in a paper like this, but barely hope to indicate what seems to me to be the truth. And I should add, that I deal only with the discussion of impersonal doctrines. The law of libel, which deals with accusations of living persons, is a topic requiring consideration by itself.

Meaning this by "toleration," I do not think we ought to be surprised at a reaction against it. What was said long ago of slavery seems to be equally true of persecution, – it "exists by the law of nature." It is so congenial to

human nature, that it has arisen everywhere in past times, as history shows; that the cessation of it is a matter of recent times in England; that even now, taking the world as a whole, the practice and the theory of it are in a triumphant majority. Most men have always much preferred persecution, and do so still; and it is therefore only natural that it should continually reappear in discussion and argument.

One mode in which it tempts human nature is very obvious. Persons of strong opinions wish, above all things, to propagate those opinions. They find close at hand what seems an immense engine for that propagation; they find the State, which has often in history interfered for and against opinions, – which has had a great and undeniable influence in helping some and hindering others, – and in their eagerness they can hardly understand why they should not make use of this great engine to crush the errors which they hate, and to replace them with the tenets they approve. So long as there are earnest believers in the world, they will always wish to punish opinions, even if their judgment tells them it is unwise, and their conscience that it is wrong. They may not gratify their inclination, but the inclination will not be the less real.

Since the time of Carlyle, “earnestness” has been a favourite virtue in literature, and it is customary to treat this wish to twist other people’s belief into ours as if it were a part of the love of truth. And in the highest minds so it may be. But the mass of mankind have, as I hold, no such fine motive. Independently of truth or falsehood, the spectacle of a different belief from ours is disagreeable to us, in the same way that the spectacle of a different form of dress and manners is disagreeable. A set of schoolboys will persecute a new boy with a new sort of jacket; they will hardly let him have a new-shaped penknife. Grown-up people are just as bad, except when culture has softened them. A mob will hoot a foreigner who looks very unlike themselves. Much of the feeling of “earnest believers” is, I believe, altogether the same. They wish others to think as they do, not only because they wish to diffuse doctrinal truth, but also and much more because they cannot bear to hear the words of a creed different from their own. At any rate, without further analysing the origin of the persecuting impulse, its

deep root in human nature, and its great power over most men, are evident.

But this natural impulse was not the only motive – perhaps was not the principal one – of historical persecutions. The main one, or a main one, was a most ancient political idea which once ruled the world, and of which deep vestiges are still to be traced on many sides. The most ancient conception of a State is that of a “religious partnership,” in which any member may by his acts bring down the wrath of the gods on the other members, and, so to speak, on the whole company. This danger was, in the conception of the time, at once unlimited and inherited; in any generation, partners A, C, D, etc., might suffer loss of life, or health, or goods – the whole association even might perish, because in a past generation the ancestors of Z had somehow offended the gods. Thus the historian of Athens tells us that after a particular act of sacrilege – a breach of the local privileges of sanctuary – the perpetrators were compelled “to retire into banishment”; and that those who had died before the date he is speaking of were “disinterred and cast beyond the borders.” “Yet,” he adds, “their exile continuing, as it did, only for a time, was not held sufficient to expiate the impiety for which they have been condemned. The Alkmæonids, one of the most powerful families in Attica, long continued to be looked upon as a tainted race, and in cases of public calamity were liable to be singled out as having by their sacrilege drawn down the judgment of the gods upon their countrymen.”¹ And as false opinions about the gods have almost always been thought to be peculiarly odious to them, the misbeliever, the “miscreant,” has been almost always thought to be likely not only to impair hereafter the salvation of himself and others in a future world, but also to bring on his neighbours and his nation grievous calamities immediately in this. He has been persecuted to stop political danger more than to arrest intellectual error.

But it will be said: Put history aside, and come to things now. Why should not those who are convinced that certain doctrines are errors, that they are most dangerous, that they may ruin man’s welfare here and his salvation hereafter, use the power of the State to extirpate those errors? Experience seems to show that the power of the State can be put forth in

¹Grote’s *History of Greece*, part ii., chap. x.

that way effectually. Why, then, should it not be put forth? If I had room, I should like for a moment to criticise the word “effectually.” I should say that the State, in the cases where it is most wanted, is not of the use which is thought. I admit that it extirpates error, but I doubt if it creates belief – at least, if it does so in cases where the persecuted error is suitable to the place and time. In such cases, I think the effect has often been to eradicate a heresy among the few, at the cost of creating a scepticism among the many; to kill the error no doubt, but also to ruin the general belief. And this is the cardinal point, for the propagation of the “truth” is the end of persecution; all else is only a means. But I have not space to discuss this, and will come to the main point.

I say that the State power should not be used to arrest discussion, because the State power may be used equally for truth or error, for Mohammedanism or Christianity, for belief or no-belief, but in discussion truth has an advantage. Arguments always tell for truth as such, and against error as such; if you let the human mind alone, it has a preference for good argument over bad; it oftener takes truth than not. But if you do not let it alone, you give truth no advantage at all; you substitute a game of force, where all doctrines are equal, for a game of logic, where the truer have the better chance.

The process by which truth wins in discussion is this, – certain strong and eager minds embrace original opinions, seldom all wrong, never quite true, but of a mixed sort, part truth, part error. These they inculcate on all occasions, and on every side, and gradually bring the cooler sort of men to a hearing of them. These cooler people serve as quasi-judges, while the more eager ones are a sort of advocates; a Court of Inquisition is sitting perpetually, investigating, informally and silently, but not ineffectually, what, on all great subjects of human interest, is truth and error. There is no sort of infallibility about the court; often it makes great mistakes, most of its decisions are incomplete in thought and imperfect in expression. Still, on the whole, the force of evidence keeps it right. The truth has the best of the proof, and therefore wins most of the judgments. The process is slow, far more tedious than the worst Chancery suit. Time in it is reckoned not

by days, but by years, or rather by centuries. Yet, on the whole, it creeps along, if you do not stop it. But all is arrested, if persecution begins – if you have a *coup d'état*, and let loose soldiers on the court; for it is perfect chance which litigant turns them in, or what creed they are used to compel men to believe.

This argument, however, assumes two things. In the first place, it presupposes that we are speaking of a state of society in which discussion is possible. And such societies are not very common. Uncivilised man is not capable of discussion: savages have been justly described as having “the intellect of children with the passions and strength of men.”² Before anything like speculative argument can be used with them, their intellect must be strengthened and their passions restrained. There was, as it seems to me, a long preliminary period before human nature, as we now see it, existed, and while it was being formed. During that preliminary period, persecution, like slavery, played a most considerable part. Nations mostly became nations by having a common religion. It was a necessary condition of the passage from a loose aggregate of savages to a united polity, that they should believe in the same gods and worship these gods in the same way. What was necessary was, that they should for a long period – for centuries, perhaps – lead the same life and conform to the same usages. They believed that the “gods of their fathers” had commanded these usages. Early law is hardly to be separated from religious ritual: it is more like the tradition of a Church than the enactments of a statute-book. It is a thing essentially immemorial and sacred. It is not conceived of as capable either of addition or diminution; it is a body of holy customs which no one is allowed either to break or to impugn. The use of these is to aid in creating a common national character, which in aftertimes may be tame enough to bear discussion, and which may suggest common axioms upon which discussion can be founded. Till that common character has been formed, discussion is impossible; it cannot be used to find out truth, for it cannot exist; it is not that we have to forgo its efficacy on purpose, we have not the choice of it, for its prerequisites cannot be found. The case of civil liberty is, as I conceive, much the same. Early

²Sir John Lubbock's *Prehistoric Times*, p. 465.

ages need a coercive despotism more than they need anything else. The age of debate comes later. An omnipotent power to enforce the sacred law is that which is then most required. A constitutional opposition would be born before its time. It would be dragging the wheel before the horses were harnessed. The strongest advocates both of liberty and toleration may consistently hold that there were unhappy ages before either became possible, and when attempts at either would have been pernicious.

The case is analogous to that of education. Every parent wisely teaches his child his own creed, and till the child has attained a certain age, it is better that he should not hear too much of any other. His mind will in the end be better able to weigh arguments, because it does not begin to weigh them so early. He will hardly comprehend any creed unless he has been taught some creed. But the restrictions of childhood must be relaxed in youth, and abandoned in manhood. One object of education is to train us for discussion, and as that training gradually approaches to completeness, we should gradually begin to enter into and to take part in discussion. The restrictions that are useful at nine years old are pernicious at nineteen.

This analogy would have seemed to me obvious, but there are many most able persons who turn the matter just the other way. They regard the discipline of education as a precedent for persecution. They say, "I would no sooner let the nation at large read that bad book than I would let my children read it." They refuse to admit that the age of the children makes any difference. At heart they think that they are wiser than the mass of mankind, just as they are wiser than their children, and would regulate the studies of both unhesitatingly. But experience shows that no man is on all points so wise as the mass of men are after a good discussion, and that if the ideas of the very wisest were by miracle to be fixed on the race, the certain result would be to stereotype monstrous error. If we fixed the belief of Bacon, we should believe that the earth went round the sun; if we fixed that of Newton, we should believe "that the Argonautic expedition was a real event, and occurred 937 BC; that Hercules was a real person, and delivered Theseus, another real person, 936 BC; that in the year 1036 Ceres, a woman of Sicily, in seeking her daughter who was stolen, came into Attica,

and there taught the Greeks to sow corn.” And the worst is, that the minds of most would-be persecutors are themselves unfixed: their opinions are in a perpetual flux; they would persecute all others for tenets which yesterday they had not heard of and which they will not believe to-morrow.

But it will be said, the theory of Toleration is not so easy as that of education. We know by a certain fact when a young man is grown up and can bear discussion. We judge by his age, as to which every one is agreed. But we cannot tell by any similar patent fact when a State is mature enough to bear discussion. There may be two opinions about it. And I quite agree that the matter of fact is more difficult to discover in one case than in the other; still it is a matter of fact which the rulers of the State must decide upon their responsibility, and as best they can. And the highest sort of rulers will decide it like the English in India – with no reference to their own belief. For years the English prohibited the preaching of Christianity in India, though it was their own religion, because they thought that it could not be tranquilly listened to. They now permit it, because they find that the population can bear the discussion. Of course, most Governments are wholly unequal to so high a morality and so severe a self-command. The Governments of most countries are composed of persons who wish everybody to believe as they do, merely because they do. Some here and there, from a higher motive, so eagerly wish to propagate their opinions, that they are unequal to consider the problem of toleration impartially. They persecute till the persecuted become strong enough to make them desist. But the delicacy of a rule and the unwillingness of Governments to adopt it, do not prove that it is not the best and the right one. There are already in inevitable jurisprudence many lines of vital importance just as difficult to draw. The line between sanity and insanity has necessarily to be drawn, and it is as nice as anything can be. The competency of people to bear discussion is not intrinsically more difficult than their competency to manage their own affairs, though perhaps a Government is less likely to be impartial and more likely to be biassed in questions of discussion than in pecuniary ones.

Secondly, the doctrine that rulers are to permit discussion, assumes not only, as we have seen, that discussion is possible, but also that discussion

will not destroy the Government. No Government is bound to permit a controversy which will annihilate itself. It is a trustee for many duties, and if possible, it must retain the power to perform those duties. The controversies which may ruin it are very different in different countries. The Government of the day must determine in each case what those questions are. If the Roman Emperors who persecuted Christianity really did so because they imagined that Christianity would destroy the Roman Empire, I think they are to be blamed not for their misconception of duty, but for their mistake of fact. The existence of Christianity was not really more inconsistent with the existence of the Empire in the time of Diocletian than in that of Constantine; but if Diocletian thought that it was inconsistent, it was his duty to preserve the Empire.

It will be asked, "What do you mean by preserving a society? All societies are in a state of incipient change; the best of them are often the most changing; what is meant, then, by saying you will 'preserve' any? You admit that you cannot keep them unaltered, what then do you propose to do?" I answer that, in this respect, the life of societies is like the life of the individuals composing them. You cannot interfere so as to keep a man's body unaltered; you can interfere so as to keep him alive. What changes in such cases will be fatal, is a question of fact. The Government must determine what will, so to say, "break up the whole thing" and what will not. No doubt it may decide wrong. In France, the country of experiments, General Cavaignac said, "A Government which allows its principle to be discussed, is a lost Government," and therefore he persecuted on behalf of the Republic, thinking it was essential to society. Louis Napoleon similarly persecuted on behalf of the Second Empire; M. Thiers on behalf of the Republic again; the Duc de Broglie now persecutes on behalf of the existing nondescript. All these may be mistakes, or some of them, or none. Here, as before, the practical difficulties in the application of a rule do not disprove its being the true and the only one.

It will be objected that this principle is applicable only to truths which are gained by discussion. "We admit," such objectors say, "that where discussion is the best or the only means of proving truth, it is unadvisable

to prohibit that discussion, but there are other means besides discussion of arriving at truth, which are sometimes better than discussion even where discussion is applicable, and sometimes go beyond it and attain regions in which it is inapplicable; and where those more efficient means are applicable, it may be wise to prohibit discussion, for in these instances discussion may confuse the human mind and impede it in the use of those higher means. The case is analogous to that of the eyes. For the most part it is a sound rule to tell persons who want to see things, that they must necessarily use both their eyes, and rely on them. But there are cases in which that rule is wrong. If a man wants to see things too distant for the eyes, as the satellites of Jupiter and the ring of Saturn, you must tell him, on the contrary, to shut one eye and look through a telescope with the other. The ordinary mode of using the common instruments may, in exceptional cases, interfere with the right use of the supplementary instruments.” And I quite admit that there are such exceptional cases and such additional means; but I say that their existence introduces no new difficulty into the subject, and that it is no reason for prohibiting discussion except in the cases in which we have seen already that it was advisable to prohibit it.

Putting the matter in the most favourable way for these objectors, and making all possible concessions to them, I believe the exceptions which they contend for must come at last to three.

First, there are certain necessary propositions which the human mind *will* think, must think, and cannot help thinking. For example, we must believe that things which are equal to the same thing are equal to each other, – that a thing cannot *both* be and not be, – that it must *either* be or not be. These truths are not gained by discussion; on the contrary, discussion presupposes at least some of them, for you cannot argue without first principles any more than you can use a lever without a fulcrum. The prerequisites of reasoning must somehow be recognised by the human mind before we begin to reason. So much is obvious, but then it is obvious also that in such cases attempts at discussion cannot do any harm. If the human mind has in it certain first principles which it cannot help seeing, and which it accepts of itself, there is no harm in arguing against those first principles. You may contend as long

as you like, that things which are equal to the same thing are not equal to each other, or that a thing can both exist and not exist at the same time, but you will not convince any one. If you could convince any one you would do him irreparable harm, for you would hurt the basis of his mind and destroy the use of his reason. But happily you cannot convince him. That which the human mind cannot help thinking it cannot help thinking, and discussion can no more remove the primary perceptions than it can produce them. The multiplication table will remain the multiplication table, neither more nor less, however much we may argue either for it or against it.

But, though the denial of the real necessary perceptions of the human mind cannot possibly do any harm, the denial of alleged necessary perceptions is often essential to the discovery of truth. The human mind, as experience shows, is apt to manufacture sham self-evidences. The most obvious case is, that men perpetually “do sums” wrong. If we dwell long enough and intently enough on the truths of arithmetic they are in each case self-evident; but, if we are too quick, or let our minds get dull, we may make any number of mistakes. A certain deliberation and a certain intensity are both essential to correctness in the matter. Fictitious necessities of thought will be imposed on us without end unless we are careful. The greatest minds are not exempt from the risk of such mistakes even in matters most familiar to them. On the contrary, the history of science is full of cases in which the ablest men and the most experienced assumed that it was impossible to think things which are in matter of fact true, and which it has since been found possible to think quite easily. The mode in which these sham self-evidences are distinguished from the real ones is by setting as many minds as possible to try as often as possible whether they can help thinking the thing or not. But such trials will never exist without discussion. So far, therefore, the existence of self-evidences in the human mind is not a reason for discouraging discussion, but a reason for encouraging it.

Next, it is certainly true that many conclusions which are by no means self-evident and which are gradually obtained, nevertheless, are not the result of discussion. For example, the opinion of a man as to the characters of his friends and acquaintances is not the result of distinct argument, but

the aggregate of distinct impressions: it is not the result of an investigation consciously pursued, but the effect of a multiplicity of facts involuntarily presented; it is a definite thing and has a most definite influence on the mind, but its origin is indefinite and not to be traced; it is like a great fund raised in very small subscriptions and of which the subscribers' names are lost. But here again, though these opinions too were not gained by discussion, their existence is a reason for promoting discussion, not for preventing it. Every-day experience shows that these opinions as to character are often mistaken in the last degree. Human character is a most complex thing, and the impressions which different people form of it are as various as the impressions which the inhabitants of an impassable mountain have of its shape and size. Each observer has an aggregate idea derived from certain actions and certain sayings, but the real man has always or almost always said a thousand sayings of a kind quite different and in a connection quite different; he has done a vast variety of actions among "other men" and "other minds"; a mobile person will often seem hardly the same if you meet him in very different societies. And how, except by discussion, is the true character of such a person to be decided? Each observer must bring his contingent to the list of data; those data must be arranged and made use of. The certain and positive facts as to which every one is agreed must have their due weight; they must be combined and compared with the various impressions as to which no two people exactly coincide. A rough summary must be made of the whole. In no other way is it possible to arrive at the truth of the matter. Without discussion each mind is dependent on its own partial observation. A great man is one image – one thing, so to speak – to his valet, another to his son, another to his wife, another to his greatest friend. None of these must be stereotyped; all must be compared. To prohibit discussion is to prohibit the corrective process.

Lastly, I hold that there are first principles or first perceptions which are neither the result of constant though forgotten trials like those last spoken of, nor common to all the race like the first. The most obvious seem to me to be the principles of taste. The primary perceptions of beauty vary much in different persons, and for different persons at different times, but no one can

say that they are not most real and most influential parts of human nature. There is hardly a thing made by human hands which is not affected more or less by the conception of beauty felt by the maker; and there is hardly a human life which would not have been different if the idea of beauty in the mind of the man who lived it had been different.

But certainly it would not answer to exclude subjects of taste from discussion, and to allow one school of taste-teachers to reign alone, and to prohibit the teaching of all rival schools. The effect would be to fix on all ages the particular ideas of one age on a matter which is beyond most others obscure and difficult to reduce to a satisfactory theory. The human mind evidently differs at various times immensely in its conclusions upon it, and there is nothing to show that the era of the persecutor is wiser than any other era, or that his opinion is better than any one else's.

The case of these variable first principles is much like that of the "personal equation," as it is called in the theory of observations. Some observers, it is found, habitually see a given phenomenon, say the star coming to the meridian, a little sooner than most others; some later; no two persons exactly coincide. The first thing done when a new man comes into an observatory for practical work is to determine whether he sees quick or slow; and this is called the "personal equation." But, according to the theory of persecution, the national astronomer in each country would set up his own mind as the standard; in one country he would be a quick man, and would not let the slow people contest what he said; in another he would be a slow man, and would not tolerate the quick people, or let men speak their minds; and so the astronomical observations – the astronomical *creeds* if I may say so – of different countries would radically differ. But as toleration and discussion are allowed, no such absurd result follows. The observations of different minds are compared with those of others, and truth is assumed to lie in the mean between the errors of the quick people and the errors of the slow ones.

No such accurate result can be expected in more complex matters. The phenomena of astronomical observation relate only to very simple events, and to a very simple fact about these events. But perceptions of beauty have an infinite complexity: they are all subtle aggregates of countless de-

tails, and about each of these details probably every mind in some degree differs from every other one. But in a rough way the same sort of agreement is possible. Discussion is only an organised mode by which various minds compare their conclusions with those of various others. Bold and strong minds describe graphic and definite impressions: at first sight these impressions seem wholly different. Writers of the last century thought classical architecture altogether superior to Gothic; many writers now put it just the other way, and maintain a medieval cathedral to be a thing altogether superior in kind and nature to anything classical. For years the world thought Claude's landscapes perfect. Then came Mr. Ruskin, and by his ability and eloquence he has made a whole generation depreciate them, and think Turner's altogether superior. The extrication of truth by such discussions is very slow; it is often retarded; it is often thrown back; it often seems to pause for ages. But upon the whole it makes progress, and the principle of that progress is this: Each mind which is true to itself, and which draws its own impressions carefully, and which compares those impressions with the impressions of others, arrives at certain conclusions, which as far as that mind is concerned are ultimate, and are its highest conclusions. These it sets down as expressively as it can on paper, or communicates by word of mouth, and these again form data which other minds can contrast with their own. In this incessant comparison eccentric minds fall off on every side; some like Milton, some Wordsworth, some can see nothing in Dryden, some find Racine intolerably dull, some think Shakespeare barbarous, others consider the contents of the Iliad "battles and schoolboy stuff." With history it is the same; some despise one great epoch, some another. Each epoch has its violent partisans, who will listen to nothing else, and who think every other epoch in comparison mean and wretched. These violent minds are always faulty and sometimes absurd, but they are almost always useful to mankind. They compel men to hear neglected truth. They uniformly exaggerate their gospel; but it generally is a gospel. Carlyle said many years since of the old Poor-law in England: "It being admitted then that outdoor relief should at once cease, what means did great Nature take to make it cease? She created various men who thought the cessation of outdoor relief the one thing

needful.” In the same way, it being desirable that the taste of men should be improved on some point, Nature’s instrument on that point is some man of genius, of attractive voice and limited mind, who declaims and insists, not only that the special improvement is a good thing in itself, but the best of all things, and the root of all other good things. Most useful, too, are others less apparent; shrinking, sensitive, testing minds, of whom often the world knows nothing, but each of whom is in the circle just near him an authority on taste, and communicates by personal influence the opinions he has formed. The human mind of a certain maturity, if left alone, prefers real beauty to sham beauty, and prefers it the sooner if original men suggest new charms, and quiet men criticise and judge of them.

But an esthetical persecution would derange all this, for generally the compulsive power would be in the hands of the believers in some tradition. The State represents “the rough force of society,” and is little likely to be amenable to new charms or new ideas; and therefore the first victim of the persecution would be the original man who was proposing that which in the end would most improve mankind; and the next would be the testing and discerning critic who was examining these ideas and separating the chaff from the wheat in them. Neither would conform to the old tradition. The inventor would be too eager; the critic too scrupulous; and so a heavy code of ancient errors would be chained upon mankind. Nor would the case be at all the better if by some freak of events the propounder of the new doctrine were to gain full control, and were to prohibit all he did not like. He would try, and try in vain, to make the inert mass of men accept or care for his new theory, and his particular enemy would be the careful critic who went with him a little way and then refused to go any further. If you allow persecution, the partisans of the new sort of beauty will, if they can, attack those of the old sort; and the partisans of the old sort will attack those of the new sort; while both will turn on the quiet and discriminating person who is trying to select what is good from each. Some chance taste will be fixed for ages.

But it will be said, “Who ever heard of such nonsense as an esthetical persecution? Everybody knows such matters of taste must be left to take care of themselves; as far as they are concerned, nobody wants to persecute

or prohibit.” But I have spoken of matters of taste because it is sometimes best to speak in parables. The case of morals and religion, in which people have always persecuted and still wish to persecute, is the very same. If there are (as I myself think there are) ultimate truths of morals and religion which more or less vary for each mind, some sort of standard and some kind of agreement can only be arrived at about it in the very same way. The same comparison of one mind with another is necessary; the same discussion; the same use of criticising minds; the same use of original ones. The mode of arriving at truth is the same, and also the mode of stopping it.

We now see the reason why, as I said before, religious persecution often extirpates new doctrines, but commonly fails to maintain the belief in old tenets. You can prevent whole classes of men from hearing of the religion which is congenial to them, but you cannot make men believe a religion which is uncongenial. You can prevent the natural admirers of Gothic architecture from hearing anything of it, or from seeing it; but you cannot make them admire classical architecture. You may prevent the admirers of Claude from seeing his pictures, or from praising them; but you cannot make them admirers of Turner. Just so, you may by persecution prevent minds prone to be Protestant from being Protestant; but you will not make men real Catholics: you may prevent naturally Catholic minds from being Catholic; but you will not make them genuine Protestants. You will not make those believe your religion who are predisposed by nature in favour of a different kind of religion; you will make of them, instead, more or less conscious sceptics. Being denied the sort of religion of which the roots are in their minds and which they could believe, they will for ever be conscious of an indefinite want. They will constantly feel after something which they are never able to attain; they will never be able to settle upon anything; they will feel an instinctive repulsion from everything; they will be sceptics at heart, because they were denied the creed for which their heart craves; they will live as indifferentists, because they were withheld by force from the only creed to which they would not be indifferent. Persecution in intellectual countries produces a superficial conformity, but also underneath an intense, incessant, implacable doubt.

Upon examination, therefore, the admission that certain truths are not gained by discussion introduces no new element into the subject. The discussion of such truths is as necessary as of all other truths. The only limitations are that men's minds shall in the particular society be mature enough to bear the discussion, and that the discussion shall not destroy the society.

I acknowledge these two limitations to the doctrine that discussion should be free, but I do not admit another which is often urged. It is said that those who write against toleration should not be tolerated; that discussion should not aid the enemies of discussion. But why not? If there is a strong Government and a people fit for discussion, why should not the cause be heard? We must not assume that the liberty of discussion has no case of exception. We have just seen that there are, in fact, several such. In each instance, let the people decide whether the particular discussion shall go on or not. Very likely, in some cases, they may decide wrong; but it is better that they should so decide, than that we should venture to anticipate all experience, and to make sure that they cannot possibly be right.

It is plain, too, that the argument here applied to the toleration of opinion has no application to that of actions. The human mind in the cases supposed, learns by freely hearing all arguments, but in no case does it learn by trying freely all practices. Society, as we now have it, cannot exist at all unless certain acts are prohibited. It goes on much better because many other acts are prohibited also. The Government must take the responsibility of saying what actions it will allow; that is its first business, and the allowance of all would be the end of civilisation. But it must, under the conditions specified, hear all opinions, for the tranquil discussion of all more than anything else promotes the progressive knowledge of truth, which is the mainspring of civilisation.

Nor does the argument that the law should not impose a penalty on the expression of any opinion equally prove that society should not in many cases apply a penalty to that expression. Society can deal much more severely than the law with many kinds of acts, because it need be far less strict in the evidence it requires. It can take cognisance of matters of common repute and of things of which every one is sure, but which nobody can

prove. Particularly, it can fairly well compare the character of the doctrine with the character of the agent, which law can do but imperfectly, if at all. And it is certain that opinions are evidence of the character of those who hold them – not conclusive evidence, but still presumptive. Experience shows that every opinion is compatible with what every one would admit to be a life fairly approvable, a life far higher than that of the mass of men. Great scepticism and great belief have both been found in characters whom both sceptics and believers must admire. Still, on the whole, there is a certain kinship between belief and character; those who disagree with a man's fundamental creed will generally disapprove of his habitual character. If, therefore, society sees a man maintaining opinions which by experience it has been led to connect with actions such as it discountenances, it is justified in provisionally discountenancing the man who holds those opinions. Such a man should be put to the proof to show by his life that the opinions which he holds are not connected with really pernicious actions, as society thinks they are. If he is visibly leading a high life, society should discountenance him no longer; it is then clear that he did not lead a bad life, and the idea that he did or might lead such a life was the only reason for so doing. A doubt was suggested, but it also has been removed. This habit of suspicion does not, on the whole, impair free discussion; perhaps even it improves it. It keeps out the worst disputants, men of really bad character, whose opinions are the results of that character, and who refrain from publishing them, because they fear what society may say. If the law could similarly distinguish between good disputants and bad, it might usefully impose penalties on the bad. But, of course, this is impossible. Law cannot distinguish between the niceties of character; it must punish the publication of an opinion, if it punishes at all, no matter whether the publisher is a good man or whether he is a bad one. In such a matter, society is a discriminating agent: the law is but a blind one.

To most people I may seem to be slaying the slain, and proving what no one doubts. People, it will be said, no longer wish to persecute. But I say, they do wish to persecute. In fact, from their writings, and still better from their conversation, it is easy to see that very many believers would persecute

sceptics, and that very many sceptics would persecute believers. Society may be wiser; but most earnest believers and most earnest unbelievers are not at all wiser.