

# *Truth and Toleration in Early Modern Thought*

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*This paper identifies and revisits early modern models of religious toleration, focusing on the relationship between truth and toleration. It argues that, from a theoretical point of view, the culprit in intolerance is not belief in some objective truth per se, thereby challenging some common assumptions. After discussing approaches based on the rights of the individual conscience and on the unknowability of religious truths above human reason, it investigates whether grounds for a general and principled theory of toleration can be found in religious truth itself and, following the tradition of natural law, in some universal truth discoverable by natural reason.*

Keywords: *Religious Toleration, Religious Truth, Golden Rule, Natural Law, Natural Reason.*

## *Introduction*<sup>1</sup>

This paper identifies and revisits early modern models of religious toleration, focusing on the relationship between truth and toleration. I will argue that, from a theoretical point of view, the culprit in intolerance is not belief in some objective truth per se. Some common assumptions – about the denial of religious truth, or about the reduction of religious truth to a minimal creed as the best ways to achieve universal toleration – will be challenged. Likewise, the narrative, centred on England and France, which has led to the celebration of the heroes of a supposedly “universal” toleration that still manages to exclude millions of people will be shown to be in need of significant revision<sup>2</sup>. After discussing approaches based on the rights of the individual conscience and on the unknowability of reli-

<sup>1</sup> This paper is a revised, briefer version of *Truth and Toleration in Early Modern Thought*, published in I. Hunter and R. Whatmore (eds.), *Philosophy, Rights and Natural Law*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2019, pp. 36-70. Thanks are due to the editors of the volume and to the publisher for allowing me to reproduce this material. I am grateful to Howard Hotson for his insightful feedback.

<sup>2</sup> In an interesting and sophisticated discussion of Leibniz and toleration, Mogens Lærke follows the current historiographical consensus in taking Locke, Spinoza, and Bayle as the reference point of a modern conception of toleration. Compared to these “paradigmatic early modern thinkers of toleration”, it is claimed, Leibniz’s approach to toleration falls short (M. Lærke, *Virtual Union, the Seeds of Hatred, and the Fraternal Joining of Hands: Leibniz and Toler-*